

Identifying When You Have Lost Access to Your Relational Connection Circuits, and Getting Them Back On Line

(Karl D. Lehman, M.D., New 7/26/2008, revised 11/12/08)

We have been created to be relational beings – we have been created to be in relationship with God and with each other. Our minds and spirits have been created to *desire* relationship and to *function best* in relationship, and the Lord has actually designed specific circuits in our biological brains to serve this longing and need for connection.

The good news is that when these brain circuits are functioning as designed, your spontaneous experience will be to feel relationally connected and to feel the desire for connection. You will experience others as relational beings, you will be aware of others' true hearts, you will be concerned about what others are thinking and feeling, you will perceive the presence of others as an emotional resource, and you will experience joy in being together.

The bad news is that when we get upset we often temporarily lose access to these circuits. When this happens, your spontaneous experience will include the *absence* of feeling relationally connected, and you won't even *want* to be connected. You will *not* experience the other as a relational being, you will *not* be aware of each other's true hearts, you will *not* feel concern (compassion) regarding what the other is thinking and feeling, and you will *not* experience joy in being together. Furthermore, when you lose access to your relational connection circuits *in the context of being upset with a specific friend or family member*, instead of perceiving that person's presence as an emotional resource you will perceive him as the problem and as an adversary.

Since this is so important, one of the most valuable things you can do when you're upset with each other is to check whether these circuits are still on line. This is something you can learn to do, and it's surprisingly easy. You pull out one of these little cards, and go down this list:

Do I feel connected to _____ (fill in name)?

Do I feel desire to be connected to _____ (name)?

Do I perceive him/her as a relational being?

Am I aware of his/her true heart?

Do I feel concern/compassion regarding what _____ (name) is thinking and feeling?

Do I perceive his/her presence as a source of joy (as opposed to a problem to be solved or a resource to be used)?

Am I glad to be with him/her?

And as you review these questions it's important to note that they are *not* asking whether you know what you *ought* to think and feel, whether you know how you *ought* to act, or whether you are aware of the kind of consequences that might ensue should you act on your hurtful, non-relational impulses. All of these protective, higher level brain functions often stay at least partially on line (for example, they will often enable you to make better choices regarding your outward behavior). Rather, these questions are asking about the thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and impulses towards other people that come forward *spontaneously* and *involuntarily*, and that *feel* true.

If the answers to these questions are “no,” then your relational connection circuits are off; and if these circuits are off, one of the most helpful things you can do is get them back on. EVERYTHING with respect to your relational conflict will turn out better and flow more easily once you get them back on.

A fascinating bit of brain science provides further understanding of why it is *so* costly to lose access to these circuits and *so* important to get them back on line. Dr. Sacks describes a patient who developed a particularly interesting form of color-blindness. After an injury to the part of his brain responsible for processing color, this patient not only lost the ability to see color in the present, he also lost the ability to think in color, he lost the ability to dream in color, and he even lost the ability to *remember* in color. He could remember the fact that bananas are yellow, but he could no longer recall the subjective experience of actually *seeing* yellow, and all of his memories came forward in black and white. *When he lost the part of his brain responsible for processing color the subjective experience of color was removed from every aspect of his life.*

My perception is that a similar phenomena occurs with our relational connection circuits. When we lose access to our relational connection circuits we temporarily lose the subjective experience of relational connection from every aspect of our lives. We not only lose the feeling of being relationally connected to those around us in the present, we also lose the ability to think relationally, and we even lose the relational connection component of our memories.

The memory aspect of this picture is especially important. This is discussed in much greater detail in the “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, and The God Who is With Us” essays, but a very short summary is that positive relational connection experiences accumulate in our memory banks, and the positive relational connection memories that accumulate in these accounts play a vitally important role in our psychological and spiritual development. For example, we develop secure attachment as we accumulate a large pile of memories for experiences where our care providers are emotionally available, correctly understand our needs, empathize with any distress we might be feeling, and respond appropriately to the unique problems we bring them. A second example is relational connection joy. We develop a strong, stable baseline of relational connection joy as we accumulate a large pile of memories for experiences where our care providers are glad to be with us (if you are not familiar with the terms “secure attachment” and “relational connection joy,” for the purposes of this discussion all you need to know is that these

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are really important, really valuable ideal foundations for all aspects of life).¹

And the point with respect to memory is that *we carry our secure attachment and relational connection joy with us, even into difficult situations, because they are anchored in the positive relational memories that we carry with us.* If I have the emotional foundation of secure attachment and a baseline of relational connection joy, both being *deeply anchored in memories from a lifetime of positive relational experiences with family, friends, and the Lord*, I can stand on this foundation of emotional security and relational joy even when I'm surrounded by people who are upset with me and attacking me. Just as traumatic content can come forward as implicit memory, positive content from these positive relational memories can also come forward as implicit memory. Even as the people in front of me are criticizing me and accusing me, the content from my positive relational memories can come forward as implicit memory, so that it *will feel true in the present*: "Yes, but my family and friends love me, understand me, and are glad to be with me, and the Lord loves me, understands me, and is glad to be with me."

However, when we lose access to our relational connection circuits *we temporarily lose access to the resources in all of our relational connection memory bank accounts.* It's like the banks are closed and all the ATM machines are temporarily out of service. To the extent that our relational connection circuits are off line we can't *feel* the relational connection memories that are the source of secure attachment, we can't *feel* the "glad to be with you" relational connection memories that accumulate to build the foundation of joy we ideally stand on as we address every other aspect of our lives, we can't *feel* the relational connection memories that accumulate as the subjective, intuitive sense of trust and safety in our relationships with our spouses, family, and friends, and we can't *feel* the relational connection memories of perceiving the Lord's presence as a person. The left sides of our brains will be able to remember these past experiences as *information*, but the subjective, intuitive, emotional right sides of our brains will not be able to *feel* any of the resources in these relational connection memory accounts.

Fortunately, the Lord knows that we often lose access to these circuits, and He has provided a plan for getting them back on line. He has designed our brains so that perceiving someone *with* us in our pain, perceiving that this person is glad to be with us, and feeling that this person hears and understands us in our pain *will bring our relational connection circuits back on line.* If there are people in our community who know how to hear us, attune to us, and be *with* us in this way, then sharing our upset thoughts and emotions with one of these friends can do the job. For those of us who experience the Lord as a personal presence, we can also do this with Him; and this is especially good news, since He is always available and able to do this. In fact, there are times when it seems like the Lord is the only one who can hear us, understand us, and be with us in this way.

¹For additional discussion of secure attachment and relational connection joy, see Part II of "Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, and The God Who is With Us."

Sometimes it can be difficult to do this, and the complete discussion regarding all the possible difficulties would make a nice week long seminar. However, there's a simple intervention that's often effective.

- 1.) Think about a past positive experience with the Lord – an experience where you felt connected to Him and glad to be with Him. This is good brain science, and it's also very Biblical – for example, think of all the scriptures along the lines of “Remember what I have done for you this day,” or “Make a pile of stones in this place to remind yourselves of how I provided for you in this place,” or “Have a feast at this time each year, and tell your children about how I delivered you from your enemies.”
- 2.) Deliberately focus on appreciating His presence and the way He cared for you in this past experience. Deliberately appreciating the Lord's goodness and how He has cared for you will actually change your brain as part of preparing your brain, mind, and spirit for connecting with Him. This is good brain science, and it's also very Biblical – for example, about half the psalms are various forms of deliberately appreciating the Lord's presence and goodness.
- 3.) After deliberate appreciation has prepared your brain, mind, and spirit for connecting with the Lord, invite Him to be with you, especially *in* any negative thoughts and emotions that still remain, and ask Him to help you perceive His presence.
- 4.) Open your heart to Him. Look into your heart and identify the thoughts and emotions you find there. NOT the thoughts and emotions you know you *ought* to have, but the thoughts and emotions that are actually there. Once you identify what's in your heart, describe it directly to Jesus as clearly, honestly, vulnerably, and humbly as possible. This is also very Biblical – the other half of the psalms are examples of this type of prayer.

To the extent you perceive that the Lord is *with* you in your negative thoughts and emotions, and to the extent it feels true that He hears you, understands you, and is glad to be with you, this will bring your relational connection circuits back on line.

And when you *feel* connected, when you *want* to be connected, when you experience each other as relational beings, when you're aware of each other's true hearts, when you feel compassionate concern about each other's thoughts and feelings, when you perceive each other as sources of joy, and when you are glad to be together **I guarantee that you will be more able to resolve your conflicts.**

Furthermore, when you feel connected, when you want to be connected, when you experience each other as relational beings, when you're aware of each other's true hearts, when you're concerned about each other's thoughts and feelings, when you perceive each other as resources, and when you experience joy in being together **you will have a foundation of joy on which to stand as you minister to others. And when this relational connection and joy is happening**

between the two of you, you and your marriage will be a witness to the world – the world will notice this kind of love and unity.

Practical thoughts/tips regarding the relational connection circuits check-list:

- An interesting phenomena with respect to our relational connection circuits is that the need and desire for someone to see me, hear me, understand me, validate me, and care about me is the *one relational aspect of my being that still remains even when I have lost access to my relational connection circuits*. Therefore, if I am asking “do I feel desire to be connected to Charlotte? Do I experience her presence as a source of joy? Am I glad to be with her?” in the context of imagining Charlotte seeing me, hearing me, understanding me, validating me, and caring for me, I can get “yes” answers even though I have actually lost access to my relational connection circuits. When using the relational connection circuits check-list, it is important to answer the questions *while either experiencing or imagining the person doing things other than seeing, hearing, understanding, validating, or caring about you*.

Practical thoughts/tips regarding the exercises to get relational circuits back on line:

- When talking to the Lord about your pain, it is important to focus on *yourself*, especially focusing on the painful thoughts that feel true and the negative emotions you are experiencing. Focusing on the person(s) you are upset with, and describing to the Lord all the reasons why they are bad and wrong, tends to be much less productive.**
- It can be important to tell the Lord about your anger, as part of feeling that you are getting to express all of your negative emotions and feeling that the Lord is hearing you, but in most situations it is helpful to then move from talking about your anger to talking about your pain. There are some exceptions, but in most situations we use feeling anger and talking about anger as a defense to protect ourselves from feeling more painful negative emotions, such as shame, powerlessness, sadness, despair, etc.
- *Choosing* to indulge in self pity or bitterness can block receiving attunement from the Lord (or any one else), and thereby block regaining access to your relational connection circuits.
- When I do these exercises, I also find it helpful to keep reminding myself that my goal in this exercise is to perceive the Lord’s presence, tell Him about my pain, and to feel that He hears me, understands me, and is with me. My goal is *not* to fix the problem that is upsetting (triggering?) me, or even to find and resolve the underlying trauma. My goal is to perceive the Lord’s presence, tell Him about my pain, and receive His attunement so that I can get my relational connection circuits back on line.

- Even though my goal is not to do the whole job of working through underlying memories, my perception is that it's helpful to be aware of the possibility that triggered underlying trauma may be contributing to the upset. In my experience, this understanding helps with finding the right words to express myself to the Lord. If I am trying to make my words make sense/fit into the present situation, but some portion of the upset is coming from old memories, I will resist the words that most accurately express the painful thoughts and emotions that are *feeling* true. And my experience is that I am most likely to *feel* that the Lord hears me, understands me, and is with me when I get the words that most accurately express my pain. If I am insisting on words that make sense in the present, and therefore also resisting the words that actually feel true, this seems to hinder my ability to receive the Lord's attunement. Even when I'm not trying to do the whole job of working through the underlying trauma, if I am aware that the upset could be coming from old memories then I seem to be much more able to recognize and accept words even when they don't seem to fit/make sense in my present situation.

This point especially makes sense if I formulate the situation as "I need to feel and receive the Lord's attunement from *inside* any memories that are being triggered." If some significant portion of the upset is coming from old memories, but I am resisting the words that feel true from inside the memories, then to the extent that I am blended with the experience of being inside the memories I will not feel heard or understood, *and this will directly interfere with feeling and receiving the Lord's attunement.*

- When I actually do this myself, I often jump right to inviting the Lord to be with me in my pain, asking Him to help me perceive His presence, and then talking to Him about my thoughts and emotions. My experience is that I usually perceive His presence immediately, and it feels like He's listening, but I don't feel emotionally connected to Him until my relational circuits come back on line. I think maybe I have had enough practice with inviting Him to be with me in my pain and perceiving His presence that I can jump right to this without needing the positive memory and appreciation first. When I'm in distress it certainly feels easier to go right to telling Him about my pain (and feeling heard and understood), than to try to do positive memory and appreciation exercises when I'm upset (and not feeling at all positive or appreciative).

Also, when I do the positive memory and appreciation exercises I am usually calmed down, with my relational circuits already back on line, by the time I *feel* appreciation and *feel* reconnected with the Lord. As I'm thinking more about this now, to some extent it's like two alternative tools as opposed to two parts of the same tool. And at least some of the time, especially when I'm really upset and there's no one with me to coach me through the appreciation exercises, I find it much easier to go right to inviting Him to be with me and telling Him about my pain. In these situations, it feels like the experience of perceiving His presence with me and feeling like He is hearing me and understanding me is immediately satisfying (even before I feel emotionally connected to Him), as opposed to the positive

memory & appreciation intervention that requires a transition that can be hard to make when I'm especially upset.

- Finally, in situations where I am having an especially difficult time getting my relational circuits back on line, I put both of these tools together (as in the original document). This can take a significant amount of time and energy, especially if I am in a foul mood and the appreciation exercise is particularly challenging; but there are situations when taking the time and energy to do both, even though it's difficult, is really worth it.

Additional reading: For a greatly expanded discussion of several of the points included in this brief message, see the series of essays titled "Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, and the God Who is With Us," Parts I through V, on in the "Immanuel Series" section on the "About our Theophostic-based ministry/therapy" page of www.kclehman.com. For those of you who do not want to go through the whole 250 pages:

*For discussion of relational connection circuits, and how you can help a person bring them back on by being with him in his pain, hearing him, understanding him, and attuning to him: see especially Part II, the discussions of synchronization, interpersonal attunement, and mutual mind (pages 23-26), the discussions of relational connection joy and "returning to joy" (pages 31- 38), and the discussions of staying with negative emotions and maintaining/re-establishing relational connection joy (pages 46-52).

*For discussion of the value of deliberately recalling past positive experiences with the Lord: see especially Part V, pages 39-45.

*For discussion of the value of deliberately appreciating the Lord's goodness and how He has cared for you: see especially Part V, pages 37-39.

*For discussion of inviting the Lord to be with you in your pain, and asking the Lord to help you perceive His presence: see especially Part V, page 7.

*For discussion of "opening your heart to Jesus:" see especially Part V, pages 24-26.

*For discussion of self pity and bitterness, and especially discussion of how to surrender them, see "Judgments and Bitterness as Clutter that Hinders Prayer for Emotional Healing," and "Deadly Perils of the Victim Swamp: Bitterness, Self Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment" on the "About our Theophostic-based ministry/therapy" page of www.kclehman.com.