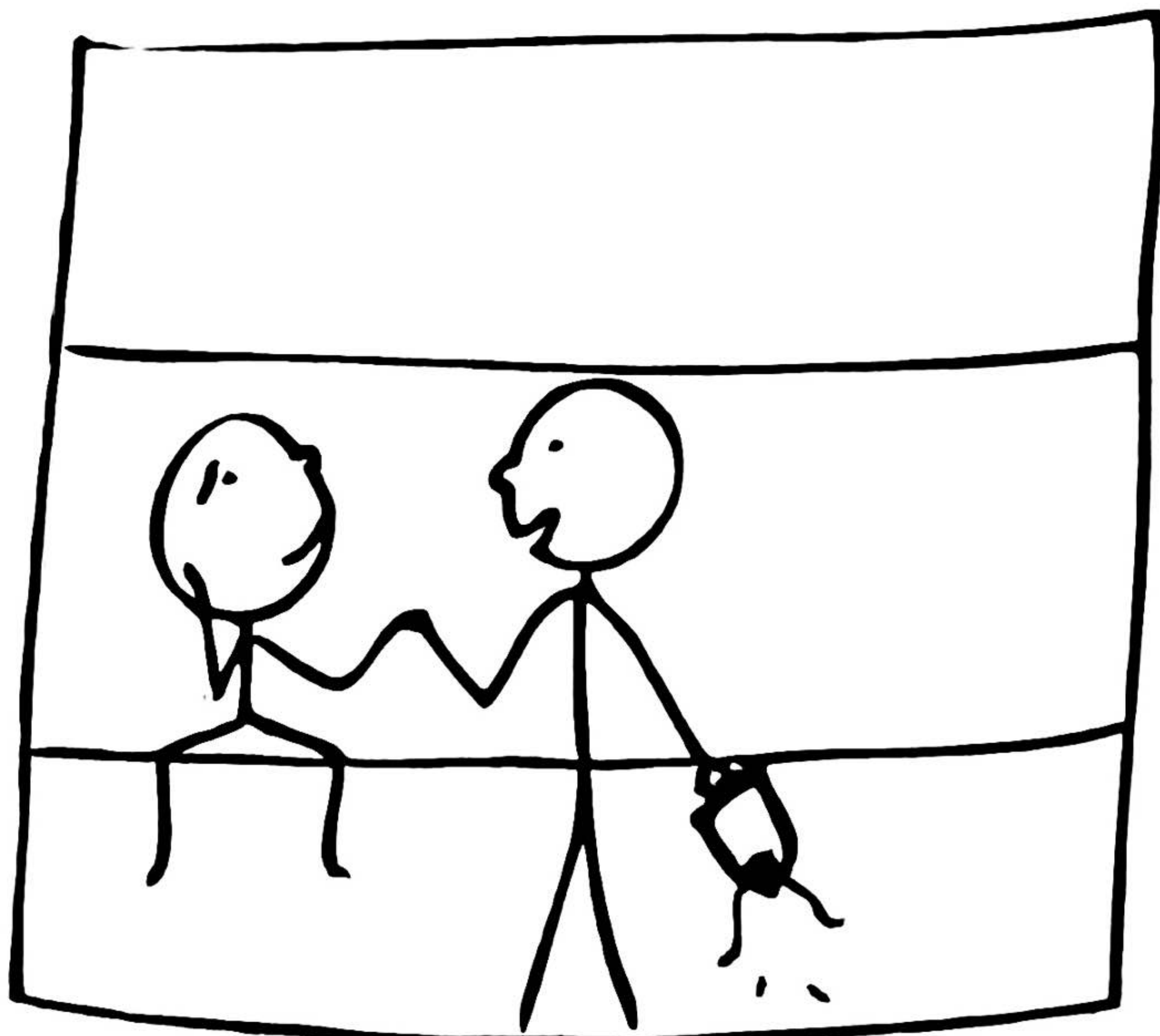
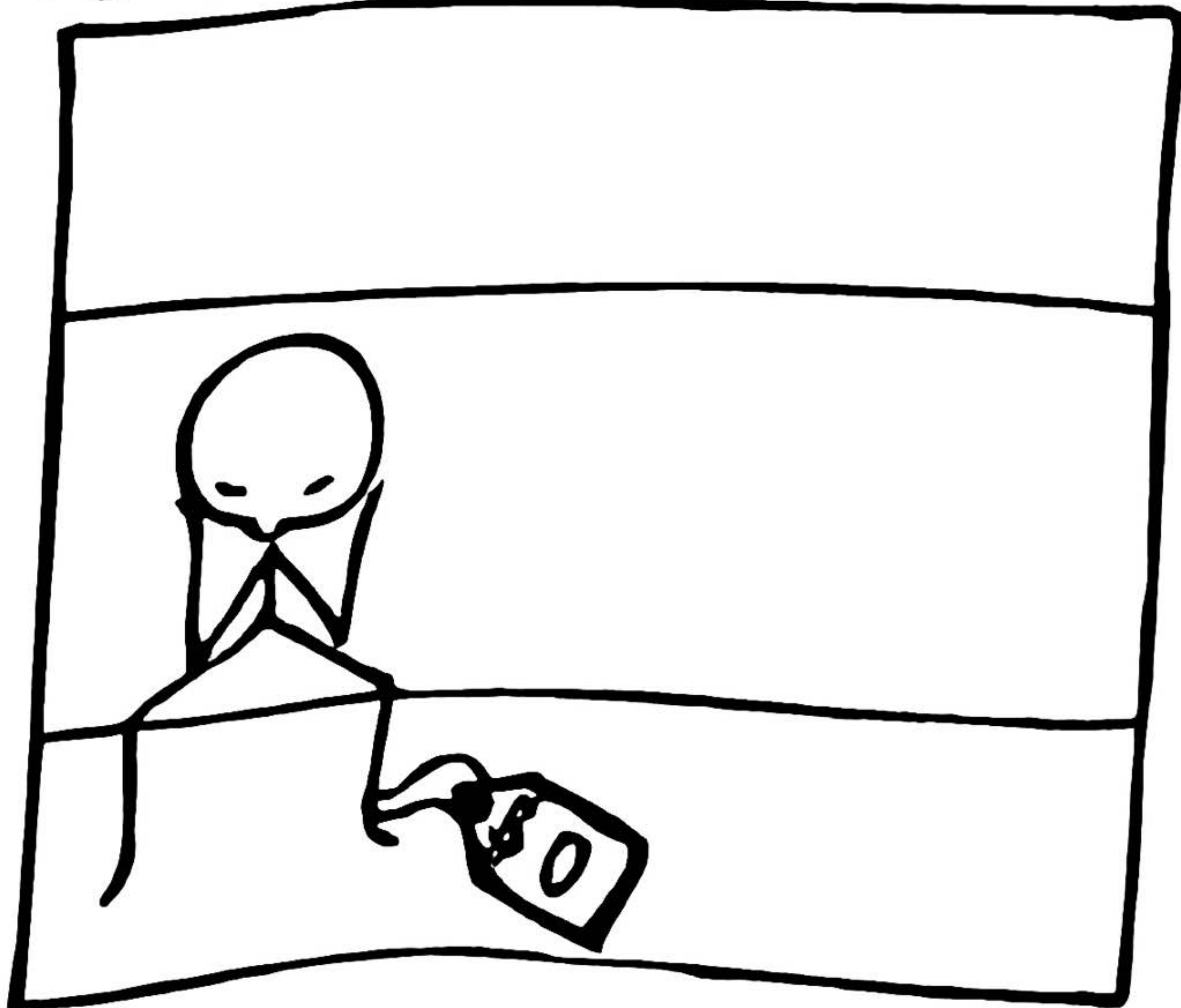


The Secure Model

If you had a relationship with a parent who in a somewhat consistent way provided you with a sense of being seen, feeling safe, and being soothed, then you will have a model of secure attachment. This secure model lets you balance your emotions, understand yourself well, and engage with others in mutually rewarding ways. Attachment continues across the life span, but to give you a sense of how the fundamental research is done, here's a brief summary of how attachment is assessed during infancy: After about a three-minute separation from the caregiver, the one-year-old infant seeks contact with the caregiver during their reunion, touches base for comfort, and then readily returns to exploring a room filled with toys. The researchers view this interactive behavior as evidence of a secure attachment model in the child that is activated in the presence of this

Sometimes I feel worthless



You make me feel priceless

particular parent. The idea is that the parent has provided both a safe haven and a launching pad; the child feels seen, safe, soothed, and secure with this parent. This learned model is then activated so that the child makes contact, feels secure, and launches out to explore the world of new toys in the room.

From infancy on, we carry these models forward as they help us organize our approach to relationships throughout the life span.

The Avoidant Model

If you had a similar experience growing up to about 20 percent of the general population, you had a relationship with one or both parents that was filled with repeated experiences of your not being seen or soothed. Here the form of insecure relationship is called "avoidant attachment." This term comes from research findings in which investigators observed one-year-old infants who were separated from their father or mother later avoiding that parent when he or she returned, rather than reconnecting and seeking comfort from the parent, as happened in the secure relationships. Here the notion is that the child's experience of not being seen or soothed over the first year of life with this parent has led to the development of a non-secure model of attachment—in this case, an avoidant model. In the presence of that parent, the child activates a model of avoidance. This is a learned response quite adaptive for the child's survival.

It's important to note that in these studies it was also seen that several of the infants who avoided one parent actually sought comfort and closeness with the other parent. In other words, if you have an avoidant attachment model as a result of your relationship with one parent, this doesn't mean that you can't have a secure attachment with your other parent, enabling you to go through life knowing

what a truly secure relationship feels like. But with avoidant models and the avoidant relationships they grow from, you've learned something very different. With a repeated set of experiences where interacting with that parent, say your father, is not soothing when you are distressed, and not connecting when you feel unseen, then the model you develop says something like, "I don't need this person for anything, because I have learned that he gives me nothing when I need connection or comfort." You learned to minimize your attachment needs. Having this avoidant model as your model for close relationships can potentially lead you to feel disconnected from others and also from your own emotions and needs. That's the disconnected self of avoidant attachment.

Let's highlight again here that your attachment model is a summary of how you've adapted to the relationships you've had with important people in your life. It's not, however, a sign of some problem you have inside you—it's merely a reflection of a learned response to real-life events, to your actual relationship in your early days. Furthermore, it does not mean you are now devoid of a need for closeness and comfort. While these models may be cortical adaptations that shape our external behaviors and our awareness, studies reveal that the limbic area that mediates attachment still retains a deep drive for connection with others. We all need to feel close to the people around us and know that we can rely on them for comfort. That's just being human. In this respect, the self-knowledge that comes from realizing you may have been living your life following an avoidant model can be very empowering. It can allow you to search the quiet, often hidden signals inside you that you may want closer connection with others. Sensing these signals may help you release your avoidant model so you can seek out from others what you need in life as you mature and age. The avoidant model was

good and useful during your early years; now it needs updating. Reflecting on these patterns can be one important step in enabling you to transform your non-secure attachment models toward security.

The Ambivalent Model.

A third type of relationship is when a child experiences inconsistency or intrusiveness with a parent, as occurs in around 15 percent of the general population. Being seen, safe, and soothed does not happen in a reliable way. When the parent returns after a separation, you go to her, but you cling to her because you are uncertain whether she'll meet your needs for comfort. Maybe she will, but maybe she won't. Better hold on! Your ambivalent model of attachment does not allow you to become soothed as you never know what to expect—she is not a reliable safe harbor. And her feelings and emotions flood your own inner world as well. For example, if you feel hungry, instead of your mom just figuring that out and feeding you, she gets flooded with her own anxiety and fears about whether she will be an effective mother for you. Since the human brain is composed of “mirror neurons” that soak up the feelings of others around us, you naturally sponge up her anxiety and fear. All you were feeling was hunger, but after interacting with your mom you now also feel fearful and anxious. Whose feelings are whose? That's the confused self created within ambivalent attachment relationships. You amplify your attachment needs with ambivalence because of the history of intrusiveness and inconsistency. Maybe this time she can soothe you, but maybe not, but maybe so, but maybe . . . That's ambivalence.

The Disorganized Model

The fourth kind of attachment can occur within the setting of the other three—secure, avoidant, or ambivalent. Besides those baseline experiences of attachment, something else is going on. For a variety of reasons, your parent, say your mom, is terrifying to you. This could be because she is depressed and irritable and runs after you, yelling at you when you get home from school. This could be because she is screaming at your father or your siblings and not at you. And this could be because she just looks terrified herself and you ~~spare~~ her terror up inside you. The problem with being terrified of an attachment figure is that it activates two different circuits in your brain that just don't work together. One is the ancient brainstem circuit that mediates a survival reaction. This circuit gets you to flee or freeze in reaction to being terrified. Get away from this source of terror! But the second circuit is the limbic-based attachment system that motivates you if you are terrified to go toward your attachment figure to be protected and soothed. The problem is you cannot go both toward and away from the same person. After separation, the infant shows behaviors of attempting to both approach and withdraw from the parent, a very disorganized approach to the reconnection.

So when an attachment figure is the source of terror, we become fragmented. This disorganized attachment makes us vulnerable in many ways. We can have a tough time balancing our emotions, having good relationships with others, and even thinking clearly under stress. Even more, a disorganized attachment makes it likely that we'll have a fragmentation of the continuity of consciousness, called "dissociation." Found in about 5 to 15 percent of the general population even without a history of abuse, and in about 80 percent of children in high-risk families with trauma and neglect, disorganized

attachment and the dissociation that accompanies it can be very challenging to our well-being. When we dissociate, we dis-associate different aspects of ourselves, such as separating feelings from memories, thoughts from actions. We can feel unreal and broken apart. This is the source of a fragmented self that emerges with a disorganized model of attachment.

Reactive Attachment

When a secure attachment is not available, we can experience a range of ways that we adapt and do the best we can, including avoidance, ambivalence, and disorganization. But there are a number of situations in which our attachment may not be simply secure or insecure. At one extreme of our human spectrum of experiences is the complete absence of attachment, in which there is no consistent figure that we can attach to. In this case, a dysfunctional condition called reactive attachment may arise and we may have trouble with our emotions and relationships, establishing rapid connections with a wide array of individuals in childhood, in adolescence, and into our adulthood. Reactive attachment can be thought of as the best a child can do with the absence of any attachment figure—not a response to forms of security or insecurity. This absence and the “disorder” that emerges with it are distinct from the variety of insecure forms of attachment we are exploring here. If you know individuals who’ve experienced this absence of attachment, or if you’ve been through this yourself, please refer to some of the important work in the professional literature on this situation as helpful resources for healthy growth.