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Treating attachment disorders—From theory to therapy (Second edition)

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Book Review

Treating attachment disorders—From theory to therapy (Second edition)

Karl Heinz Brisch (MD), Translated by Kenneth Kronenberg

2012, The Guilford Press, New York

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Treating attachment disorders—From theory to therapy is a crisp account of the application of attachment theory in practice and an exceptionally engaging book to read. Carefully written to balance the most up-to-date research with therapeutic case material, this book on attachment theory highlights the pivotal role of attachment in human relations, including the therapeutic relationship; and the complementary nature of an attachment-based orientation to other therapeutic modalities. The book illustrates the transferability and applicability of attachment theory to other settings.

The book speaks to both trainee and expert in the field of child and adolescent mental health and quickly absorbs the reader in the unfolding of the title throughout the book. For those unfamiliar with attachment theory, a brief historical overview and concise descriptions of the theory and its core principles may create an interest to explore attachment-based therapy further. The inclusion of recent findings in neurobiology, genetics, and traumatology and a case example of treating an attachment disorder before conception may prove stimulating for those familiar with attachment theory. Considering the book's timely and contemporary nature, rooted in current research on attachment, and shown to be highly applicable in varied clinical settings, psychotherapists and psychologists working with children, adults, and families, psychiatrists; clinical social workers; educators; nursing practitioners; paediatricians and gynaecologists might all find this book a worthwhile read.

Dr Karl Heinz Brisch, MD, is a child and adolescent psychiatrist and psycho-dynamically trained psychotherapist. He currently heads the Department of Paediatric Psychosomatic Medicine and Psychotherapy at the Dr von Haunerschen Children's Hospital at the Ludwig-Maximilians University in Munich. Apart from being involved in research on infant development and children with high-risk conditions, Dr Brisch's expertise lies within the field of attachment theory, attachment disorders, and attachment-based psychotherapeutic interventions. Emerging from his extensive knowledge of and clinical experience in working with attachment disorders, this book reflects the author's finely attuned approach to human development and speaks of his ability to hold both theoretical principles as researcher, and the individual and her needs, as clinician, sensitively in mind.

In this updated version, Dr Brisch orientates and carefully guides the reader through six sections. Section one provides a concise history of attachment theory as it originated in psychoanalysis and was further developed by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth and other scholars. This is followed by the foundational concepts that ground attachment theory including the role of sensitivity and quality of attachment, internalised attachment representations, exploration and autonomy. The concepts of attachment and separation as implied by other theorists are briefly described as well. In section

two, Brisch guides the reader toward the classification of attachment disorders. Ainsworth and Main's original secure, insecure, and disorganised attachment patterns are considered as protective or risk factors in the development of attachment disorders. Before attending to diagnostic procedures of attachment disorders, he provides detailed descriptions of the manifestation of disrupted attachment, which may involve the absence of attachment behaviour; undifferentiated, inhibited, or exaggerated attachment behaviour; attachment disorders and role reversal; attachment behaviours with addictive or aggressive features and attachment disorders masked as psychosomatic disorders. The third section addresses attachment-based psychotherapy and emphasises the importance of a secure attachment as facilitated within the therapeutic bond. Sections four and five, engage the reader with descriptions of attachment oriented therapy in clinical practice. The final section highlights current longitudinal research as executed in the context of two preventative programmes.

The structure of the book is undoubtedly one of its strengths. In addition to a thoroughly researched theoretical stance, a rich presentation of attachment-based interventions and an introduction to the use of attachment theory in preventative programmes form the outline of the book. Not only does the organisation of the material allow the reader to follow the author's line of thinking easily, it also enhances the book's utility as a reference tool for clinicians from various disciplines. This emphasises the dynamic nature of attachment theory and enables the author to make theoretical knowledge available to psychotherapists. Another positive aspect is Brisch's writing style. He is able to convey comprehensive theoretical principles in a clear and concise manner. This uncluttered approach to writing certainly achieves the book's didactic purpose. However, experts in the field of child and adolescent psychiatry, who are conversant with psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories, may find Brisch's brevity a compromise on the complexity and depth of these theories.

Brisch is careful to prevent a misinterpretation of the value and significance of attachment theory as an all-encompassing approach to the understanding of human development and behaviour. To this end, he balances his approach of advocacy for attachment theory and its therapeutic value in clinical work, with a reflective stance in which he compares and evaluates attachment principles and their interpretation and treatment of a wide range of psychological disorders, to that of other schools of thought. This critical orientation is characteristic of the book and supports Brisch's notion that attachment, although fundamental to human development and functioning, is but one among many other entry points into a complete understanding of being human.

The book's outstanding contribution lies in the captivating clinical case descriptions and the case examples of an inpatient intensive psychotherapy unit. Brisch's selection of clinical cases ranges across the lifespan and include the manifestation of attachment disorders before conception, during pregnancy and through infancy into old age. The reader may at times want to know more about a particular case, and might find the transient descriptions frustrating. Nonetheless, the purpose of this section might be to illustrate the diversity of developmental stages, physical settings and psychological presentations in which attachment-based therapy can be applied. Examples include diagnoses of emotional, behavioural, psychosomatic, personality and psychotic disorders and correspond to previous sections in the book that provided the theoretical groundwork. In each case, Brisch provides an overview of the initial presentation and symptoms, the patient history, consideration of attachment dynamics, therapy and its course and concluding remarks and further follow-up. He is unafraid to provide examples of cases of aggression for instance, in which treatment (without an attachment orientation) failed, precisely because the attachment needs were obscured by the behavioural difficulties. The author indicates how disrupted attachment patterns are transferred inter-generationally and how earlier interventions; even preventative measures, could divert the trajectory of a developing attachment disorder. It is clear that Brisch, in his portrayal of the significance of attachment theory and its therapeutic application, is not interested in establishing "a new school of therapy" (Brisch 2012: xxii), but rather wants to emphasise its complementary value to other therapeutic approaches.

Attachment-based therapy offers the patient the opportunity to process unresolved trauma and loss, from within a secure environment. This secure base consists of the quality of attachment

to the therapist and the physical setting, including the frequency and times of sessions that are predictable and consistent. The case illustrations indicate that attachment-based treatment may amend the traditional psychoanalytic frame to accommodate the individual patient's need for attachment, exploration, autonomy, and separation. Such adjustments are sensitively implemented, recognising the broader systemic context in which the individual is embedded, and being attentive to the individual's needs at different times during therapy. The descriptions of well-resourced settings and particularly staff consistency, forming an essential part of creating a secure base, may evoke the question as to whether attachment-based therapy is viable in developing countries where public institutions are poorly resourced and where a high staff turnover is common.

Brisch unassumingly describes his own counter-transference in most of the cases. However, what seems to be lacking is a more detailed description pertaining to working through the transference as to establish a secure attachment. Being congruent to his position of transparency, he presents cases in which treatment (from an attachment perspective) was successful, and cases in which the outcome was difficult to ascertain. This more true depiction of interventions in clinical practice makes the book exceptionally relevant to clinicians working in the field of child and adolescent psychiatry.

Treating attachment disorders—From theory to therapy uniquely describes how attachment-based dynamics can enrich and complement other theoretical approaches, and may serve as an important resource tool to both novice and experienced clinicians in the field of child and adolescent mental health. The book's integrated approach to the application of attachment principles in clinical settings distinguishes it from other books on the topic of attachment and encourages the reader to consider the psychopathological presentations in terms of attachment dynamics, a different, and perhaps a more humane, perspective.

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