



Where Do You Turn?

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The punishing reality of COVID-19 is that it has raged like a hurricane on the seascape of human interaction. Contact with one another has become potentially dangerous, and it is a cruel irony that those whom we long to hug can be a source of our suffering or even our death. So, we arrange to see each other virtually, on

computer screens, on separate sidewalks, or even through windows. Unfortunately, this conflicts with our basic human need to belong, to touch, and to be joined with one another.

There has been extensive research over the past decade in the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (the science of relationships) showing that our need to connect and belong is as essential as our need to survive. As described by Kurt Lewin, Peter Coleman, John Gottman, and others, only one of three things happens in relationship: We *turn towards* each other (empathic or friendship cycle); We *turn away* from each other (withdrawal or stranger cycle); or we *turn against* each other (adversarial or enemy cycle). Research on human attachment (what we learned about security and trust associated with relationships from our early primary care givers) suggests that what we experienced in these earliest relationships *between* ourselves and important others ultimately manifests in our relationships *within* our self. Expanding on terminology introduced by Stan Tatkin and in keeping with our ravaged relational seascape, those who turn away from themselves and others become islands—at risk for depersonalization (as relationships are not seen as an important source of understanding and soothing); those who turn against themselves and others become like waves—desiring relationships, often idealizing what the relationship can provide, and then receding from their “shore” when that idealized relationship “disappoints” due to the imperfection that is inherent in humans. Both of these relationship styles can predispose us to burn-out. Then there are those who turn towards themselves and others—*anchored* with compassion for themselves and others as they find the courage to see and accept what is present without judgment, to learn, to love, and to forgive struggle in themselves and others. Research would suggest our relationship style characterizes how we lead, work, and survive or thrive during times of challenge.

Relationships in the time of COVID-19 are altered, and because relationships are central to our well-being, many of us carry around a general sense of uneasiness and loss. It is helpful to notice this loss, grieve it, and perhaps take this as an invitation to explore your own preferred relationship style in order to better understand this loss in more personal terms. It is our early exposure to relationships that generates how we choose to relate to ourselves. Take a moment to reflect on your preferred approach to relationships—particularly the one with yourself. Do you prefer being an island (relationships are secondary to achievement), a wave (relationships are desired but are often a source of disappointment), or have you learned to be an anchor (relationships take work, forgiveness, courage and compassion and are an important part of my life)? As adults, we can choose to develop a secure attachment (anchor) with ourselves and others by truly seeing and understanding ourselves and addressing our needs and unmet needs with kindness and compassion. If it fits for you, try spending some time checking inside and using a method offered by Dan Siegel—reflect with Compassion (for yourself for being willing to explore), Openness to whatever you discover, Acceptance of this as being real at this time (those three words permit change), and non-judgmental Loving for yourself (COAL).

In this time of COVID-19—a time of enormous challenge and loss—may you be happy, safe, healthy, and at ease. ▼