

# Personal Relationships and Well-being for Cardiothoracic Surgeons



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## KEYWORDS

• Cardiothoracic surgery • Well-being • Teamwork • Relationship skills • Burnout

## KEY POINTS

- Relationship science over the past 40 years has brought to light the significance of secure, connected and stable relationships in our lives.
- We are verbs, not nouns. Nouns are labels and static and do not permit change. You are constantly growing. You are not stuck and doomed to always be whatever label someone decides to place on you.
- Accepting influence from others (both at work and at home) helps to build strong partnerships. When there is a failure to accept influence, relationships tend to fail.
- One of the most powerful tools for building strong relationships is the ability to make and accept repair attempts.

## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY OF RESEARCH

As surgeons, and as providers of surgical care, we are often taught about leadership, and there is no question that surgeons need to be able to *take charge* and lead. We also learn a lot about “followership” and depending on the circumstances and where we are on the hierarchy of knowledge or authority, we can be pretty good at *taking orders* and following someone’s lead.

What we do not learn much about is *partnering*, yet it is the ability to partner that creates the mortar that holds together the bricks of our relationships both at work and at home.

This article is devoted to the art of partnering by cardio thoracic (CT) surgeons, particularly with

their significant others/spouses and family members, although the science behind the skills and practices that we will present can lead to improved partnering in the professional setting as well and can result in more secure and successful relationships at both home and at work.

The challenge of partnering by CT surgeons with their spouses and significant others is real, and it is measurable. It is very likely connected to the incidence of burnout and work-related distress among CT surgeons that has resulted in their withdrawal from engagement and decreased satisfaction with their professional lives. In a study published by the American Association for Thoracic Surgery (AATS) well-being committee in 2022,<sup>1</sup> a majority of CT surgeons reported being moderately to severely physically and emotionally

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exhausted at work, feeling a sense of dread when thinking about work, and having a lack of enthusiasm when thinking about work.

The impact of this work-related burnout has an undeniable influence on all aspects of the lives of many surgeons. In a recent report generated by the well-being committee for the AATS and presented at the AATS 2023 annual meeting,<sup>2</sup> 66% of respondents to a survey sent to the significant others and spouses of CT surgeons felt that burnout was having a moderate-to-severe impact on the lives of their CT surgeon partners, and this was particularly true for those spouses or significant others who surgeon partners worked longer hours (68.4 vs 60.4 h/wk;  $P = .005$ ). Even at the preferred commitment of 60 h/wk, CT surgeons are working an additional .5 Full-time employment (FTE) compared to the more typical US worker's 40 hour work per week! The significance of work hours on the family is even more evident in the response of 63% of spouses and significant others who felt that their CT surgeon partner's schedule did not leave enough time for family life. This finding was overwhelmingly related to work hours. Those spouses and significant others who agreed that there was no time for family life have CT surgeon partners who work more than 40 h/wk *more* than those spouses and significant others who felt the schedule did leave adequate time for family life (70 vs 48.6 h/wk;  $P < .001$ ).

The effect of this on the lives of CT surgeons is predictable. Spouses and significant others of CT surgeons found that their partners had less empathy (42%), were less connected to loved ones (48%), had less interest in social activities (54%), and less connected to outside interests and hobbies (57%). All of this was most significant for those partners who had children aged under 19 years living in the home, which is a likely contributor to stress. However, when children are exposed to a stressed relationship, they often have little ability to understand the reasons for the stress and may even believe that they are the cause of it.

In this same study, spouses and significant others reported that they rarely had calm, good-natured interactions with their surgeon partner (23%), that they rarely engaged in activities together (40%), that they did not spend a healthy amount of time together (48%) and most disturbingly, that they could not find enough time for intimacy (52%). This hardly depicts the type of relationships that these couples hoped for when they embarked on their life journey together.

Relationship research over the past 40 years has brought to light the significance of secure, connected, and stable relationships in our lives. The

Harvard Longitudinal Study of Adult Development is one of the most famous longitudinal studies ever performed. It tracked the lives of 724 men for over 80 years. One group was a cohort of sophomores at Harvard. The other group consisted of boys from Boston's poorest neighborhoods in the 1930s. After initial interviews and medical testing, their lives were followed over several decades. The study had 4 directors in order to keep it going over the years. Some of the boys ascended the ladder of success and some went in the opposite direction. Many are still alive and some of the findings are presented in a recent book<sup>3</sup> by the current director of the study. The lessons from the tens of thousands of pages of information generated from these lives point unequivocally to one common element that was present in the lives of those who achieved happy lives, and it was not wealth, fame, or a commitment to hard work. The clearest lesson simply stated is that good relationships keep us happier and healthier.

A second important study that underscores the importance of relationships was performed by James Coan.<sup>4</sup> He put people into MRI scanners, and then he delivered small electric shocks to them. When they got the shock, the parts of their brains that indicate stress lit up like a Christmas tree. Then, he had them hold the hands of others including strangers and spouses. When they held the hand of those with whom they were in a meaningful, trusting relationship, the shock had less of an effect, both as demonstrated on the MRI, as well as to how the shock was perceived by the subject. He then studied the hand holders and amazingly, it appeared that the shock was shared—distributed between 2 brains. By either literally (in our relationships at home) or metaphorically (in our work relationships) holding the hands of our partners, we can diminish the allostatic load of the stress from our challenges. This is why strong relationships keep us happy and healthy.

We learn about relationships early in life. Research by John Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth, Mary Main, Eric Hesse, Dan Siegel, and others<sup>5,6</sup> emphasizes the impact that our relationships with our early caretakers have on our sense of security in the world in childhood and throughout our lives. In addition to our basic biological needs for food and shelter, we all need a secure base to which we belong. While we can develop secure relationships as adults, even if we did not have secure relationships with our parents, it requires intention and the re-experiencing of relationships, which are safe, secure, competent, compassionate, consistent, and caring with significant others. Ideally, we have these relationships with our parents and extended family from birth and throughout childhood and

thankfully, it is never too late to engage in these relationships because it is through these relationships that we internalize a sense of security and of being loved for who we truly are, long before we begin to erroneously define our value by our accomplishments, titles, or other external reflections that we think distinguish us such as the car we drive, the home we live in, or who we know. It is through our relationships with parents and other adults who are in the role of caretaker or teacher that we learn to self-regulate and manage our responses to life's demands. Depending on the nature of these relationships, some familiar patterns of relating to ourselves or to others may emerge. Some examples of these patterns are (1) learning not to trust others in relationships, (2) competing against others for recognition, (3) expecting one's self to be perfect with a loud internal (and external) critic when there is a failure, (4) acting out in frustration and anger due to an inability to self-soothe when needs are not being met, and (5) finding other avenues rather than relationships to create security/stability in life.<sup>7</sup> As human beings, we as a species are wired in a way that makes us very sensitive to rejection. When a sense of security, epistemic trust, and a sense of belonging are not experienced in our early years, we are vulnerable to developing an intense fear of not belonging and being accepted, creating a shame cycle of trying to not acknowledge that we have needs and then having shame when we do have them or when we fail to perform to the perfection that we believe is needed in order to be loved. We never outgrow the need for supportive and secure relationships with others to help us regulate our emotions, especially during times of stress.<sup>8-10</sup>

### **Turning Toward, Against, or Away**

Research on relationships at all levels of development suggests that 1 of 3 things are happening in our relationships at any given time.

1) We *turn toward*, and the person in the relationship feels seen, understood, and secure/soothed in the warmth, stability, and belonging of the relationship. Turning toward invites authenticity and generates trust without the fear of judgment, criticism, or shame and also without the fear of abandonment or loss of belonging. John Gottman describes this as a *friend* relationship,<sup>11,12</sup> and Dan Wile characterizes this as creating a cycle of *empathy*.<sup>13,14</sup> As mentioned earlier, we learn this ability to *turn toward* from our relationship with our primary caregivers.<sup>8</sup> When we feel truly seen, understood, and soothed as children, then we cultivate an internalized capacity to regulate our emotions and explore our beliefs with curiosity.

We extend this Curiosity, Openness, Acceptance, and Loving-kindness not only to ourselves but also to others we encounter as we seek to manage the demands of our lives. Dan Siegel describes this as practicing COAL. Worthiness is not attached to performance or to having to fit in or to meet expectations. Conversations are centered around trying to explore and understand another so that their perspectives can be heard and valued. Most of us would like to be seen, heard, understood, and valued.

- 2) We *turn against*, and the person in the relationship feels judged, criticized, and possibly shamed for not meeting expectations. Gottman has described this as an *enemy* relationship, and Dan Wile suggests that it creates an *adversarial* cycle. The message is that the person (whether ourselves or another) is defective and unworthy of belonging unless they change to fit-in with expectations. As with turning toward, turning against is often learned through our relationship with our primary caregivers. When we grow up feeling judged, criticized, shamed, and even being punished if we fail to perform or achieve perfection, we are at risk for both internalizing this loud critical voice as well as for extending it to others. There is a loss of curiosity and exploration in order to understand and join with compassion. The relationship, whether with others or with ourselves, ceases to be one of soothing (emotional regulation) and understanding. A consequence of this is that it accelerates fear and anxiety from the worry that we will not be "good enough" if we do not achieve perfection or meet expectations. It is difficult to grow, change, and reach our potential when in the dysregulating grip of fear and anxiety related to our worthiness. In the adversarial cycle, we turn against others or ourselves with criticism or judgment when we are irritated or disappointed with a behavior or outcome from an event. The adversarial (enemy) cycle is also characterized by a tendency to put problems, when they exist, inside the other person and then blame them for their inadequacy. Interactions are organized around interrogating, judging, and fixing. Most people do not want to be interrogated, judged, and fixed.
- 3) We *turn away*, and the person in the relationship feels alone and abandoned. Gottman describes this as a *stranger* relationship, and Dan Wile characterizes it as creating a cycle of *withdrawal*. The message is that it is not safe to see others or even oneself in their (our) entirety. There is often a false belief that accompanies turning away that if we do not look at the parts

of others or ourselves, we judge as inferior or unworthy of love, they will not exist and will not need to be acknowledged or processed. Even though we may exile these parts, they are still there. Turning away may evolve when we learn in our relationship with our primary caregivers that relationships are not important and they can be messy, take too much energy, and cannot provide the feeling of belonging and acceptance that is more likely to be attached to accomplishment and performance. Unlike turning toward or turning against, where relationships have energy (regulated or dysregulated), turning away creates a false sense of emotional regulation as we disengage from needs (ours or those of others) and the valuing of the relationship and its importance. A consequence of this is loss of the ability to be intimate and genuine with oneself or with others. In highly stressful medical fields, like cardiothoracic surgery, this can contribute to depersonalization (inability to have a relationship with self or with others) and result in the syndrome of burnout. In the withdrawal cycle, we turn away or withdraw from others or ourselves with dismissiveness when needs are overwhelming, behaviors do not meet our expectations, or we experience the person or situation as being unworthy of our attention or too time consuming to manage. Individuals with this style of relating often have a strategy that includes dismissiveness of feelings. Turning away can also look like trying to control relationships through micromanaging in ways to keep them from getting too close, vulnerable, or demanding.

And just to be clear again, we do this with ourselves as much as we do this with others.

We are enemies to ourselves when we have a loud internal critic.

We are strangers to ourselves when we tend to ignore our feelings.

We are friends to ourselves when we cultivate curiosity and loving self-compassion.

### ***The Importance of Early Relationships***

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.<sup>5,6</sup> Expanding on terminology introduced by Stan Tatkin,<sup>15</sup> those who turn away from themselves and others become *islands*—at risk for depersonalization (disconnecting from their feeling

self as they treat themselves or others more like a machine or an object) since relationships are not seen as an important source of understanding and soothing. For islands, tasks, achievement and reaching goals supersede relationships and connecting. Islands manage their insecurities, fears, and worries by trying to avoid feelings and relationships that invite them to experience vulnerability. They frequently put tasks, goals, and accomplishments ahead of relationships and attempt to not engage with or to expect those with whom they are in relationship not to invite vulnerability or have many needs. Islands tend to view others as commodities, and they expect high achievement and performance from those with whom they are close. 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 all humans. Waves may have experienced parents who were sometimes available and sometimes not. Because of this inconsistency, they may have trouble trusting others in relationships. Like the metaphor of the wave, they yearn for connection and tend to idealize others only to crash and feel frustration and anger when they realize that the other person is a fallible human being. Waves can be very volatile in their relationships and have difficulty self-soothing. Additionally, waves may shape shift who they are depending on the circumstances and in doing so, not be true to who they are authentically. This can be confusing and also take a toll on others, as it is hard to know who will show up.<sup>15</sup>

Both of these relationship styles can predispose us to struggle, dissatisfaction, and burnout. In essence, islands manage their emotions by trying not to have them and waves manage their emotions by hoping others will make everything *ok*, and then blaming them when they cannot.

Then there are those who turn toward themselves and others—*anchored* with compassion and forgiveness for themselves and others as they find the courage to see and accept what is present without judgment, to learn, to love, and to accept struggle in themselves and in others. Research would suggest our relationship style characterizes how we lead, work, and survive or thrive during times of challenge.<sup>16</sup>

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 and I tend to put that person on a pedestal, but am often left feeling

disappointed in them, or myself, when they (or I) fail to be perfect), or have you learned to be an anchor (relationships take work, forgiveness, courage, and compassion and are an important part of your life)?

Over the years, we have learned a lot about the importance of having secure, connected, compassionate, curious, competent, consistent, and caring relationships in our lives, and there are many similarities between what we needed as children from our parents and what we need from our partners in committed relationships as adults. Throughout our lives we need to feel seen, heard, understood, and valued. In the best of circumstances, this happens from birth throughout childhood and on into our adult lives; however, not everyone has this experience, and the good news is that it does not have to determine the trajectory of future relationships. If we are willing and open to learn and to grow, we can establish an internal sense of security through treating ourselves as worthy of dignity and belonging no matter the external conditions or accomplishments of our life. Similarly, we can choose relationships that mirror our dignity and worthiness to belong that are not based on any external criteria. The good news is that even if we did not grow up in a family with these qualities of being seen, heard, understood, and valued, we can learn to create them later in life and not repeat the disappointing experiences of the past. Some have used the metaphor of an anchor to describe this relationship with our self and others because it is from a secure sense of self and a secure base with others that we are mostly likely to learn, grow, and reach our potential. Just as the metaphor of the anchor, which is able to withstand the storms of life and stay securely grounded, when we have our own internal sense of security and of being grounded, we are able to withstand the difficulties and problems of life with greater equanimity.<sup>8</sup>

We cannot help but exchange energy and information with those around us, and those who are closest to us are the ones who are most deeply impacted.<sup>17</sup> Imagine the significant other of a CT surgeon looking forward to a date night, a vacation, or to share a birthday celebration with their partner only to have plans canceled at the last minute due to an unanticipated clinical emergency. Although the partner of the surgeon logically understands the importance of the clinical event, they may get physiologically activated by the experience especially if it has been a frequent event. We are all especially susceptible to this type of activation if we have had previous experiences with rejection or not being able to influence and manage experiences that are important to us. The spouse or significant other may choose to

withdraw or become frustrated and irritated as a way of protecting themselves. And, what about the surgeon, who is exhausted and who was equally looking forward to the planned event and who finally gets to come home in anticipation of being welcomed, only to find their spouse or significant other has turned away and is unavailable or who is turning against and exhibiting frustration, irritation, or anger? How will the surgeon not feel rejected or blamed in return? Ideally, the surgeon and their partner would turn toward one another and notice their disappointment at not being able to have the experience they both wanted. They would listen deeply, provide reassurance, and try to brainstorm some different solutions or perhaps get a coach or counselor to provide support for their relationship. We cannot help but be impacted by the people and environments in which we spend our time. Knowledge of this helps us develop awareness of the importance of providing compassionate support to ourselves, our partners and children, as well as seeking outside support when we lack the tools and skills to do this and are living in unsupportive environments.

In the remainder of this article, we will provide some evidence-based suggestions for turning toward your significant others, children, and other family members in order to cultivate more secure and satisfying relationships.

### ***Tools for Improving Relationships***

#### ***Commitment and attunement***

Secure relationships are built on a core of attunement and trust. Attunement resides in the ability to be mindfully aware of *yourself*, of *others*, and of *context*. The neurologic basis for this is beautifully described by Dan Siegel in his book, *Mindsight*.<sup>18</sup> Attunement, when it exists for a relationship (whether among work team members, or the important others you relate to), is connected to our yearning to feel seen, heard, understood, and valued. Which is ultimately connected to our need to feel safe and secure. Which, in turn, is connected to our very real and basic need to belong. There are techniques that can be learned and practiced for cultivating cultures of attunement. In most cases, you will need to turn off your automatic patterns of relating, particularly if you lean toward being an island or a wave. Attunement, at its core, generates *trust*. I see you, hear you, and value you. In his book on the science of trust,<sup>12</sup> John Gottman emphasizes the importance of commitment, and ultimately, it is through commitment that many couples (or team members) find a way to hang together even when times are difficult. Perhaps, especially when times are difficult. People who

spend the time and energy to see, hear, understand, and value each other (who are attuned to one another) and who send a message of commitment—"I will be there for you. I will come when you call me, and I will stand by you when you need me"—make relationships work. Contrast that concept to the often-repeated failures of commitment, particularly in the world of CT surgery, when a failure or struggle invites a turning away or turning against an individual, often to the extent of replacing or diminishing them. When you meet a couple who have been together for decades, ask them about times that their commitment was the glue that got them through some challenges. They will all have stories to share.

We all yearn to feel a sense of safety, security, trust, and belonging with those most significant to us. We often experience this when we ourselves feel truly seen, heard, understood, and valued by those closest to us. Therefore, the first step in any interaction is to first attune to ourselves and secondly to the other person.

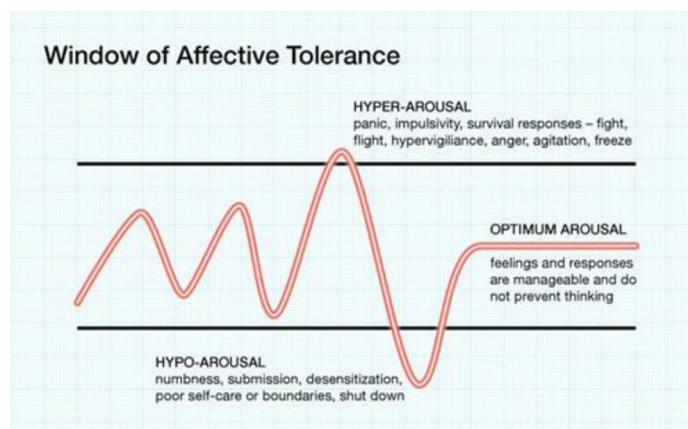
There are numerous ways to attune to oneself. They generally include pausing and noticing our inward state. We all have a window of tolerance, which is a metaphor for how well we are internally regulated at any given moment (Fig. 1). At the top of the window is our sympathetic response or fight/flight response and at the bottom of the window is our parasympathetic response of shutting down or fainting. Before we attune to another person, we need to check-in with ourselves and notice our own state of regulation or dysregulation and self-soothe through breathing, reflection, or some other activity that invites us to be at ease with ourselves before connecting and attuning to another. Additionally, we need to explore our own mind through attuning and reflecting so that we have greater awareness of our own thoughts, beliefs, feelings, hopes, and expectations. In other words,

we want to explore our internal world through seeing, hearing, understanding, and valuing our own self and our needs and perspectives.

Once we have attuned to ourselves, we can then explore, from a stable core of self-awareness, to learn more about the experiences, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and hopes of another person with whom we are in a relationship. In other words, we convey a sense of valuing their perspective with curiosity, openness, and acceptance of both our differences and similarities. We turn toward them to explore, understand, and join them. As an aside, when we use the term, "join," we do not necessarily mean that we agree with the other person, although we may. Rather, we join them by having them feel seen, heard, understood and valued, and supported by our genuine curiosity, kindness, and acceptance of what is real for them.

Attunement can also look like a bid for connection or an expression of a desire to spend time with another in a way that lets the other know that they are a source of delight and joy in our lives and not an obligation or responsibility.

Attunement to another requires an open, curious, and learning mindset.<sup>19</sup> We have to let go of knowing and thinking we are right as we open ourselves to the possibilities contained within another person's perspectives, especially when their perspectives are different from our own. It is important to remember that 2 people can have very different experiences of the same thing.<sup>20</sup> Unless we ask the other person and find ways to share with one another, we may never know that we are having different experiences of the same event. This is nicely depicted by the image shown in Fig. 2.<sup>21</sup> As you look at this image, you may be sure that you are seeing a dress that is a certain color and your certainty creates for you an expectation that everyone else sees the same thing. However, it turns out that some people see this



**Fig. 1.** The affective window of tolerance defines the zone in which we are resourced to respond to stress or challenge. When an individual goes out the top of the window of tolerance, it is typically a fight/flight response and characterized by fear, anger, or loss of emotional regulation—typically a sympathetic nervous system response. When someone goes out the bottom of the window, it is typically a freeze or shutdown—a parasympathetic response. The window of tolerance is dynamic and can be enlarged by increasing ones internal and external resources.



**Fig. 2.** This is a photo of a dress. Some people see this dress as blue and black, others as white and gold. If you assumed someone was having the same experience as you, you might be wrong, unless you checked it out. And who is right? We can have different experiences of the same thing. (From: McRaney D, *How Minds Change: The Surprising Science of Belief, Opinion and Persuasion*. 2022, New York. Portfolio / Penguin).

dress as blue and black while others are convinced it is white and gold. Who is right? And more importantly, if you did not explore in an open-minded way to learn about the perspectives of another, you might never know that others might be having a very different experience than you of this “same thing.”

In cultures of commitment and attunement, individuals are permitted to embrace the 5 freedoms as described by Virginia Satir<sup>7</sup>: The freedoms to (1) see and hear what is here instead of what should be, was, or will be; (2) say what one feels and thinks instead of what one should; (3) feel what one feels instead of what one ought; (4) ask for what one wants, instead of always waiting for permission; and (5) take risks on one’s own behalf instead of choosing to be only “secure” and not rock the boat. This last freedom is also a key element in systems and relationships that are psychologically safe.<sup>22,23</sup>

Safe and secure relationships are fostered by commitment and attunement, which is manifested as mindful honoring and valuing of others so that they feel seen, heard, understood, valued, and safe. This safety nurtures intimacy (and in organizations, intimacy is expressed as respectful understanding and accepting of differences as factors that enhance and not detract from the capability of the team). Furthermore, when commitment is trusted, the environment becomes one in which it is safe for individuals to be the most authentic expressions of their feelings, beliefs, perspectives, and values. And these are the relationships that grow and thrive over time. Secure and safe relationships do not flourish in a culture of dismissiveness (turning away) or derisiveness (turning against).

### **Accepting influence**

In his interview with the Harvard Business Review several years ago, John Gottman suggested that accepting influence can be one of the most powerful tools you can learn for cultivating a strong partnership.<sup>24</sup> We all need to allow ourselves to be influenced by those with whom we are in important and meaningful relationships. When we are willing to try new experiences or are willing to experiment with, share or try-on a differing perspective, we send a message to our important others that they and their needs and perspectives matter and are valuable. Imagine having a salt shaker but instead of it being full of salt, imagine that it is full of “yeses.” And you can sprinkle them around in your relationships. “Yes,” that sounds like a good idea. “Yes,” tell me more. I have not thought of it that way before. “Yes,” if that is important to you, then I will do it. “Yes, Yes, Yes.” As opposed to “No.” Does not the word “No” even create a different feeling in your body? Notice it. “No,” we do not do things that way around here. “No,” I do not need your ideas. “No,” we will not do that. Not now. Not ever. “No,” there is no way that dress is white and gold (or blue and black)!

Accepting influence can be promoted by a practice of being curious and open (the first part of COAL—Curious, Open, Accepting, with Loving kindness),<sup>25</sup> which expands upon and elevates accepting influence to a partnering of understanding by encouraging us to adopt a learning as opposed to a knowing mindset.

We are *verbs*—constantly evolving and growing because of our ability to influence and be influenced by each other. We are not *nouns*—labels doomed to be stuck forever by the descriptor someone decides to stick on us.

And this is challenging because we all work simultaneously with 2 different types of systems:

mechanical and complex adaptive (which includes the biologically driven system of relationships).

A mechanical system might be something like a ventilator, or an airplane. We expect them to perform in a predictable and reliable manner. They lend themselves to checklists and protocols to enhance reproducibility. They are not supposed to exhibit emergent (novel, innovative, and unexpected) behaviors,<sup>a</sup> and if they do, we generally bring in a repair person who interrogates, judges, and fixes them in order to get them to conform to expectations for their performance. Most of us do not want to be interrogated, judged, and fixed. Mechanical systems lend themselves to task orientation—we do not have a relationship with mechanical systems.

Complex adaptive systems (which include the biological systems that are humans and the relationships between us) are unpredictable and variable. They lend themselves to curiosity and openness to possibilities and emergent behavior is welcomed. When there are problems, we explore to understand and join. Most of us, when there are challenges would like to be understood. Complex adaptive systems lend themselves to relationship orientation and a partnership approach. For a partnership to be strong, we need to learn to be curious, not judgmental.

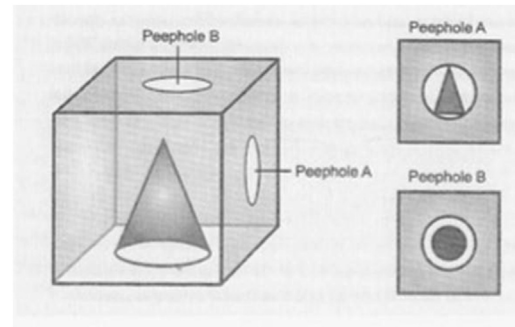
The ability to be curious is emphasized by the dilemma of the cube<sup>7,26</sup> (Fig. 3). Imagine a box and inside that box is a cone—like the ones you see in parking lots or highways. And imagine that the box has 2 peepholes. Someone looking through peephole A, at the side, might see something like a triangle, and someone looking through peephole A on the top might see a circle.

Who is right? The (what we like to call) Capital T TRUTH is the consensus of perspectives.

In a yes culture, where we are attuned to others and give them the freedoms to see what they really see, we are curious and willing to accept their input, and we invite descriptions of what they see.

#### **Adopting a learning versus knowing mindset**

Strong and secure partnering requires a mindset that is willing to not know and be willing to struggle and occasionally fail. Part of learning, relevant to partnering, is to be open to exploring how to be influenced by others. Knowing—unfortunately too well engrained in our medical culture—embraces an attitude that differentiates us into experts, who are supposed to know everything, and the rest of us, who do not. We are either smart or we



**Fig. 3.** The dilemma of the cube demonstrates how people can become convinced of that what they are seeing is the truth when, in fact, it may only be a part of the truth. The *whole truth* is the consensus of perspectives. (From: Ungerleider RM, Ungerleider JD, Strand A: *Discovering Your Mindful Heart: An Explorer's Guide. Developing your internal resources to manage life's demands.* 2020, Indianapolis, IN: Balboa Press).

are not. In her work studying 10 year olds who were either praised for being hard workers who were willing to see their limitations and to constantly learn, or for being validated as smart, Carol Dweck<sup>19</sup> found that those children who embraced learning showed significant improvement in performance over time, whereas those praised for being smart actually regressed and saw a 20% decrement in their performance over time. The point is, in a partnership, we are likely to be more successful if we do not approach our partners as if we are the knowers and they are our checklists. That is not a recipe for long-term strong partnerships.

#### **Making and accepting repair attempts**

Finally, no matter how hard we try and how much we learn, none of us operates from a secure base of connection, compassion, curiosity, competence, consistency, and openness at all times. We all have our moments of responding as an island or a wave. In research on couple relationships and relationships between parents and children, it has been found repeatedly that it is often not the rupture itself, but rather how that rupture is repaired that makes all the difference in creating secure relationships. Therefore, it is critically important that we learn to make and receive repair attempts in order to repair the damage that these ruptures create. Many researchers<sup>11,13</sup> on couple relationships, as well as parental relationships

<sup>a</sup>This distinction between mechanical and complex adaptive systems may become less clear in the emerging world of artificial intelligence.



with children, have found that the capacity to reach out with sincere remorse or an apology for the injury, while extremely important, is not as critical as the acceptance of that bid for reconciliation on the part of the one who was hurt. Making and, in particular, accepting a repair attempt is perhaps the most important set of skills that we can learn to form the secure foundation necessary for creating nurturing and loving relationships. It is worth noting that the request for a repair must come from a sincere desire to connect with and understand the perspective of the one who felt hurt or injured in some way. It does not work if the repair request is superficial or not perceived as coming from a place of curiosity for what happened and a deep remorse for the hurt, with an intention to learn and do it differently in the future.

### ***Relationships with children***

We would like to note that the principles we have described in this article apply to relationships throughout the life span. Children, in particular, are vulnerable to experiences in which they do not feel a sense of safety and security. Like all of us, they yearn to be seen, heard, understood, and valued, leading to a feeling that they are a source of delight for their parents. When parents are overwhelmed by their own needs and stressors, they may find themselves turning away (manifested as wanting their children to manage their own needs without being bothered to interact with them) or turning against (manifested by irritation and annoyance at the needs of their children). Thankfully, like all of us, it is the capacity to repair these moments of misalignment that allow children to reclaim and restore a sense of security with their parents.

### **SUMMARY**

The information provided in this brief article is intended to be an invitation to learn more. The science of Interpersonal Neurobiology (the science of relationships) has expanded and evolved over the past decade, and we have more information available to us now than ever to help us learn better ways of partnering and thriving in our relationships. And importantly, these same skills can be applied to our work teams with resounding success. Readers who are interested in learning more can likely find many good books and articles on the science of relationships. In addition, it is valuable to consult a relationship coach, and there are now an increasing number of coaches who also understand the context of a profession in cardiothoracic surgery.

### **DISCLOSURE**

None of the authors have any relevant disclosures.

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