



BEING A TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNITY

INTIMACY BARRIER

To form and maintain healthy relationships it is vital to be exposed to positive and kind relational experiences.

Negative and unpredictable responses from a primary caregiver can impact a child's perceptions of and interactions with others.

What is an intimacy barrier?

The way we view and interact with others is based on our early experiences with our primary caregivers.

If our primary caregiver responds to our cry for basic needs with love and care, then our brain releases a 'feel good' hormone, leaving us with feelings of safety and pleasure. If our primary caregiver responds in an unpredictable or unkind way, then our brain releases a stress hormone creating feelings of fear and confusion.

It is common for people to experience both 'good' and 'bad' responses from their primary caregivers. However, if the bad outweighs the good, then a child is at risk of forming an intimacy barrier.

An intimacy barrier is our brain's way of reacting to the history of negative relational experiences, like angry, absent and/or unpredictable parenting early in life. Intimacy barriers influence the way we function in the present and can make it hard to form relationships with others. Having an intimacy barrier can mean that intimacy and closeness with others makes you feel scared and uncomfortable, rather than safe and regulated.

Symptoms of an intimacy barrier

Signs of an intimacy barrier might include:

- > Avoiding personal questions or physical intimacy (including platonic intimacy).
- > A general distrust of others and their intentions.
- > Unregulated responses, such as being verbally or physically abusive to perceived intimate questioning, or when intimate and/or personal space is entered.
- > Fear of abandonment. In young children this may be expressed by crying when you leave the room, they may also cling to you or become angry that you are leaving.
- > Low self esteem.

Supporting children with an intimacy barrier

- > Remember bigger than 'normal' intimate and personal spaces may be required. Be ready to step back and give them the space they need.
- > When interacting, be present and patient
- > Let them come to you and be available to them when they do
- > Don't take their responses personally
- > Ensure they have things they can control. Allow them to control physical proximity, touch, and emotional discussions. Have firm boundaries, but pick your battles when it comes to smaller issues, such as doing homework. Allow them to experience natural consequences rather than you forcing them to do something.
- > Give them time to make choices
- > Provide warnings and options when touching or entering their space, such as their bedroom.
- > Understand that relational interactions may trigger an emotional response
- > Be mindful of higher sensitivity to abandonment when leaving a room or home. When leaving, explain where you are going, how you can be contacted and assurance you will return shortly. It's important to return when you say you will to build their trust.
- > Remember to regulate yourself before you try to help regulate others.



Here to help! Come and talk to us if you'd like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources:

- > Hambrick, E & Perry, R.D. (2016) A neurodevelopmental perspective and clinic challenges
- > Source images: Freepik.com



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