

Psyche & Soul 2 (July 11-12, 2020)

Childhood Foundation of Healthy Relationships: Trust

Jose Parappully, SDB, PhD

This is Jose Parappully, Salesian Priest and clinical psychologist at Sumedha Centre, Jeolikote, with another edition of Psyche & Soul.

Last week we learned that the best help for health and happiness are loving relationships. Data from the 82-year-old Harvard Longitudinal Study had demonstrated unequivocally that warm and satisfying relationships are the most important ingredients of the good life.

However, we also know that developing healthy relationships is a challenge for most, if not all, of us.

What helps us develop healthy, loving relationships that lay the foundations for health and happiness? Psychology has some reliable answers here too.

Trust: The Master Virtue

Foundations for healthy relationships are built on the trust and security we developed through our childhood experiences, as well as the family environment in which we grew up.

Trust is a master virtue that has a profound impact on our adult relationships. Contemporary psychological theories emphasise the importance and implications of the trust that the infant, and later the child, develops in relation to the caregivers, especially the mother.

For example, in the psycho-social life span developmental theory of psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, trust developed in the first year of life is the pivot on which all of development rests.

How does one develop trust?

The first year of life is one in which the infant is showered with many sensuous and gratifying experiences. It is washed, oiled, powdered, massaged, breast-fed and carried around lovingly by the mother and other family members. It is the object of much fussing. All this attention makes the infant feel very good (like a 'prince' or 'princess') and proud of itself. It begins to feel itself as worthy of all this attention and love. As a result it develops trust in self, others and the world around and feels very secure to reach out and explore the world. When such attentive caring is missing from sensitive caregivers the infant develops mistrust in self and others and grows up insecure.

Family environment also contributes significantly to the development of trust. When the infant finds itself in a cohesive, peaceful, warm and supportive environment, it feels secure and experiences the world as safe, friendly and comforting. It is such environment that helps the child develop a benevolent, trusting attitude toward self, others and the world at large.

The essential virtue that results from trust is hope, defined as "the enduring belief in the attainability of fervent wishes." Hope, in turn, leads to optimism and enables one to relate to others with confidence and without fear.

The confidence in self and a benevolent and hopeful attitude toward others resulting from trust it has developed enables the child as it grows up into adulthood to reach out to others in love, feeling loved and accepted. The security developed through childhood trust enables the adult to take the risks involved in reaching out to others.

On the other hand, when the childhood environment is chaotic, un-nurturing, characterised by conflict and unloving relationships and worse, violence, the child feels very unsafe and develops mistrust which in turn impairs the capacity for healthy relationships.

Children with unhappy childhoods, the Harvard Study tells us, are more likely than others to be pessimistic and self-doubting. This in turn makes them unable to receive love when it is offered and fearful in offering love to others.

They are afraid to grow close to anyone and to let anyone come close to them, for fear that they will be exploited, taken advantage of.

Moreover, children who have failed to develop trust grow up with a suspicious and even malevolent attitude toward life. They can develop a paranoid personality. They attribute malicious motivations to even the most innocent behaviours of others. They feel everyone is against them. This too makes relationships difficult.

Lack of trust, and consequent attitudes of fear and suspicion, can wreak havoc in a marriage, as well as in religious community life. Interpersonal relationships get vitiated, resulting in stress that undermines health and happiness.

As the poet Joseph Conrad has so perceptively observed: "Woe to the man (woman) whose heart has not learned to hope, to love, to put its trust in life."

.....

Jesus has spoken about the importance of trust. In his response to the synagogue official who pleaded with him, with some desperation, to come down and cure his daughter, Jesus said: "Fear is useless; only trust is needed!" (Lk. 8, 50). When we do not trust, all kinds of fears envelop us. Trust dissipates our fears, makes us more receptive to love.

I am told the phrase "Do not be afraid!" occurs 365 times in the Bible, like a daily reminder to us all through the year to place our trust in a loving and provident God who has our wellbeing--our health and happiness -- at heart.

We shall conclude with an experiential exercise

- Sit quietly for a while, taking a comfortable position, in the awareness of whatever has been evoked in you by what you heard.

....

- Focus now on the first years of your life. Allow your body to re-experience that time of your life. What do you experience (body sensations, thoughts, images, emotions, sounds)? Any memories come into awareness?

- Stay for a while with whatever experiences come in to awareness and the feelings these evoke in you.
-
- You could now spend some time in prayer, sitting quietly before God with whatever this exercise has evoked in you. Offer this early stage of your life to God, asking for healing of any trauma (painful/distressing experiences) you may have had, and thanking God for the love and care you experienced that taught you to trust.

.....

Have a blessed and trust filled weekend.

The podcast is available at anchor [Psyche--soul---health-and-happiness](https://anchor.fm/psyche-soul-health-and-happiness) on <http://donboscoindia.com/english/defaultbosco.php>

Please send your comments, and questions to me at sumedha.bps@gmail.com