



SHARK BONES

Exploring Our Core Sensitivities

The Mommy and Me class was in full swing. A dozen toddlers gathered around the leader, trying with varying degrees of success to follow a lively singing and clapping game. The mommies (and daddies) were lined up along the back wall, close enough to be accessible if needed, far enough away to give the 2-year-olds their first taste of independence at “school.” Most of the adults chatted and laughed quietly among themselves, happy to turn over the supervisory reins to another grown-up for a brief few minutes. Many exhibited the uniquely parental skill of talking to one person (an adult) while looking exclusively at another (their child). Others had pulled out their phones the minute they sat down and never looked up. A couple kept their eyes locked on their child and sat in focused silence.

“Wow,” snorted Carla, “if my Jack was this easy to

entertain at home, I’d actually get something done!” Most of the parents laughed or nodded in agreement, until interrupted by Sharon, who crowed “Fiona loves singing games at home! I can pay all my bills while she sings along with the stuff I download!” The other parents laughed again and exchanged knowing glances as one said teasingly, “Yeah, Fiona’s great, Sharon.”

Next to Sharon, Maria wrenched her eyes away from her son and nervously asked “What?” as little Rory glanced timidly over his shoulder at his mother for the tenth time.

At the edge of the group of adults, Ellis hunched over his phone. Occasionally he glanced up, scanning the room as if he was trying to remember what he was doing there.

Suddenly, Rory burst into song and started waving his arms like a miniature conductor. The parents clapped and called out “Go, Rory!” nudging Maria and saying “Look at him!” Maria nodded distractedly; she didn’t seem to notice the applause for her son and just edged a little closer to the group of children. By the end of the session she found herself sitting right behind her son, fidgeting restlessly.

Shark-infested waters are everywhere, even in the nurturing environment of Mommy and Me classes. Some of these parents are hearing shark music right now. Others will hear it somewhere else today and in a different place tomorrow. The fact that shark music

plays doesn't mean there's something wrong—that the situation is dangerous, that we're terrible parents, or that our children are “in trouble.” The important point to take away from this scene is that it's an ordinary setting filled with ordinary people. That's where shark music comes up: in everyday situations. And this is the way we parents react: not by doing “harm” to our children, but by developing our own particular ways of protecting our children and caring for them. Most of the time, those habits of interacting with our children are fairly benign. But there are patterns that we follow, patterns that are evident in the scene just described, that can affect the attachment bond our children take into life with them. Looking a little more deeply into these “shark”-infested waters to understand our own patterns of shark music can help us make the best choices to build security with and for our children.

This chapter will help you explore your own shark music should you wish to do so. We help you start to recognize it in almost all of your relationships, because its recording will tend to play wherever you're attached. But first, try [the quiz](#) that follows.

SHARK MUSIC CHECKLIST

Quickly read through the following items and check off all those that you identify with. Don't agonize over this. If it sounds familiar, check it off. If not, move to the next item.

What Makes Me Feel Particularly Good?

- Sitting next to someone I love who promises to stay close**
- Being seen at important events
- Activities I can do alone*
- Pleasing people**
- Being recognized for doing an excellent job
- Having breathing room from others*
- Associating with successful people
- Feeling needed**
- Long-distance friendships*
- Having someone else take care of a difficult task for me**
- Winning
- Being in the audience*
- A cuddly environment**
- Being on my own, doing things I like*
- Taking care of and being taken care of by my closest friends**
- Being on top of things
- Having all my important family members and friends nearby**
- Solo vacations*
- Putting other people's needs and feelings ahead of my own**
- Being self-sufficient*
- Feeling highly competent
- Being honest, even when it's not popular*

- Being with a soul mate who really shares the way I think

What Makes Me Feel Uncomfortable?

- Being alone**
- Coming in second place
- The silent treatment**
- People who seem unmotivated
- People wanting to be very close to me*
- Others thinking I've done something wrong
- Feeling obligated to the people I love*
- Being around people who whine about their problems when all they have to do is get their act together
- Being with someone who always acts like he or she wants to leave**
- Someone who's critical
- Being too isolated*
- Acting confident when I know I'm not**
- Feeling like I'll be too much for people*
- Criticism
- Depending on others*
- Being assertive**
- Living alone**
- Being considered average
- Saying what I think**
- Being the center of attention*
- Being controlled or manipulated*
- Being disappointed by friends

- People wanting to know everything about me*
- Being hugged*
- Being in charge**
- Making a mistake
- People feeling like they're on the same page with me*
- Failing
- Not being understood
- The high expectations of others
- People being overly affectionate*

What Do Other People Say about Me or Think of Me?

- I tend to go off on my own when I have a problem to solve.*
- I need to do more on my own.**
- I give mixed messages: when I'm alone I sometimes want to be with others, and when I'm with others I often want to be alone.*
- I give in too easily.**
- When I'm upset, I withdraw to figure it out myself.*
- I rely a lot on other people.**
- I "go negative" just to get those closest to me to back away.*
- I need a lot of support from others to get things done.**
- I focus on achievement to the detriment of my personal relationships.
- They want more of me than I care to give.*
- I boast about my accomplishments.
- I hurt others' feelings by wanting to do things alone.*
- I tend to keep a bit of distance between me and friends.*

- I'm a perfectionist.
- I try to get "too close."**
- I show more affection when I miss someone than when the person is right here.*
- I can be too critical.
- I tend to "retreat" when someone getting close to me starts to expect additional closeness.*

I Believe:

- It's OK to present yourself in a manner that makes others see you in the best light.
- Loving someone means never having him or her feel alone.**
- It's very hard to tell someone you love him or her.*
- It's much more important to have friends than to be considered successful.**
- Winning is among the best things in life.
- People who need people are the luckiest people in the world.**
- No one likes losers.
- Winning doesn't matter—I just want everyone to get along.**
- Being too close to others is unsafe.*
- Being placed in isolation is the worst punishment possible.**
- Even when everyone thinks I'm great, I often think I'm not doing enough.
- The best way to show people you love them is to never want to be away from them.**

- If I get too connected, I'll be too much for people.*
- When someone wants you to do things on your own, it means he or she doesn't care about you.**
- People are often trying to control or manipulate me.*
- If I argue with someone, I might lose him or her.**
- A few friends is plenty.*
- My opinions aren't that important.**
- I try to have amazingly outstanding friends.
- It's more important to stay connected to someone than to be right.**
- I constantly have to prove myself with my work and studies.
- Other people know how to do things better than me.**
- Other people's needs can leave little room for me the closer they get.*
- If I could take care of myself, people wouldn't take care of me.**
- I have a very special purpose for my life.
- People can be vicious when you make a mistake.
- Independence means nothing if you don't have someone who cares about you.**
- Even when I do things right, I'm probably an imposter.
- It's OK to ask for help even when you can figure it out yourself.**
- Anything I do that I'm really proud of I worry I won't be able to do again.
- It's important to be really good at what I do even if no one knows it.*
- Having children means you don't have to feel alone.**

- When people can see how good I am, everything in life is better.
- When people get close, they can emotionally smother you.*
- Even when I am wrong I have a hard time admitting it.

Scoring

Now add up the number of items you checked that are **bold**, underlined, and *italic* and enter each number below.

Bold: _____

Underlined: _____

Italic: _____

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CORE SENSITIVITIES: THE SOURCE OF OUR SHARK MUSIC

We all develop ways of protecting ourselves from pain. Chronically shy Stacey learns to take a friend along to parties to avoid the agony of meeting new people alone. Chang learns not to push through the pangs and twinges but to break up his long run into two short ones to protect his worn-out knees. Vince meditates before his weekly call to his mother so he doesn't end up

feeling so guilty about her loneliness that he gets off the phone quickly—and then feels even worse. Jan learns to come out swinging in real estate negotiations to disarm her “opponent” and avoid the humiliation of revealing she just hasn't prepared as well.

These are all conscious decisions made to defend against pain. Shark music is, as explained in [Chapter 5](#), an unconscious defense against emotional pain experienced in our earliest attachment relationships—ruptures that went without repair—or memories of the painful aspects of relationships that we don't want to repeat. Conscious defenses don't always have positive outcomes, as Jan eventually figured out when she got tired of losing sales and began to let down her guard, finding that leaving herself vulnerable often turned adversaries into allies and resulted in better deals all around. Shark music doesn't always create positive outcomes either. Our presumed self-protection doesn't work all that well for us, and—as you may well have discovered by this point in the book—though well intentioned, it also isn't helpful for our children. This chapter is an invitation to bring the unconscious defense of shark music into our consciousness so that our shark music doesn't make our parenting decisions for us.

It is easier for a patient to remember trauma than to remember nothing happening when it might have happened.

—DONALD WINNICOTT, pediatrician and psychoanalyst

Shark music is triggered by painful thoughts and memories, usually focused on a key theme that felt particularly hurtful to us as we were growing up. While there can be a wide variety of painful moments, it's common for us to find one theme around which we focus our defenses against further pain. This specific theme is what we call a "core sensitivity"* in the Circle of Security approach that we use with parents. These sensitivities fall into three somewhat distinct categories:

- Separation sensitivity
- Esteem sensitivity
- Safety sensitivity

Each core sensitivity has its own unique shark music—that is, each of us is likely to hear a specific shark music theme when we sense (accurately or inaccurately) threats of either abandonment (separation sensitivity), criticism or rejection (esteem sensitivity), or intrusion (safety sensitivity) in our relationships. The Mommy and Me session illustrates all three sensitivities in broad strokes: Maria doesn't want to be left alone—ever. She pays a lot of attention to what others seem to want from her and gives it to them so they'll stay with her. Sharon is focused on specialness and performance. Sensitive to criticism and judgment, she places a lot of her attention on what others think of her (and her child). Ellis is wary

of the intrusion of others, of people asking too much from him, of losing himself in relationships. He's not really cognizant of this wariness despite the fact that it steers him to keep his distance in most interactions, at times from his own child.

You may already recognize yourself in one of these three sensitivities. In a very general way, separation sensitivity predisposes us to struggle around the top of the Circle as described in [Chapter 5](#). If you feel more nervous about your child's attempts at autonomy, but you also have trouble asserting your parental authority (except when you finally get fed up and jump to the other extreme), you might be separation sensitive. Esteem sensitivity leaves us vulnerable to struggles around the bottom of the Circle, particularly concerning issues of, well, vulnerability. If you read all the parenting books to give your child the chance to be the best and the brightest (anything but average), you could be esteem sensitive. Safety sensitivity usually leads us to struggle on the bottom of the Circle as well. If having a child with whom you can share affection but who also welcomes plenty of distance (doesn't seem to need you too much) seems ideal to you, you may be safety sensitive.

If you don't yet have children, with the help of this chapter you can still find clues to your core sensitivity by considering other important relationships in your life. Meanwhile, what did the Shark Music Checklist say about your core sensitivity?

- If you checked more **bold** items than the other two, you may lean toward separation sensitivity.
- If you checked more underlined items, you might be more esteem sensitive.
- If you checked more *italic* items, you might tend toward being safety sensitive.

You likely checked some items in each group.* That's normal. Most of us have aspects of each sensitivity, but it's our dominant core sensitivity that plays the loudest shark music for us—especially when we're under stress. So it's good to know where your main sensitivity lies. It might be where you're most vulnerable to ruptures in your relationships and where you find it hardest to offer repair (see [the box](#)).

As you can see from the box, our core sensitivities can lead us to construct unspoken rules for how to behave in relationships or interact with others. Unconsciously we're trying to give ourselves some emotional stability and protection, but in reality our game plan has unspoken rules that create expectations for others to follow. In adult relationships this often results in our unwittingly violating another person's own unexpressed sensitivity. Alyssa asks Guy for lots of reassurance that he loves her to ease her fear of being left alone, but these requests feel intrusive to Guy, which only makes him try to get more distance from her. A rupture has occurred on both sides, but without an understanding of their own and each other's core

sensitivity, repairs are likely to be hit or miss or to simply never happen. When Alyssa keeps their 4-year-old daughter, Lia, near her most of the time, Lia develops miscues designed to maintain her mom's availability while also (barely) maintaining a bit of her need for autonomy: she runs back to Alyssa repeatedly while playing, acting as if she's upset (a miscue), but then, while appearing inconsolable, she wriggles away to play again. Lia is doing what her unconscious mind is telling her will please her mother even though she could never put that into words.

When you do become acquainted with your core sensitivity, you can reflect on how it may be influencing your responses to your child's needs around the Circle and decide to override the shark music alarm. During the Mommy and Me session, some of the parents were doing just that. One mother knew she tended to get very nervous when her toddler was out of arm's reach. To avoid standing in the way of his exploring (what we call "going out," or being on the top of the Circle), she repeated to herself silently, "He's fine, he's fine, he's fine" and tapped her foot in time with the rhythm of the words. No one suspected she was struggling at all. It was different for Maria. She felt uneasy seeing Rory engaged elsewhere, with his back to her, even though she had no idea why. She just found herself scooting closer and closer to the children. It was different for Ellis too. He shifted between the urge to get closer to his son when the little boy seemed to stop participating and

the urge to turn back to his phone when his son started to whimper. Sharon, too, lacked the self-awareness that would help her ignore her shark music when she wanted to. A sheepish expression flitted across Sharon's face for a moment when her friend told her Fiona was a great girl, and then she seemed calm, serenely gazing around the room over everyone's head. Inside she was telling herself that the other parents had no idea how great Fiona really was. Besides, she had read all the books and knew how much affirmation little ones needed. The fact that Fiona was clearly ahead of her peers in development was proof. Underneath those thoughts she felt twinges of something else: a foreboding that simply didn't make sense.

Core Sensitivities and Ruptures

Shark music can be like one of those supersensitive car alarms—intended to prevent theft but prone to screaming a warning about the slightest vibration caused by a gust of wind or a mild touch. In that sense shark music can be a false signal, leading us to react to the needs of our children in ways we never intended to. One way to get to know your core sensitivity is to reflect on where you often have hair-trigger or automatic responses that you later regret or at least question. If you already have children . . .

- Do you find yourself automatically saying, “I think we should stay home today” or “No, I don't think that's a good idea” when your child wants to go off on his own

somewhere—even though later you could honestly say there was no reason to object?

- Do you scold your toddler for refusing to share or insist she behave in certain ways “because the other kids won't like you” or “You're not being kind enough,” even though on reflection you could see you were expecting more than a 2-year-old could possibly do?
- Do you automatically get your 3-year-old to “think about a better plan” or quickly get focused on playing with a toy when he comes to you whimpering with a skinned knee or say, “Now isn't the best time” when he seems to want to get on your lap—even though part of you really wants to pick him up to comfort him or just cuddle?

Patterns of these kinds of reflexive responses might tell you what your core sensitivity is. The next time those occasions come up, you can learn more by asking yourself, “Where was my child on the Circle?”

If you already have children, some of these illustrations might seem familiar. If you're expecting your first, you can explore your other close relationships for clues to your core sensitivity.

SPOUSES, PARTNERS, BEST FRIENDS: HOW OUR ADULT RELATIONSHIPS REVEAL OUR CORE SENSITIVITIES

Do you ever feel like the thought of being close to

someone is very comforting in theory but when your partner presents you with certain needs the closeness feels too demanding in reality? Or does emotional distance from a partner start to feel quite threatening? Or maybe you find yourself caught up in trying to be perfect within your relationship more than simply being in the relationship? All of these are likely indications of your core sensitivity. So one effective way to start figuring out where your core sensitivity might be is by looking at your adult relationships, particularly those with intimate partners. The following overview of the core sensitivities includes some questions you can ask about those relationships, past and current, to start accumulating self-knowledge. We also offer a [“Core Sensitivities within Close Relationships”](#) chart.

	Conclusion	Procedural Certainty	Common Procedural Triggers	Others Say	Healthy Goal	Truth Be Told
Separation Sensitive I think I must comply with what others want, need, and feel while not focusing on my own wants, needs, and feelings.	I do what I can to focus on the needs of those close to me. Otherwise, I'm afraid they will be upset and leave me. Alternatively, I can often get upset because those close to me don't seem to be doing their part to take care of me.	In order to feel close, I must remain needy, good, weak, and, if necessary, incompetent/helpless. Then I will be taken care of and not feel alone.	I am vigilant, scanning for signs that something is wrong in the relationship (thus keeping the relationship center stage, often within a state of upset and difficulty); I fear taking a stand with significant others. I tend to be preoccupied with whether or not I am being loved enough.	"You want too much from me." "It feels like you're clinging to me." "It's like you want me to threaten to leave and then dramatically decide to stay."	To give up my perceptions, opinions, and needs is to deny who I actually am and, thus, to deny a deeper level of intimacy.	"Just below the surface, I think you will leave me." "If I don't focus on you, you'll walk out." "I can get helpless so you'll come near and take care of me."
Esteem Sensitive I believe that who I am, is just as I am, is not enough to be valued. I continually attempt to prove that I am worthy through performance and achievement.	Perceptions of me feel all-important. I attempt to be in control of perceptions. I am vigilant about any view of me as having failed or being inadequate. Those around me tend to "walk on eggshells." I am often disappointed in others for not "getting it."	In order to be noticed and responded to, I must perform, accomplish, be perfect, and think like the "all-important other" (anyone I admire for their intelligence, beauty, performing well, and/or power). When I'm performing well and/or with someone I admire, I feel special and not alone.	I scan for others' positive and negative perceptions. I have a hair-trigger reaction to criticism; I need to be right; I need not to be wrong. I desire to "be on the same page" with others close to me.	"It's not always about you." "It's just criticism, not the end of the world." "I'm not an extension of you." "I feel pressured to always be upbeat or only say nice things about you; if I don't you'll feel criticized, angry, or cold."	Recognizing that mistakes are inevitable. Sharing my needs and vulnerability can be fulfilling.	Just below the surface, I'm fairly certain that I'm not really worthy." "I may get angry if you don't fit my ideal." "I may withdraw if your disagreement upsets my fantasy that we always think alike."
Safety Sensitive The cost of being connected to significant others requires giving up having choices about who I really am and what I really want.	I attempt to be in control of closeness. When I get close to another my sense of safety is at risk.	To be in a relationship is to be intruded upon and controlled. To be in a relationship is to risk being enslaved. The best I can hope for is closeness from a distance.	Scanning for any sign of someone being dominant, manipulative, intrusive, or being "too close" ("too intimate," "too understanding," "too concerned"). Exposure/being seen can feel excruciating.	"I want more from you." "It's like you disappear on me." "Why do you go into hiding whenever I ask about yourself?" "I don't want to control you; I just want to be close."	Within a context of negotiation, closeness doesn't require being intruded upon, invaded, or controlled; intimacy can be safe.	"Once again, I just got frightened because it felt like we were getting too close." "I think I just retreated into my self-sufficient mode, sure that you'd try to control things."

Based on the original teaching of James Masterson, MD, and Ralph Klein, MD.

Core Sensitivities within Close Relationships

Separation Sensitive

People who are separation sensitive are focused on keeping relationships close. Any suggestion of distance, such as the sense that the other person *isn't* so focused on the relationship, might feel threatening. Because of a fear of abandonment, some separation-sensitive people might sacrifice their own individuality—their wants, needs, and feelings—or well-being to make the relationship “work.”

Separation-sensitive people are those we described as

struggling on the top of the Circle in [Chapter 5](#), and **Maria** is an example.

Security camera: Our core sensitivities are a lens through which we scan our relationship environment for “sharks.” It’s as if we’re equipped with a security camera that alerts us to the presence of a perceived threat. To feel at least somewhat secure, the separation-sensitive person scans constantly for signs that something is wrong in the relationship or that someone who is relied on might potentially leave the relationship.

- **In love relationships, have you often agonized over whether your love is returned?** Separation-sensitive people can ask for continual reassurance of their partner’s love; some may appear to be “the jealous type,” with a theme of “I’m afraid you’ll leave me” as central.

- **With intimate partners and even close friends, do you dissect the relationship to make sure nothing is wrong?** Sometimes separation-sensitive people unwittingly stir the pot, highlighting difficulties and creating upset to test the relationship and make sure it’s not about to fall apart (which, ironically, can put additional stress on the relationship). They also often use a sense of helplessness as a way to keep others close, by continually soliciting help with emotional pain.

- **Do you avoid taking a stand with your loved ones?** By nature, being assertive can create distance from

others. This may feel too risky if you’re separation sensitive (“Having my own opinion might mean separating from you and being left alone”). Of interest is that separation-sensitive people might withhold being assertive but often pick fights. While assertion claims competence and might push you away, arguing with you keeps us embroiled in the relationship and therefore close.

Esteem Sensitive

Esteem-sensitive folks feel compelled to be distinguished positively, with an emphasis on their own accomplishments and perceived perfection, because deep down they don’t believe their unadorned, naturally flawed human selves will be considered acceptable. Imperfection equals rejection. They try to get emotional “supplies” (admiration and acknowledgment) from an all-important other person but may also act like they don’t have emotional needs. To be vulnerable is to risk being found wanting and then shamed or humiliated. Abandonment is a fear here too, but the focus is rejection for imperfection. The goal is to always perform exceedingly well, to be special and always be above average.

Esteem-sensitive people are those we described as **struggling on the bottom of the Circle** in [Chapter 5](#), and **Susan** is an example.

Security camera: The only way for esteem-sensitive people to be convinced of being “secure” is to be convinced others perceive them in a positive/exceptional light, so they constantly scan others for potential negative and positive perceptions of themselves.

- **Do you find criticism hard to take?** Esteem-sensitive people not only feel the need to be right but even more need *not* to be wrong. This inclination is pervasive, showing up in personal and professional relationships. The esteem-sensitive partner may find apologizing very difficult because it implies being wrong and being wrong brings memories of criticism and humiliation. Or the esteem-sensitive partner may apologize or put himself down almost incessantly. While at first this appears to be almost humble, beneath the surface this habit can be preemptive: “If I criticize myself first, either you won’t or, even if you do, it can’t hurt as much because I got there first.”

- **In love and friendships, are you looking for those who are on the same page with you?** For esteem-sensitive people, the ideal is someone who can “understand perfectly,” who “totally gets it,” and who shares the same thoughts and feelings and is in full agreement on almost everything. This is called “one-mindedness.” (“To the degree that we’re of the same mind we won’t have the differences that lead to criticism and eventual rejection.”)

- **Does your intimate relationship need to be perfect?** Esteem-sensitive people may find vulnerability excruciating, so a relationship with even modest flaws or cracks in it can feel too fragile. (“Perfection means neither of us will ever have to say we’re sorry.”)

Safety Sensitive

People who are safety sensitive are something of an enigma, especially to those who are in relationships that are typically close—parent/child and intimate partners, maybe even close friends. Those who are safety sensitive believe the cost of making a close connection with another person is the loss of themselves. Get too close and you’ll have to yield to the other person, sacrifice what you really want and who you really are, and ultimately end up being manipulated or controlled. On the other hand, not yielding and having a sense of self implies being all alone. Therefore, to be safety sensitive is to always be stuck in a dilemma about being connected versus being oneself, a genuinely difficult struggle.

Another way to think about safety sensitivity is to consider it to be a kind of “intrusion” sensitivity. People who are safety sensitive are conscious of how others are potentially intruding into their sense of self. The paradox is that they want and even long for closeness but often find themselves uneasy when having to

interact within an actual relationship. Finding ways to be self-sufficient becomes a central goal.

Safety-sensitive people tend to struggle on the bottom because they fear exposing their need for others and getting too close (which, of course, implies potential intrusion). Ellis shows signs of safety sensitivity—not wanting to get too close or stay too far away, from either his child or the rest of the parents.

Security camera: Security means keeping a distance for safety-sensitive people. So they are constantly scanning for signs of intrusion, dominance, or manipulation. Just below the surface, they are also scanning for any indication that they may be “too much” for others, doing what they can not to be intrusive themselves.

- **Do you act torn about new relationships, getting close and then pulling back over and over?** Safety-sensitive people want relationships and want connection but often feel uncomfortable once they have them. This can be misunderstood as an “unwillingness to commit.” While it can appear this way to someone wanting more closeness, the discomfort and pulling away have to do with fear of intrusion, of someone who will inevitably want too much.

- **Do those in close relationships with you accuse you of suddenly withdrawing or going into hiding?** A variety of triggers (too much empathy, too much understanding, too much physical contact) can make

the safety-sensitive person feel threatened, which results in backing away or shutting down.

- **Do potential partners view you as aloof or insensitive, more interested in honesty and the truth than people’s feelings?** Safety-sensitive people live by the rhetorical question, “If I can’t trust myself, who can I trust?” They have plenty of empathy and secretly experience much longing for connection, but sharing either may lead to another coming too close. Hence they often focus where they feel safer: unwavering honesty and a willingness to stay with the facts (even when this may cause distance). This commitment to honesty allows personal integrity and it also tends to push others away, both of which can feel “safe” in the short run. Sadly, this sense of safety often leads to a sense of being alone.

“In my own relationship with my partner I sometimes feel like I just want to escape from long hugs, but I can remind myself that he is needing his cup filled and it’s actually OK getting a hug even though it makes me want to squirm away sometimes. I think ‘There is no real danger here, just my shark music.’”

—Alison Bruce, Karratha, Western Australia

You may be wondering how your core sensitivity might affect your ability to function as the hands on the Circle; see [the box](#).

Although your core sensitivities influence you most

in your closest relationships, they can also shape your responses in many other common daily interactions; see [the box](#).

Now that you've had a look at a lot of descriptions and illustrations of core sensitivities in a variety of relationships, take a look at how they apply to you in [the quiz](#) if you feel like it. What the quiz indicates may be obvious to you, or you can tally your score.

Core Sensitivities and Our Hands on the Circle

Remember, we have the option of keeping both hands on the Circle or, when we rupture, we can take either one hand or both hands off the Circle.

Separation Sensitive

If you're separation sensitive, you may often find yourself taking your hand off the top of the Circle, just at the moment your child begins to venture farther away from you. Taking that hand off leaves your child feeling less secure, so he runs back to you, giving you the illusion of feeling secure again now that your security camera has revealed a shark and you've found a way to avoid it. Or you may have difficulty taking charge when your child needs firmness from you, because you confuse being authoritative with being authoritarian and fear losing your child's affection and closeness if you act bigger and stronger.

Esteem Sensitive

If you're esteem sensitive, you might find yourself taking your hand off the bottom of the Circle when your child needs comfort or help with organizing any strong emotion—maybe you were expected to “rise above it” or “make lemons from lemonade” when you were small, and you're unconsciously driven to impart the same lesson. If it's time to take charge, you might move toward scolding or shaming (using words or rolling your eyes), a form of being critical that repeats the shame you were familiar with growing up. Or, not wanting to risk being “of two minds,” you may allow your child to run the show, afraid to step up and clarify that you do, in fact, have two distinctly separate minds and “It's now time that you listen to the one that is bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind about this particular issue in this particular moment!”

Safety Sensitive

Typically, a safety-sensitive parent will take his or her hand off the bottom of the Circle, wanting to have the child close but not too close. Sometimes the parent will also take his or her hand off the top, wanting the child to remain “close enough” that the parent doesn't feel too lonely. This, of course, can be confusing to the child, who essentially hears, “Please don't go too far away, but also don't get too close.”

Mean, Weak, and Gone for Each Core Sensitivity

In the most extreme cases of each core sensitivity, some parents grew up with a parent who was chronically negligent, mentally ill, abusive, or always expected the child to be the designated family caregiver, leaving that child with no model for the hands on the Circle. In this case, regardless of your core sensitivity, in times of distress your hands can't reach the

Circle at all, even though you very much want to reach out and meet your child's needs by being bigger, stronger, wiser, and kind. Miraculously, we have seen parents of each core sensitivity who had consistently mean, weak, or gone caregivers leave that negative legacy behind by learning the Circle of Security and using its simple coherence as a road map in difficult situations. They have also often benefited from getting professional help when feeling overwhelmed.

Prompt and Response: Core Sensitivities in Everyday Exchanges

Our core sensitivities can be tapped when we least expect them to rear their heads. Here are examples of common statements another person might make and how you might respond—internally—depending on your core sensitivity.

Prompt: "You wouldn't believe what just happened to me. I just got another promotion, my second in the past six months—I'm now officially the new assistant manager at the bank, and I'm thinking they might be preparing me to be full manager at the branch office opening next year."

Internal response—Separation: "That will never happen to me. Never. I'm such a loser! That's all anyone thinks of when they think of me. Someone who will never make anything of herself."

Internal response—Esteem: "She's so full of herself. It's not like she doesn't kiss everyone's butt all the time trying to climb the corporate ladder. Who does she think she is? She's not so special."

Internal response—Safety: "Her enthusiasm has nothing to do with me. She's holding me hostage. I can't leave. But I can't stay. But I can't leave. And she just keeps going on and on and on."

Prompt: "Who do you think you are? You have no right to say that to me!" (Furious)

Internal response—Separation: "She's right. Who do I think I am? I should never have told her I disagreed. Take it back. Tell her I'm wrong. Tell her it's all my fault."

Internal response—Esteem: "I have every right to say what I want. This isn't my first food fight, and it won't be my last." Or "She's my boss. It's my job in life to keep her thinking she's awesome and special and the one who knows what's important. Get back on the same page."

Internal response—Safety: "I'm not willing to step into her movie. I'm not even willing to stay around for her movie. One more time it's clear I'm not cut out for whatever it is that people seem to need from me."

Prompt: "Why can't you just stay here for a few minutes? Why can't you help me?"

Internal response—Separation: "Serves you right. You sure weren't there for me last week when I was falling apart. This time I'm going to make sure you get what it feels like to be left in the dark."

Internal response—Esteem: "I thought we had a lot in common, but maybe not. I thought you had it together. Your going all tragic is not working for me. I'm looking for friends who are more like me than you are."

Internal response—Safety: "I don't want to stay for 2 seconds. I know we're friends, I know you need help, but I'm not able to do this. Every time you look at me

I'm just backing 3 feet farther away."

Prompt: (Someone talking with a harsh look of devaluation/rolling of the eyes.)

Internal response—Separation: "Don't make her even more upset. She's already mad at you. You pushed too hard. Stop pushing her."

Internal response—Esteem: "I am *not* wrong on this one. I did nothing wrong. You always take the high road. You are so arrogant. Get over yourself!" or "She's really mad now. Remind her she's perfect. Tell her she's the best. Make her think she's always right. Perfection solves every problem."

Internal response—Safety: "Hmmm. Whatever she just did I'm not OK with. I think that look on her face just made it clear why I don't stick around."

YOUR CORE SENSITIVITY IN ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

What do the relationships you've had as an adult tell you about your core sensitivity?

- Do you tend to worry about your spouse/partner leaving you?
- Are you often concerned about what your friends, neighbors, and acquaintances think of you and your partner as a couple?*
- Have you been comfortable with long-distance relationships (even if your partner was not)?**

- Does relying on your partner to take care of things make you feel closer to him or her?
- Have you broken up with a partner because the other person kept being critical of "every little thing"?*
- Have you had relationships end after you've been accused of being cold, withholding, commitment phobic, or simply not present?**
- Do you see your best friends only every few months?**
- Is your social life centered on a tight group of friends who all think alike?*
- Do you count on the advice of your close friends to help you make your decisions?
- Has it been important for you to be elected or appointed the captain of your sports teams, the chairman of your volunteer committee, or the leader of your social group?*
- Do your friends think of you as easygoing because you're OK with going along with whatever they want to do when you get together?
- Have you lost friends after being honest even when you knew it would hurt them?**
- Are ethics and integrity more important to you on the job than relationships?**
- If you're not the top performer at work, do you feel like a failure?*
- Do your annual reviews usually say you're a good team player but don't take enough initiative?
- Do you tend to take jobs where you can rely on your boss to mentor you?
- Do you prefer work that focuses on the product and doesn't involve a lot of interaction with others?**

- *Do you believe that even though you're not necessarily the best, this can be remedied by being around those who are?*

Scoring

Now add up the number of items you checked that are **bold**, underlined, and *italic* and enter each number below.

Bold: _____ Underlined: _____ *Italic:* _____

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OK, we mixed it up a bit just to try to get at your less conscious, less analytical answers. In this case, **bold** indicates safety sensitivity, underlining indicates separation sensitivity, and *italic* indicates esteem sensitivity. As before, these “scores” aren’t definitive. The questionnaire is supposed to give you a few ideas of what types of responses we have in our adult relationships, from intimate partnerships to friendships to work. Do your results gibe with your results from the Shark Music Checklist? Looking at your core sensitivities from all these different angles may point you directly to a single conclusion, but they may not. The workings of procedural memory and implicit relational knowing are complicated; see the box on the facing page.

THE CRUCIBLE OF CORE SENSITIVITIES: YOUR CHILDHOOD

“To look at where all those things are on the Circle related to your upbringing and how you want them to be the same or different is very eye opening—and empowering that you can change it.”

—Susan Pinnock, Washington County, Oregon

Now we come to what, for many people, is the hard part. One of the richest sources of information about your core sensitivity is your own childhood. And yet delving into your attachment bonds during your earliest years can be uncomfortable. It’s not easy to look unflinchingly at the pain you felt when certain needs went unmet. So don’t force yourself—go ahead and flinch, then back away if memories are too hard to bear. But you might try to give yourself permission to let procedural memories rise to the surface of your mind, where you can let them inform your understanding of yourself and how you became the person you are today.

Most people find that, once they’ve been introduced to the Circle of Security, memories of attachment interactions from childhood start popping up unbidden. You may already be experiencing that. Some of these memories may be wonderful to revisit—moments in time when a parent or other caregiver seemed to know exactly what you needed and provided it, freely and lovingly, with no words necessary. Others

may evoke some sadness or even anger. You might be surprised that you haven't thought of these incidents in years, or that you've never thought of them in the context of attachment. But as you read about the different core sensitivities, incidents that fall into one category or another are likely to come up. Again, try to give yourself permission to hear what they have to tell you without forcing yourself to do so.

Not So Fast . . .

Entire books could be written on the core sensitivities, and people sometimes spend a long time in therapy trying to sort out their attachment styles, usually those few who are experiencing a variety of problems that can be traced to their original attachment bonds. Our goal in this chapter is to stimulate your own reflection by giving you different ways of looking at your core sensitivity, but not to be completely definitive. The goal here is reflection, not having the right answer. You'll know you're grasping the complexity of this subject if you end up seeing two possible core sensitivities in statements like these:

"My earliest memories are of my father telling me that the Bible says we must be perfect, not just try. And before I was born, I was the child who was supposed to be special for God. That's been a big weight. Keeps me trying all the time. I can never relax. I never really have time for anything or anybody."
Here's somebody who feels lots of pressure from a caregiver, either pressure to be perfect or pressure to comply in order to keep the caregiver at a safe distance.

"To be different feels like I'm no longer connected to my

family. I'm just afraid I'll find out I'm wrong. The truth is that I'm no longer connected to my family; I'm just not the person they thought they raised. Which puts me on the outside. I don't know why I want to get back in, but I do. It makes me feel so isolated and alone." **This person seems to have a hard time being herself but also a hard time being connected, which could indicate safety sensitivity. It could also be an expression of having lost the one-mindedness that esteem-sensitive individuals seek and wanting to find a way back to that. Then again, it might mean that she is separation sensitive and struggles with the risk of having her own thoughts and feelings.**

"It just doesn't seem right that my parents would reject me for growing up. What did I do wrong? What's so bad about just trying to do something that is a little different? I actually like my parents, at least some of the time. But they want me to be a carbon copy of them. Especially my dad; he wants me to think like him. When I don't, I start to feel weird and nervous." **The key theme expressed here is the person starting to differentiate from his parents. This could indicate any of the three sensitivities: Separation-sensitive people get very nervous when stepping away from the important other person. Esteem-sensitive people who feel they're losing one-mindedness with the other person can be thrown off balance. And if this person went on to say, "I never was just like him; I just pretended I was," he could be safety sensitive.**

These spontaneous revelations might be enough to fill in the picture of your childhood attachment—how your core sensitivities were born in the caregiving

environment you grew up in. If you had a parent who seemed to be esteem sensitive, you may have become what is called in attachment language avoidant in relationships—avoiding needs (your own, your partner's, your child's) on the bottom of the Circle because they set off shark music that warns you away. If your caregiver leaned toward separation sensitivity, you might have formed an anxious attachment style— anxious about being left and therefore about needs (your own, your partner's, your child's) on the top of the Circle. If you had a caregiver who was manipulative or who seemed not to be able to make sense of your need for distance or separate space, you might have developed what we can call a self-protective attachment style—one in which you're on guard against intrusion, manipulation, unpredictability, or meanness. There are no universal, straight paths from one generation to the next, however, as you'll soon read. All of this information about your childhood caregivers amounts to clues about where you might struggle in parenting your own children.

The insights that come to you naturally may be enough for you. If you're interested in further exploration, some ideas for gathering additional information follow.

Let's start with a couple of simple questions:

- What part of the Circle were your parents most comfortable with (top or bottom)?

- What part of being the hands on the Circle were your parents most comfortable with (bigger, stronger, wiser, or kind)?
- Were your parents likely to move toward mean, weak, or gone?
- What clues does this give you to your own core sensitivity and attachment style?

Tolerating the Full Spectrum of Emotions

How emotions were treated in your family of origin provides a good clue to your parents' core sensitivities and the attachment bonds formed in your childhood home. Think of emotions as existing along the full spectrum of the rainbow. If your parents or other caregivers were uncomfortable with certain emotions and did not seem to be able to help you organize these experiences, you were in essence being asked to live without these feelings. Imagine living your life without green or red or blue. What would that do to your view of everything else? Or what if you were entirely color-blind? Picture going through life trying to avoid red or green or another color because it scares you or otherwise makes you feel bad. That's what it's like to be taught, implicitly, that certain emotions are unacceptable. Having a full range of emotional capacity is key to having good relationships. If you'd like to look at your caregivers' emotional capacity—and get some

clues to your own—try filling in the Being-With Circle in [Chapter 5](#) if you haven't already done so.

To oversimplify, if your parent was separation sensitive, you might have written in “curiosity” or “anger” way out at the edge of the paper. If your parent was esteem sensitive, perhaps you wrote “fear” or “sadness” or “anger” outside the Circle. If your parent was safety sensitive, maybe you wrote “joy” or “sadness” on the far edge of the Circle. Ask yourself these questions about your diagram:

- What emotions were your caregivers able to fully help you with?
- What emotions were your caregivers partially able to help you with?
- What emotions were your caregivers not able to help you with?
- How has all of this affected you as an adult?
- If you have children, how do you think this affects how you are currently Being-With your child?
- How might your choice to do things differently impact your Being-With your child?

We always tell parents that Being-With your child even 30% of the time is “good enough.” (This, of course, doesn't give a parent permission to disregard Being-With the other 70%!) That goes for *your* parents too. What this means is that offering your child the knowledge that each of the core emotions is fully acceptable at least some of the time—all the way inside

the Being-With Circle—makes a huge difference for the security of a child.

The Legacy of Our Parents' Core Sensitivities

Do any of the following statements about childhood ring a bell for you?

“It was like I really wasn't there in her eyes, like all she wanted to see was my brilliance and future as the one she could be proud of.”

“Sometimes I feel like I'm going to disappear into an empty black hole that will swallow me up. But as I started to look into the hole, it turned into the voice of my mother, a voice that I don't remember hearing but was actually the look that would suddenly appear in Mom's eyes the moment I did something that didn't make her think I was the most remarkable child in the world.”

“Who am I when I'm not trying to be brilliant? Who am I when I'm not trying to be perfect? I'm afraid nobody wants to see me, just for me.”

“Now that I'm not 'somebody' at work, I feel like I'm nobody at all.”

—*Reflections from esteem-sensitive adults*

“Whenever my mom would seem to care, I'd be suddenly terrified that she would reject me. My fear has always been 'If I let my fear be known, they will punish me.' ”

“Every time I start to think about friendship, I'm afraid of

what might happen or that whoever it is wants something from me. It's as though they won't just let me be. I'm concerned they will take control. If I'm ever going to have a relationship, it is going to have to be one where I can have my own thoughts."

—*Reflections from safety-sensitive adults*

"I look inside to see what is me—but there is no shape, no real definition of what that is."

"Being me means being alone. If I give up on you, you will give up on me."

"Part of what I struggle with is resenting being treated like a child almost everywhere I go. But at the same time I don't want to give up being treated like a child and start taking responsibility for my life."

—*Reflections from separation-sensitive adults*

Like Parent, Like Child?

Not necessarily. Via the straightest possible path, an esteem-sensitive parent might raise an esteem-sensitive child simply because of the miscue phenomenon: Your mother turns away (literally or metaphorically) when you're sad and need comfort, so when you need solace you show her a drawing you made or your A+ from that day's schoolwork, knowing that she'll stick around to applaud you and her being close (at least physically) will make you feel better. Your procedural memory of all this give-and-take leads you to discourage bids for

comfort in your own child because shark music tells you that the rejection of those bids hurts—a lot—and you don't want your child to be hurt the way you were. And the wheel keeps on turning.

But there are other possibilities too:

We've known many esteem-sensitive parents who end up with one esteem-sensitive child, à la the route just described, and one who becomes more safety sensitive because the one-mindedness demanded by the parent feels too intrusive.

Likewise, in our experience, separation-sensitive parents may tend to have separation-sensitive children, especially daughters. But sometimes a separation-sensitive parent is superproud of her "little man" of a son, but doesn't want him to leave home, and he becomes esteem sensitive: He sticks around, but he also thinks of himself as God's gift to the world. Or a separation-sensitive parent who is very clingy might end up with a safety-sensitive child. A parent who is intrusive can produce a child who does everything possible to separate himself. We know one boy, for instance, who insisted on being a die-hard Green Bay Packers fan in the midst of a Dallas Cowboys family. He did this on purpose.

A safety-sensitive parent, fearing intrusion, might keep her child at a distance, which in turn makes the child desperate to stay close—separation sensitive. When a safety-sensitive parent ends up learning to fear intrusion and control, you might see a parent-child

dyad that is friendly but cool, choosing to spend time reading books together instead of doing something more interactive. A safety-sensitive parent could have an esteem-sensitive child if, for instance, the other parent is esteem sensitive and the child finds more availability with him or her. Or if the safety-sensitive parent needs distance and constantly feels like the child is too much for her, the child could end up feeling criticized and rejected. As stated in the example above, esteem sensitivity in the other parent would likely become the source of a way to find more access through either one-mindedness or joint goals toward perfection. (We have more to say about choosing security within two-parent families in [Chapter 8](#).)

SECURITY AND INSECURITY, THEN AND NOW

If you're starting to get to know your core sensitivity, you may have an idea of whether your attachment to your first caregivers was primarily secure or primarily insecure. Keep in mind that security exists along a continuum. Our degree of security may vary, but it's quite likely that when under stress we demonstrate a tendency to be either avoidant or anxious or self-protective in our relationships. Fortunately, there's hope for all of us. As we've said, even the most insecurely attached individuals we've met have shown the ability to earn security. The Circle of Security as a map can be

for a parent like the sextant that guides a sailor. Developing your reflective functioning can turn sharks into minnows and bring security into your life. In fact, John Bowlby defined health as the ability to update old internal working models with more current ones. Honing your ability to reflect via the Circle of Security can take you a long way toward relationship health. So can forming relationships with secure others throughout your life.

Here's what earned security can look like for each of the three core sensitivities:

- **Esteem sensitive.** Trusting relationship without conditions: "I can be average, make mistakes, not share your mind and still feel welcomed, cared for, and connected. When ruptures inevitably happen, I can express my vulnerability (sadness, anger, and fear) and request comfort, trusting you care. Imperfection is acceptable after all."

- **Separation sensitive.** Trusting in four truths: (1) I am capable; (2) life isn't easy; (3) I'm going to have to do a lot of heavy lifting by myself, but only with important others caring in the background; and (4) I have thoughts, feelings, and capacities I avoid at great cost to myself. I can also step away from relationships that do not support me supporting myself. ("I can finally stop going to the hardware store hoping to find milk. I can quit choosing relationships that simply repeat my

negative certainty. The choice is always mine.”)

- **Safety sensitive.** Trusting relationship as negotiable: “I can come and go, tell you the truth, have my own experience, and you won’t try to change me or control me. When I start to feel too close (smothered, intruded upon, controlled), we can talk about it. Eventually I can admit my longing for safe connection, and I won’t be too much for you. I’ll need you to stay honest, available, and steady.”

Fortunately, when we have our own children, we have an excellent “lab” for learning and earning security—for ourselves and for the next generations. In [Chapters 8 and 9](#) we illustrate the “full catastrophe” of attachment relationships and show you ways to become attuned to your child’s needs, to Be-With your child even when you’d rather be anywhere else, to be alert for typical situations and events that trigger shark music, to repair the inevitable ruptures, and to foster and sustain the kinds of relationships that dreams are made of.

We do not learn to greet our feelings, especially the difficult ones, alone.

We learn to greet them in relationship.

*This is a complex topic rooted in psychoanalytic and object relations theory, attachment theory, and the clinical insight of James Masterson, MD, and Ralph Klein, MD. In those fields of study, the ideas formed about attachment during

our own childhood become defenses of the self that, at their most extreme, lead to personality disorders. In our lexicon, these core sensitivities exist to some extent in all of us, and while they are defenses, in the huge majority of cases they’re simply a part of our personalities, worthy of recognizing and then reconsidering from the position that adulthood now offers.

*Some items in the checklist can also apply to more than one sensitivity. Feeling uncomfortable when faced with the high expectations of others, for example, could come from safety sensitivity in addition to esteem sensitivity. In real people, nothing is absolute or universal. The checklist was designed to give you a general impression.