

Insecure childhood can make dealing with stress harder

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Credit: Frontiers

Imagine two candidates at a high stakes job interview. One of them handles the pressure with ease and sails through the interview. The other candidate, however, feels very nervous and under-performs.

Why do some people perform better than others under emotionally stressful conditions? The clue might lie in early childhood experiences, a recent study published in the open access online journal, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* found.

Emotional bonds with our primary caregiver or parent in early childhood are thought to be the basis of our ability to regulate our emotions as adults.

"We know from other studies that our history of attachment directly influences how we act in social situations;" explained Dr. Christine Heinisch, one of the authors of the study; "but what about reaction to a neutral stimulus under [emotional conditions](#)?"

A good example of this in daily life, says Dr. Heinisch, is when a car approaches a traffic light. Under neutral conditions, it is easy for the driver to follow the signal. But what happens under [emotional conditions](#)?

"Usually, people tend to make more errors, like stopping too late or even driving through when the [traffic light](#) is red. Sometimes they stop although the light is still green," she explains.

But not everyone's actions are impacted by emotions to the same extent. Some of us had emotionally responsive caregivers or parents in childhood, while others didn't.

It is these early experiences, according to the "attachment" theory in psychology, which influences the ability to regulate emotions as adults. "We expected those having problems with emotional regulation to make more errors in performing a task - and one significant variable influencing this is our attachment experience;" said Dr. Heinisch.

To test this theory, their group conducted a study on adult subjects with different childhood caregiver experiences. Subjects in the study performed a task of identifying a target letter from among a series of flashing letters. This task was administered under conditions that evoked a positive, neutral, or negative emotional state. The researchers then assessed task performance and analyzed EEG recordings of brain function in their subjects.

The results were revealing. Subjects who did not have emotionally responsive caregivers in childhood (insecure-attached) had more trouble performing under emotionally negative conditions than the others (secure-attached). They also had lower brain activity in response to the target letter under negative conditions than secure-attached subjects.

The lower task performance correlated with inefficient strategies for [emotional regulation](#) seen in insecure-attached adults. This could mean that a greater share of cognitive resources was allocated for regulating emotions, and consequently, less was available for performing the task.

One potential limitation of this study is that the target letters were unrelated to the emotional context cues provided, and therefore had little real-life relevance. In future studies, the authors plan to use a person or an object with emotional significance as target, and socially relevant situations as the context of the task.

One thing seems clear though—childhood emotional experiences have long lasting consequences for your ability to perform a given task.

More information: Rainer Leyh et al, Attachment Representation Moderates the Influence of Emotional Context on Information Processing, *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* (2016). [DOI: 10.3389/fnhum.2016.00278](#)

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