

TRANSCRIPTION OF FELT SECURITY: BUILDING IT IN YOURSELF AND OTHERS BY MARGERY ARNOLD

Hello. I am Marjorie Arnold and I'm a licensed psychologist in California. I've worked with children and families, and for a long time and especially have a soft space for children and families who are involved in the foster care system. I'm an adoptive parent of two young women, and I'm also on the advisory board for Traumawise.

Today, I'm going to talk to you about security, that feeling of all-rightness that allows us just to be ourselves. When we're secure, we are calm and able to focus on whatever we're doing, wherever we are, and with whomever we're with. So we're able to explore, to discover, to learn and to grow. We are free and we have security. Now, psychologists refer to this as felt security. In other words, security is subjective to each individual. You cannot tell me that I am secure, and I cannot tell you that you are secure no matter how much I want for you to feel that sense of being all right, being okay, I cannot make it so for you. That security has to be felt by the person that it is in. So maybe you've been on a roller coaster ride with two friends, and you, when you got off, the friends are screaming. That was awesome. And let's do it again. But you, you are like this. Just, like, literally not breathing. Your eyes are open wide and you don't remember a thing about the ride. So same experience, but different feelings. And that is how we are wired. And we're going to learn a little bit more about how we're wired. So no matter how much I want you or my daughter or my friend or my neighbor to feel that sense of being all right and being okay, I cannot make it happen in another person, but I can build it up in myself so that I can rely on my own sense of security to let others borrow it, my sense of self security.

So, there's four things I'm going to try to hit home for you today. One is that it's personal to you and to whoever has it felt security. It grows with repetitive practice. That's the only way it grows. And it grows that way from, from when we're babies all the way until we leave this place. So it takes repetitive practice to build it. And once you have it, it gives you a secure base from which you can be free, free to explore, to learn, to love. And finally, in order to do all of those things, you must take risks and you must experience some discomfort. You cannot build trust without trusting. You can't learn and grow without failing, and you must have discomfort in order to be comforted. That is how we build this in us. But that's okay, because we're made to do that. We're made to get through it, and we're made to get through it together. All right.

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So felt security begins when a need is expressed. Babies have a lot of needs here, some of them, but they're pretty simple. And for the rest of our lives, we are going to have these needs. So the way that babies get felt security, it's the same way that we do as adults. We will continue to have these needs and get them met every day of our lives and our felt security, that feeling of being okay and safe right now depends on us getting these needs met, these and others So felt security begins when a need is expressed. And I'm using the example of the baby because we were all babies once and because felt security grows rapidly in the first 18 months. That is a time a critical period for us in which we are really growing our nervous system, to adapt to this world that we come into. But we can still develop these things later as well. And so if we don't have it, we will do whatever it takes to get felt security. And some of us are lucky enough to gain a healthy sense of security by 18 months of age, and we take that into the rest of our lives.

Okay. So thought security begins when a need is expressed and that that need is expressed inside the baby. But there's things that other people see when that need is expressed, squirming, crying. When babies get to be little over two months, they can start engaging us with a smile, but or a little older, a little reaching hand. But for now, what I want you to know is that felt security begins when a need or emotion is felt inside the body and it's expressed by the body. And it might be expressed in some emotional displays that our nervous systems just automatically read. We don't have to think about it. Our bodies will read the emotions of the people around us. Okay. So felt security begins when a need is expressed and when the need is met. And that's the repetition. That's a repetitive practice that needs to occur to get to felt security over and over again. Thousands and thousands of iterations of a need is expressed and a need is met, A need is expressed and need is met. That's how we get to healthy attachment. That's also how we get to, which is, what is known as a feeling of felt security.

So the baby feels secure knowing that if it has a need, the need will be met, she will be cared for and safe. And when the world is predictable, in other words, when I have an when a baby has a need and a caregiver attends to it over and over and over and over again, then it's much more easy for that baby to learn how to appropriately express needs and how to soothe themselves.

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This is just to tell you that it goes over and over. All right. So felt security. What matters is that the patterns are repeated because when those patterns are repeated over and over, we're actually there's the, the connection between the neurons is growing. So literally inside the child's nervous systems, there's a group of nerves that fire when a child has sensations of discomfort. And then there's another group of neurons that fire when the discomfort is soothed. And the more those things happen together, the, the need and the soothing, the need in the soothing, the need and the soothing, the connections between those neurons grow and we carry those repeated patterns inside of ourselves, inside our nervous systems, and they respond automatically to the environment and to the people around us. So our nervous systems are constantly reading our lives to determine if we are safe or not. And this process, it takes place outside of our awareness and it is hardwired into us. I want to understand that this is not a software program that is just easily replaced. You can't just tell someone to, when they are trying to get their needs met in a way that is not socially appropriate. They can't just switch the software program and and change their behaviors really quickly. It's actually nerve fibers, nerve fibers with strong connections to other nerve fibers that will help them meet the need for felt. security one way or another.

All right. So what happens if the need is expressed and no comfort comes over and over and over? Pretty soon that baby will stop expressing its needs and that baby because they express needs, and nothing happens. It's much harder for that child to develop an internal sense of felt security. If you don't recognize your own needs, if you don't recognize the signals in your body that tell you that you have a need, it's much harder to get them your needs met. And what happens if a need is expressed and no comfort comes? I said that one. Ready?

What happens if, let's say a need is expressed and sometimes the caregiver responds and help soothe the baby, but at other times the, the need is met with frustration or anger or even rage or harm. The one who loves the baby is also the one who harms the baby. So that can be very, that is not a very predictable world. So the child develops an internal sense of just being ready for anything. So you might see young children with a nervous system that is edgy. They're constantly scanning. They want to know, they're always looking around what's going to happen, and they may not know that their needs are going to be met. And so they might look like a hyperactive child. They might look like an anxious child. They might have just very disorganized behavior.

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Now, I've given you three kind of extreme examples, and every parent does all three of these actions, meeting the need, ignoring the need and getting angry about the need that that's expressed, that's normal. But what grows and develops inside the child is the repeated patterns, because the more the patterns are repeated, the stronger the neural connections become. And, and so that it's the pattern that matters because those patterns are the ones that are going to stick with the child. The things that happen rarely or are not going to be staying with the child's nervous system.

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So fortunately, though, for us humans, we can learn to recognize unhealthy patterns or patterns that no longer serve us. So even when we get older, we can see, well, that kind of edginess has some benefits to it, but it also has some things that are not so helpful for me. And I can learn to recognize when I'm feeling that way and get the repeated practice of getting my needs met. So, most trauma therapies have this type of repeated exposure to needs or to triggers that cause doses of discomfort that we can soothe and in therapy, the only way those things are going to be seen is if we have just smaller doses that we can handle in the presence of support. So we learn to handle our triggers in safety, so that our nervous system can have repeated patterns of exposure, of experiencing the trigger and not experiencing the difficulty. And through that repeated practice in a safe environment, that security can grow, and we can take on bigger and bigger challenges. Our bodies just keep on building neurons and reinforcing patterns of behavior long into our adulthood. We can't easily change that software program, but we can begin one moment at a time to rewire that, our nervous system, one interaction at a time, just over and over again.

So I had fun making these slides, AI is really fun. Through thousands and thousands of cycles of having a need and meeting the need. So we're just going around this, having a need, whatever it is, and then the need gets met. The child learns to be aware of their own needs, and then they learn about how to get those needs met either by themselves or with the help of others. The better the child is at knowing what they want and need, the better they are at getting their needs met. The more they're going to feel secure in their body. And that felt security is going to allow them to risk doing something that they've never done before. They can take risks because they know that even if suddenly, they need help or feel discomfort in this new situation, they can, they know how to comfort themselves. They know who to go to for help. In other words, they know how to stay emotionally regulated and they can go into the world and explore and learn. So through these thousands and thousands of cycles of having a need and meeting the need, the child learns to be aware of his or her needs and wants and how to get their needs met either by themselves or with the help of others. And through that process, our cup is filled.

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Can somebody learn to and explore and love if they don't feel safe? What do you think? No. Why? Why do they have less energy and attention for learning and growing? Because their energy and attention is working on keeping them safe. So, what does that look like? Well, a lot of times it looks like escape, running away. If I don't feel safe, that is the quickest way to, to get away from whatever is making me feel unsafe. And eventually it might look like chemical escape or soothing through substances. It might look also like clinging on. Or it could look like pushing everyone away. It could be a combination of clinging on and pushing people away. Whatever worked in those first 18 months of life, we will tend to repeat, because our bodies have learned through thousands and thousands of neural connections that that be those behaviors are the quickest way to safety. So when you see somebody with their behavior, it doesn't make sense to the situation. Believe me, it makes sense in their bodies.

So, it might also, another behavior you might see is that just dismissing your own needs and desires, dissociation from emotions. If there's no way to get safe, we humans are so adaptable we can cut off all of our understanding of what is happening to us and we can become very good at that. And we may not really be aware of what of how to read the signals of our body, and we might have to learn how to do that. The better the child is at knowing what they want and need, the more secure they're going to feel in their body. And that felt security is going to allow them to go out to the world and take risks.

So, but what happens when we make a mistake, especially when our children are old enough to know that we make a mistake? And I'm thinking about you as a caregiver right now, with children, it doesn't take long before they know and they'll start telling you that you've made a mistake, but that works into felt security as well. If, if I know that you care for me and you're there to support me and but you make a mistake and cause a rupture to our relationship, I can learn from this rupture and it's repair. I can learn if you repair that, if you come to me and say you've made a mistake and that you want to make it better, I can learn that nobody's perfect, that we all make mistakes. I can learn that when you mess up, when the people in my life mess up, they're going to own up to it and they're going to apologize and they're going to try to make things better.

So, we don't get felt security from perfect parenting or perfect relationships. Actually, we would that would be a dependency. We would be depending on somebody else to take care of us. No, we get felt security from risking mistakes and succeeding. Or when we don't succeed, we repair the damage. This is all part of a felt security, too. And it's okay if I make mistakes from time to time, I can learn to name the hurt, acknowledge the hurt, and, and start to repair that relationship.

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Okay. So, I just want to take a moment to say that there's ,these examples that I've given are just oversimplifications to teach some pretty important concepts. And my examples are not going to cover everything. There are so many factors that contribute to whether or not a person feels safe and is able to grow and learn and love too. Besides, you know, these repeated things that they've experienced in early childhood. So just to name a few factors that might influence that, their biological temperament, environmental, other environmental factors, historical factors, cultural factors, political factors, intensity of traumas, so many things can affect us. So if your situation, that, seems much more complicated than what I have described, please don't think that I'm oversimplifying your challenges or that I'm invalidating the difficulty that you are facing. I know it is there. I'm just trying to convey some principles on which we can build hope and change. I know that these situations are so hard and also I'm not excusing bad behavior. Trauma reactions can get people into a lot of trouble and cause a lot of heartache. That being said, if we punish them or we think that if we just figure out who's to blame for the problem, that the problem's going to go away. Those are not helpful strategies. Blame and punishment are not helpful. But what is helpful is setting boundaries and having appropriate expectations and helping, giving people the amount of time and support and practice to help them get to those higher expectations.

Okay, I'm going to keep moving through. So one of my favorite studies about attachment, I've watched young children playing on a playground with their caregivers, so like one caregiver, one child, and they literally mapped their, their footprints across a diagram of the playground. So if there was a caregiver sitting on this bench over here and we had like little, I don't know, some kind of special shoes that would show the tracks of the child, you'd see a lot of tracks right here, right, with the caregiver when they first arrive. And then once the child realizes, okay, this place, this new place is okay, I'm going to go give it a try. They might come out here and kind of watch a little bit more from the edge of the playground and maybe look back and check, make sure they're okay, and then look back to their caregiver, make some eye contact, and then go forward and maybe play over here for a little bit. And then something that maybe makes them uncomfortable, or they have some kind of need, and so what they do is they just run back to that caregiver. They stay here for a little bit. Caregiver helps them meet that need, and then they go out and they might come over here and then they might be so free and feel so secure and safe and be having so much fun that they might go over here, might even go up this tree and climb the tree and then come back to the caregiver, once you know, something happens. We need safety to explore, in this world. We take our internal sense of safety away from our attachment figures and we go out into the world and explore because we have that internal sense of being safe right here in us.

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So, I do have a question for you, and I want to know who sits on the bench for you? Who can you go to? Who's that place of safety that you can go to, to get reregulated, to, when things aren't going right, when you're uncomfortable, when who can you go to? Try to think of maybe three people would be great if you had three, but we all probably need one.

Okay, so in your packet, you're Welcome Packet There's a tool called Seeing the Needs and Meeting the Needs, and that is basically it's a spreadsheet and it could be a little overwhelming if you look at it all at once. But it's just a spreadsheet and I'm going to show it to you. We're going to get more into that in the next presentation. When I talk about co regulation. So we'll be doing a presentation on CO regulation and we're going to get more into that tool. But for now you can find that blank spot where it says, Who are the people that make you feel safe and write the names of those people for yourself. Okay. And then when thinking about, you know, caregivers, it is so easy as a caregiver or working in a caring field to get into burnout, much harder to get out.

So if we're trying to look at a broken systems and people who are getting burnout in those, we need to think about what might be missing in those systems and maybe what's present that isn't helpful. To take a moment and think about what we've talked about, see if you can figure out what might be missing and maybe what isn't helpful.

And so I will just tell you the felt security of the people in the system may be missing. So, if you're in a family system thinking about the different people in your family, they may not be getting that their needs met, their needs for feeling safe, but also some things that might be present that are not helpful are those blaming and punishment kinds of things that that's probably not helpful.

So that's just some thoughts for you to ponder and, and one more thing, just going back to felt security to hammer, hammer at home to you felt security is personal to you. When someone shows you with their words or their behaviors that their needs are not being met, please believe them. Don't try to convince them that they are wrong. Their bodies know that something is missing or something is threatening to them and it may have nothing to do with the situation that they're in right now. It may have something to do with the past, but in that moment, you are not going to convince them, so believe them. Okay. Second, felt security, we can all get there, but it grows with repetitive practice of noticing a need and meeting the need. We don't excuse bad behavior, but we also know that punishment and blaming are not helpful. And what does get us to where we need to go is compassionately supporting people to get their needs met in healthy ways with clear boundaries. And finally, well, not quite finally. But when we have felt security, it gives us the freedom to grow and to learn, to explore, gives us the freedom to love.

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And in order to do all of those things that we've just talked about, you must take some risks, calculated risks, and experience some discomfort. You cannot build trust without trusting. You can't learn and grow without failing, and you must have discomfort in order to be comforted. So these are the things that I hope that I got to you today, and that's what I have for you. And, my hope for you is that you find comfort when you need it. And I look forward to talking to you again about co-regulation.