

The Polarity of Mind Reflex: A New Construct in Human Relationship Physics

By: Daniel Materna, Psy.D. (6-10-12)

The human brain is designed for survival. Our physical survival is typically fostered through the fight-or-flight response that is hard wired into the structure of our brains. Thus, when we perceive a threat and the amygdala receives the information, we either attack and fight back to neutralize the threat, or we flee and run away from it. Our physical welfare is therefore protected and our longevity is hopefully guaranteed.

But what happens when the “threat” is an emotional one? That is, what happens when we face a threat to our secure love and attachment with others? For example, what happens to a child’s brain when it receives information that his or her needs and feelings don’t count, such as through child abuse or neglect? What happens to a young brain when it hears a parent yelling at the child and calling him or her names? In contrast, what also happens within a person’s brain when they are treated as extra special or spoiled? What does a spoiled or favored child come to expect in terms of future relationships and mutual respect of needs with others? How are relationships shaped after a person’s feelings and related needs are either rejected or overly attended to?

If we consider having our needs met as basic to our survival, then perhaps the fight or flight response and its embedded network of wiring throughout our brain has a part to play in the structuring of our relationships. The Polarity of Mind Reflex is the term I use to describe how the fight or flight response gets applied interpersonally, in terms of our emotional survival and the patterns people engage in. Specifically, the Polarity of Mind Reflex is a model for understanding two compromised solutions to problems associated with attachment experiences that have gone poorly for any number of reasons. The inadvertent solutions include adopting either a self-serving style of relating where a person asserts his/her needs without much concern for others, or an excessively giving style where the person takes care of others without much concern for his/her own needs.

There are psychological terms we commonly use to describe how the Polarity of Mind Reflex manifests itself in relationships and personalities. The narcissist-caretaker pattern is one of them. This pattern is pervasive and presents itself in the offices of psychologists and marital therapists daily. Let’s review this pattern briefly. The narcissist, or inherently self-serving person, seeks to get others to meet their needs. Selfish people covet attention and their needs typically count more and are at the expense of anyone else’s. That is, selfish-types “take” and getting their needs met is something they strive for or “fight” to achieve. In comparison, caretakers (sometimes called codependents or in more extreme cases victims) structure relationships by giving to others. Many caretakers never or rarely make their needs known to others. Thus, caretakers “run from” their needs and give extensive attention to other people. Both narcissistic types and caretakers seek to avoid the anxiety and insecurity each feels when it comes to healthier forms of interaction, i.e., where needs exchanges occur and secure love and attachment get created. Each instead engages in a unidirectional pattern of relating that fails to create a secure attachment with others. Secure love can never be established in either of these two ways. Secure attachment only occurs through mutual respect where both people’s needs are voiced and valued.

The Polarity of Mind Reflex is a construct recognizing the ways the fight or flight response affects people’s relationships in regards to needs expression. Again, either of the

polarities is flawed, because they never result in secure love and attachment. But because the fight or flight response is so basic and integrated in our brain's design, a pattern of relating frequently arises that causes relationship problems that can lead to divorce. Those who go the selfish route, "fight" to get their needs met. Others' needs don't count to them. In contrast, those who assume caretaking roles "run" from their own needs and seek mainly to structure relationships by being givers. Mutual relating is too anxiety ridden and compromised patterns of association occur. Our brains are structured this way and even though we are no longer fighting or running from saber tooth tigers, it is played out in how people fill their needs interpersonally. The Polarity of Mind Reflex represents this dynamic. The end result is two people keeping each other at a distance and avoiding the feelings of anxiety that mutual relating would trigger.

Beyond our basic needs for food, shelter, and other necessities of life, I think the primary need people come into our offices to get help with is in regards to establishing secure and lasting love in their lives. That's the need behind interpersonal problems. People simply need healthy and secure love in their lives, but our brains can get in the way of allowing it. Diagnoses related to depression and anxiety, notwithstanding those with a profound biological basis, can be the symptom people develop when love needs aren't secure. I know this simplifies diagnoses and the variety of clinical issues we are presented with and treat, but there is validity to this theory. For example, why do people care whether they get along with others anyway? What needs are they fulfilling in doing so? Beyond basic needs for collaboration to have a functional society, I think the overarching need many of our clients are struggling with is for secure and lasting love. Our need for healthy love relationships is as basic to our health and well-being as clean air and water. When the sources of being loved in our lives are "polluted" we can get sick and suffer problems that could compromise our lives, just like when our water or air is polluted.

I think the Polarity of Mind construct helps to explain why people stay in unhealthy and abusive relationships. As the brain is growing and developing in childhood, neurological pathways are being laid down and embedded in our brains. You might call this process shaping, early learning, or memory formation, but the end result is that children learn whether and how their feelings and needs count early in life. They also learn it at a time when brain development and growth is occurring and neuronal structures are being delineated. Right there, along with a child's brain growth which is incorporating early experiences is a survival mechanism we refer to as the fight or flight response. Applying the fight or flight response to our needs, as we did above, we can consider how we learn to fight for our needs (selfishness) or flee from them (caretaking) early in life. I suspect people more extreme in either polarity had complicated or troubled childhoods, where their needs were overlooked, violated, or excessively attended to by a doting parent or person. But once the brain is fabricated and axons, dendrites, and all their branching and neuronal associations are laid out, change will not be easy. Patterns of need fulfillment persist until major changes occur such as through psychotherapy.

The need exists to underscore one universal fact about where secure love comes from. Secure and lasting love only develops when the mutual respect of needs exists in a relationship. That is, both people's needs must count in any relationship for trust to be established and secure and lasting love to be created. Stop and reflect on how you cannot trust or be securely attached to anyone, if they regularly disregard your needs. Similarly, if you only meet the needs of others without asking to have your needs met too, insecure and precarious love results. Thus, in relationships neither narcissism (including varying degrees of excessive self-serving behaviors) nor caretaking will ever produce secure attachment. However, our brains seem to forego this because of a more primitive and extensively integrated survival structure. Without knowing it,

our brains may be falsely leading us into patterns of relating to others that sabotage our abilities to create secure and lasting love because of the effects of the misapplied fight or flight response. Thus, people either learn to run from their needs or want their needs to dominate exclusively, but all at the expense of secure love and attachment. It is no wonder abuse victims stay with abusive partners; their brain's survival structures were shaped early on to do so and this also explains why such patterns are hard to change. For example, it takes time through psychotherapy for the cortex to affect the midbrain and its fight or flight composite. What we don't see are all those axons, dendrites, and synapses configured early in life and integrated into our brain through the fight or flight response (affecting ways we relate to interpersonal needs).

Below is summarized the steps associated with the Polarity of Mind Reflex and its effects:

STEP 1: A person experiences rejection, abandonment, neglect, abuse, or spoiling. (Or is simply taught to serve and take care of others, but never to consider their own needs.)

STEP 2: The person must survive; children rely on adults for safety, caring, and nurturance.

STEP 3: If parents don't meet their children's needs for security, how will they get them met? (Safe and secure love only occurs through the mutual respect of needs.)

STEP 4: The brain automatically directs people towards two groups of behaviors: A. A person focuses on others' needs and assumes a caretaking position in relationships, or, B. They strictly focus on getting their own needs met regardless of the cost to others. (B is also the response when children are spoiled or when the person decides they can't rely on others to meet their needs so they decide to only rely on themselves.)

STEP 5: Mutual respect of needs in relationships is not learned and applied.

STEP 6: Secure love and attachment is prevented.

STEP 7: A life course of relationship problems follows. People then never experience secure and lasting love. People don't attach well to you because you are unable to practice mutual respect of needs. People leave you or you leave them, because love and attachment doesn't get established. People wonder why they have to either cope with repeated losses or live their lives never truly feeling loved. But things can change. They have to, if secure love is the goal.

I want to share one last point about the Polarity of Mind Reflex. People also alternate between caretaking and selfishness. For example, there are times when narcissistic people can be charming and overly attentive to others, but later, once the relationship is more established they shift to their predominant selfish ways. Such is the case outlined in Mary Jo Fay's book *When Your Perfect Partner Goes Perfectly Bad*. Even narcissists can be attentive to the needs of partners (victims?) in order to seduce them into their web of being "attended to." Similarly, as caretakers seek to become assertive and voice needs they often become very self-focused. Others complain, "What happened to the old you; you seem so selfish now?" Such it is with human nature; people can't help themselves from swinging from one polarity to the other as they

undergo change. The effects of the fight or flight response and its application to needs fulfillment in relationships is habitual and hard wired into us.

I think the Polarity of Mind Reflex helps to further explain complex and persistent relationship patterns. But like any good construct, it can also direct us toward interventions to modify relationship habits that take it into consideration. Briefly, such interventions need to always have as their goal creating the capacity in people to engage in mutually respectful relationships. Problems arise if you only teach a caretaker to act assertively with their partner because this triggers the selfish person's basic defenses; they recognize a threat to their needs being met and resistance and conflict will follow. Similarly, if you only try to teach a narcissistic person to be more empathic and to care about the needs of others you will run into problems with their amygdala and how they learned to only care about their needs as a means to survival. Again, mutual interventions are called for here. I think the Polarity of Mind Reflex offers a new perspective on common problems people have in relationships. I will be putting out a book in the future called *New "Simple" Solutions to Life's Love Problems* where I will present interventions having a more mutual basis for use in resolving the Polarity of Mind Reflex issues.

(The author welcomes comments from readers regarding this article and their views about the Polarity of Mind Reflex construct at jdmaterna@surf724.com)