

Boarding school and broken attachments

Boarding school is meant to make kids ‘independent’, but surely not so cut-off that they cannot have a fulfilling relationship, argues **Anne Power**

Children who grow up in boarding schools tend to develop a shell, a protection, which walls off both the outside world and their own vulnerable self. This article will look at how these barriers intersect with pre-existing attachment styles, and how these combined fortifications can get in the way of successful adult relationships.

The impact of boarding on a child

A former boarder commented that the baby monkeys in Harlowe’s experiments could have been spared.¹ She’s right. Observations of boarding schools could have demonstrated the important truth: that young mammals don’t attach to the one who feeds them, but to the one who provides safety and comfort. We could say the same of the hospital studies showing that separation from caregivers triggers a particular sequence of grief in children: protest, despair, detachment.² This sequence could also have been observed in children sent away to school. Jo Trotter, a

former boarder, illustrates this detachment as she speaks for her young self: ‘On visits home, I don’t get excited anymore and it would be easier now if I never went home.’³

In 2004, Joy Schaverein defined ‘boarding school syndrome’ – the protective response adopted by children who find themselves marooned among strangers with no safe parental figure.⁴ This defence is poignantly described by a former boarder.⁵ ‘I learn not to let people see my pain, and the shock and inherent numbness help to stop me feeling.

“
Whatever attachment strategy a child was already using will probably be exaggerated in the early months at boarding school, and then subsequently adapted

I learn to become the survivor and forget who I was before that cataclysmic change.’

This is the kind of protection used by most boarders to some degree. The younger children are sent away, the more rigid the layers of protection will be, and the greater the loss of connection to self and others. For many boarders, this learning about how to hide the true self is the deepest part of their education:

REFERENCES

- 1 Den Hollander F. Skinny dipping in the Rhine. In: Simpson N (ed) Finding our way home: women’s accounts of being sent to boarding school. London: Routledge; 2019 (pp9–16).
- 2 Bowlby J. Attachment and loss. London: Random House; 1969.
- 3 Trotter J. Sometimes. In: Simpson N (ed) Finding our way home: women’s accounts of being sent to boarding school. London: Routledge; 2019 (pp71–76).
- 4 Schaverein J. Boarding school: the trauma of the ‘privileged’ child. Journal of Analytical Psychology 2004; 49(5): 683–705.
- 5 Giddens C. Being sent, then and now. In: Simpson N (ed) Finding our way home: women’s accounts of being sent to boarding school. London: Routledge; 2019 (pp2–28).

‘The lessons I learnt through my schooling were not academic. I learnt to have a mask in life. I learnt to dissociate. I learnt to mood alter. I learnt I was unlovable. I learnt that I could only rely on me. I learnt to be a chameleon, and to do what I need to, to fit whatever environment I was in. To adapt. Not to have needs. Not be important. I learnt I was irrelevant.’⁶

How are attachment patterns impacted?

For a few children whose homes are hell, boarding school could theoretically be a place of safety. For most families, even if parents have had difficult lives and aren’t able to provide a secure relationship, the displacement to a boarding school will result in the children being bereaved. To cope with that loss, they will develop strategies – different forms of denial – and these will interfere with their development. Whatever attachment strategy a child was already using will probably be exaggerated in the early months at school, and then subsequently adapted. Evidence from the consulting room and from memoirs shows that boarding school syndrome comes on top of an existing attachment pattern. The combination of the two forms of defence produces the strategic survival personalities described by Nick Duffell.⁷

For avoidant children, boarding school is an exaggeration of the hands-off care they’re used to. It’s probably easier for these children to adapt, because they already have low expectations of care, and have learnt to minimise their feelings and their attachment longings. They did this in their family of origin because caregivers gave better care when

vulnerable feelings were kept hidden.⁸ Living in a very large group of mostly unknown peers, these children will double down on their familiar defences: keeping their vulnerable feelings hidden from others and themselves. In time, avoidant children may cope by developing a habit of compulsive caregiving, aloofness or grandiose, narcissistic traits.

For preoccupied or anxiously attached children, boarding school is their worst nightmare come true – they always expected to be abandoned, and now this has happened in the most catastrophic way. Their parents have left them with strangers, and are deaf to their pleas and threats. These children tend to keep on pleading with their parents for years, fighting to make their parents relent. Their lifelong pining for reassurance becomes amplified and conflicts with their newer strategic survival personality. This coping mechanism, identified by Duffell, helps a child navigate the harsh, competitive culture in most boarding schools.⁷ Out of that internal conflict may come self-destructive, overly rebellious or grandiose traits.

Secure children trusted their parents and were inclined to trust other grown-ups, so it’s an appalling shock to learn that their loving parents have abandoned them with strangers. At first, they’re confident that when they explain their distress to their parents, they’ll be rescued. We sometimes hear of parents who were as upset as their homesick child but steeled themselves to see it through because they were so convinced of the benefit to their child. Where parents deeply grieved the separation from their child, the relationship may have been secure, and this may make the betrayal more crushing for a child because trust is lost in such a traumatic way.

Children with disorganised attachment have experienced fear in their own homes. Raised by troubled parents, they’ve lived with a dilemma: do I turn to my parent for comfort or flee from them because they are the source of danger? These children will have a reduced capacity to manage their feelings, and they may never ‘settle’ in boarding school. Unable to behave as the rules require, they may get expelled. Many more children may become disorganised through the trauma of boarding school – the combination of broken attachment, loss of the familiar, exposure to abuse and bullying may trigger a storm of rage, fear and pain, which erupt in ‘difficult’ behaviours.

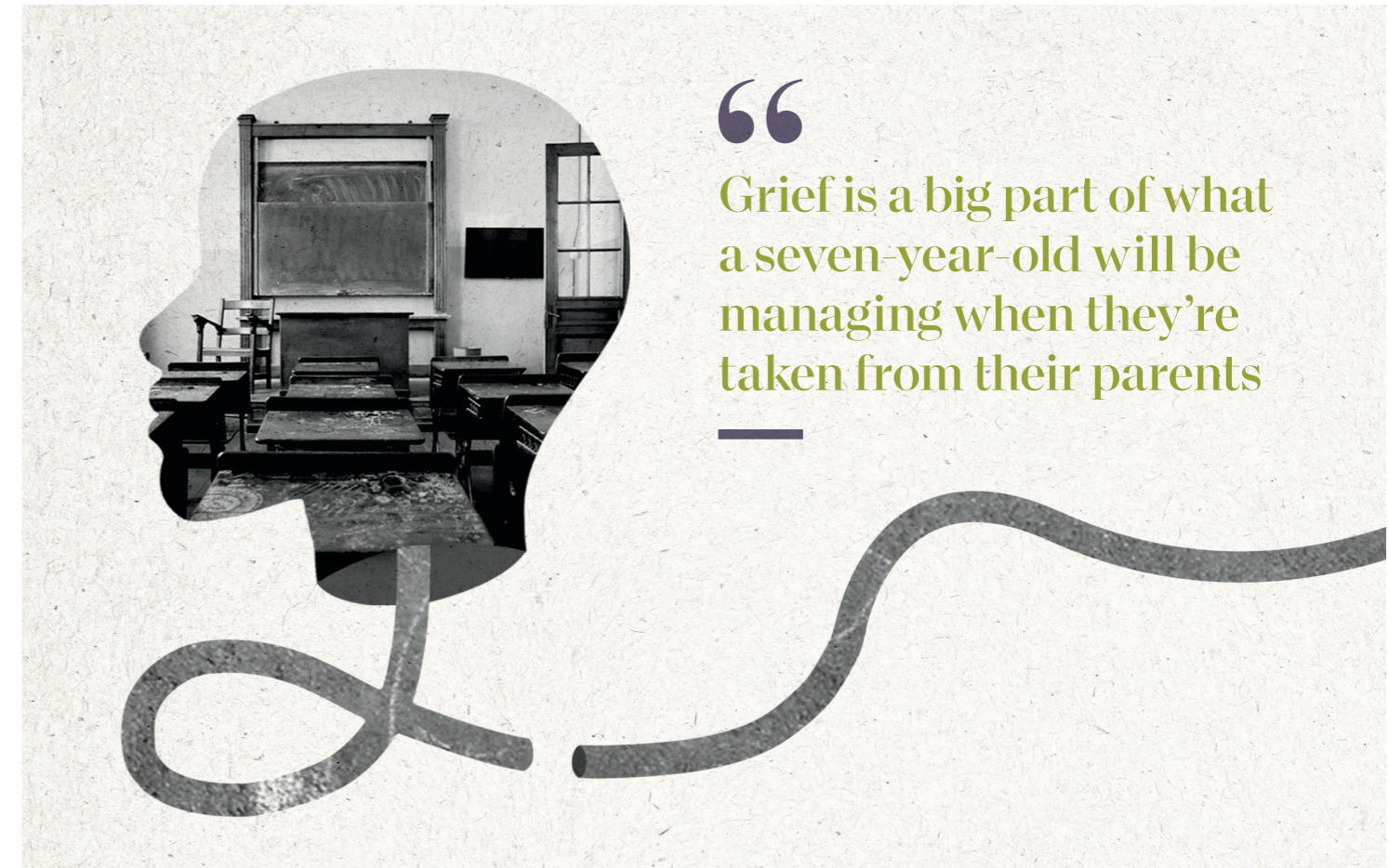
Some children report that they enjoy boarding school, and indeed appear to thrive, but we can hypothesise that they achieve this by adapting ‘well’ to the separation from parents and immersion in an institutional environment. In the short-run, this adaptation may be very advantageous. In the long-run, they may have closed down parts of the self that will be very hard to re-open. This kind of ‘successful’ adaptation appears to be most possible for the more popular children, often sporty or clever, and probably with a somewhat avoidant pattern when they entered the school.

Grief is a big part of what a seven-year-old will be managing when they’re taken from their parents. By calling this ‘homesickness’, the depth of pain can be dismissed. It’s true that children will appear to ‘get over it’, but only because evolution has set them up to move through protest towards despair and detachment. Bowlby maintained that when children lose a parent, they pass relatively quickly through the stages of grief, as it’s adaptive for them to find a new caregiver.² Some groups of children will be especially vulnerable to the loss and to the uniform expectations that are put on large groups of children. Adoptees may be particularly disturbed by being sent away. Neurodiverse children may find the environment crippling intrusive and disturbing.

Can peer relationships compensate?

One of the claims made in favour of boarding school is the deep friendships that can be formed there. I asked AI to tell me about friendships formed in battle and I found the answer chillingly reminiscent of boarding school: ‘Friendships formed in battle are often characterised by deep emotional bonds that arise from shared experiences, hardships, and the unique circumstances of military service.’⁹

These relationships can be profound and lasting, as they’re forged in a climate of unsafety, where individuals rely on each other for survival, support and camaraderie. However, for any in-group, there is an out-group, and many boarders live with the loneliness and fear of not belonging. This former boarder describes how her false self came to predominate: ‘Needing to feel as if I belong is a recurring theme in my life. I feel I can never be myself, I always try to say and do the “right” thing to get accepted into a group.’¹⁰



“
Grief is a big part of what a seven-year-old will be managing when they’re taken from their parents

Of course, the impact of bullying in a day school can also be catastrophic in a child’s development. The 24-hour presence of social media makes this even more toxic. But for a child being bullied in boarding school, there’s less protection against the loneliness and shame. I’m not labouring the damage caused by abuse and bullying because my intention is to focus on the potential harm that’s done even when boarding schools are operating at their best. The modern adaptations – flexible boarding, homely surroundings and children living in smaller groups within the school – cannot take away the core wound: the removal of children from their parents. In any other setting, we would regard this as something to avoid at all costs.

“
For preoccupied or anxiously attached children, boarding school is their worst nightmare come true...

How are later romantic relationships impacted?

In some parts of the dating scene, it’s well understood that a former boarder can be a poor bet in relationships. The stereotype is a man who will hurt you. He’s easy to fall in love with, being confident, charming and with a promise of a vulnerable inner life, which the new girlfriend or boyfriend hopes and believes they can nurture. When the first intense passion passes, his interest in knowing his partner seems also to evaporate. Now he seems aloof, disinterested and closed to his partner’s attempts at knowing him better. These individuals are often not at all self-confident in a real sense. Self-worth, self-respect and self-compassion may be at dangerously low levels, and this disables the former boarder from offering validations, respect and empathy to their partner – male or female.

It’s not a coincidence that we hear of so many pairings between an aloof former boarder and a disappointed anxiously attached person. We can explain this by the attraction of the ‘fascinating and the familiar’,

whereby we tend to fall in love with someone who carries an underdeveloped part of ourselves.¹¹ Hence, a quiet, sensitive person may fall for someone who seems strong with a commanding presence. Each is seeing in the other a part of the self that’s not been treasured and has had no chance of developing. When these two become a pair, they feel complete, they feel they have ‘come home’, and they’re convinced that this blessed state will endure. Sadly, they will need to pass

⁶ Knight C. The story of a little girl lost. In: Simpson N (ed). Finding our way home: women’s accounts of being sent to boarding school. London: Routledge; 2019 (pp53–60).

⁷ Duffell N. The making of them: the British attitude to children and the boarding school system. London: Lone Arrow Press; 2000.

⁸ Ainsworth MDS, Blehar MC, Waters E, Wall SN. Patterns of attachment: a psychological study of the strange situation. Hove: Psychology Press; 2015.

⁹ iAsk. [Online.] <https://tinyurl.com/2bppfd6h> (accessed 3 February 2025).

¹⁰ Turner M. Privileged deprivation. In: Simpson N (ed) Finding our way home: women’s accounts of being sent to boarding school. London: Routledge; 2019 (pp87–92).

¹¹ Power A. Contented couples: magic, logic or luck? London: Confer Books; 2022.

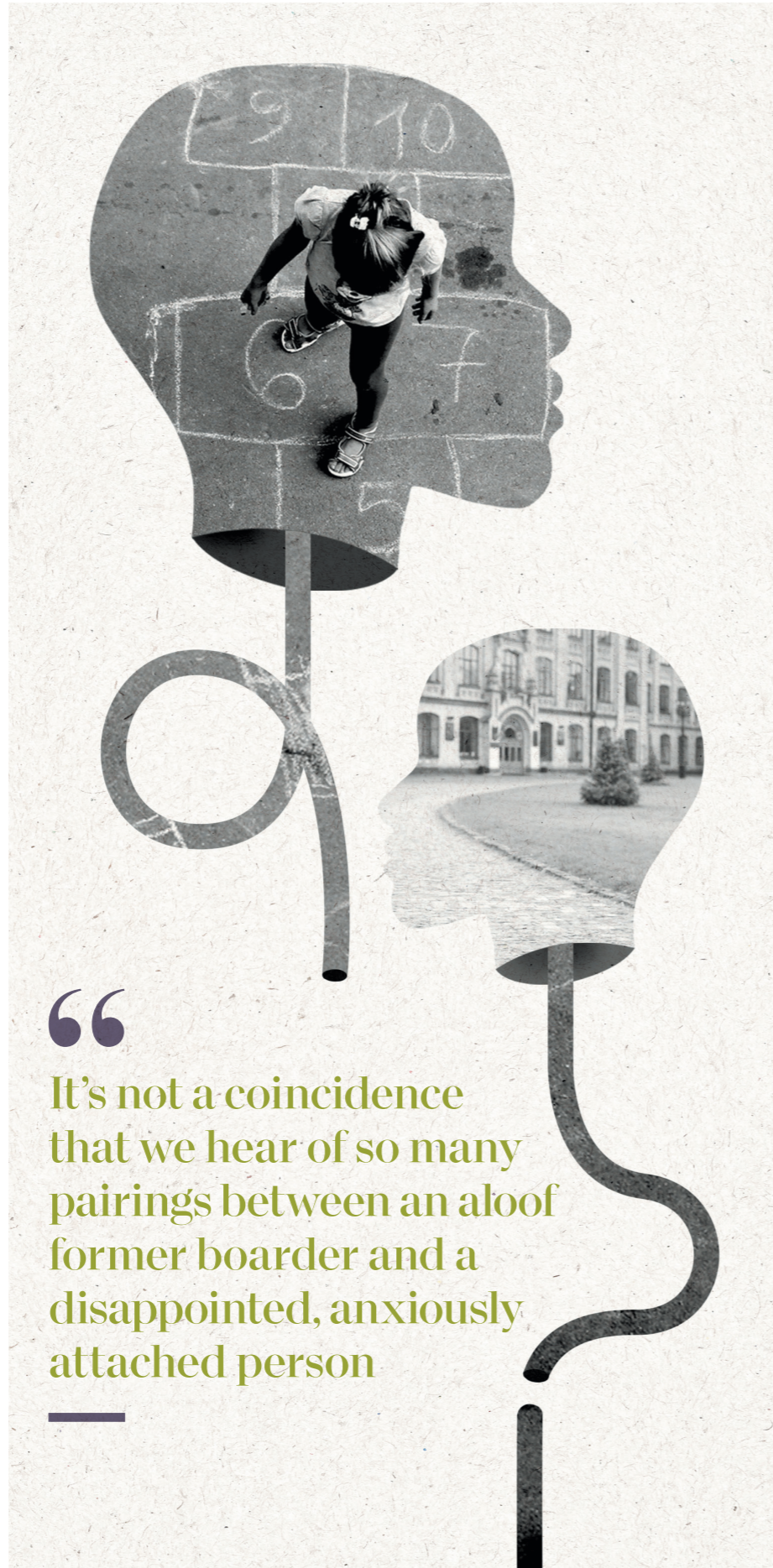


through some challenging developmental stages to become a secure, fulfilling couple.

A tug of war develops, with this former boarder trying to hide, and their partner wanting them to show up. His sense of safety lies in minimising feelings, but this triggers frustration and longing in his partner. In heterosexual and same-sex relationships, many couples have one partner who manages feelings with more avoidant strategies (the withdrawer) and one whose attachment behaviours are more anxious (the pursuer).¹² In more secure couples, this is something they can recognise and manage by de-escalating their own cycle, whether through humour or by a generous remark by either party. When the two partners are entrenched in two competing strategies, life between them can become unbearable and without help, their relationship may end. The avoidant person may find it easier to walk away, but sometimes it's the anxiously attached partner who becomes so exhausted with their attempts to elicit care, they become a 'worn-out pursuer' and leave the relationship.

I've simplified this picture to convey the dynamics, but, of course, women are often withdrawers and men are often pursuers. We see this in some heterosexual pairs, and it's very visible in same sex-pairs. This was powerfully shown by couples I interviewed about their long-term relationships. Kate describes herself as the withdrawer and has learnt how her avoidant patterns have, in the past, caused her to find ways to avoid her own feelings and those of her partner: 'I'm trying to learn not to try to fix it. I'm trying to learn to just keep my mouth shut, to listen, to be a more empathic listener.'¹¹ Later she described how it felt when Diane would ask, 'What's wrong, why aren't you talking to me?' 'Uh... it could be a matter of shutting down even more, getting a little bit more paralysed or sometimes it would, I would, it would manifest itself in anger.'¹¹

Kate hadn't been to boarding school, but her avoidant pattern serves a similar aim of self-protection, and was developed in a similar environment of neglect and harshness. Many children with anxious attachment may emerge from boarding school with a relational manner that confuses others as well as themselves. Their original need to hold on and seek reassurance has been overlain by the message that they must be independent. Other factors can also create a confusing picture, making it



“
It's not a coincidence
that we hear of so many
pairings between an aloof
former boarder and a
disappointed, anxiously
attached person

“

For most clients in any therapy, a key task is learning to distinguish between our self and the survival strategies we developed to get by

harder for a couple to know who is pursuing and who is withdrawing. Neurodiversity is one such factor and can sometimes mean that people with anxious attachment appear avoidant. In some couples, the distress is very loud and obvious, but in conflict-avoidant pairs, it's just as deep but very silent. This pattern could easily develop between two former boarders, both primed to behave 'well' and to keep their authentic feelings hidden.

‘Sealed-off’ sex

Many former boarders enter the world of adult relationships, frightened, internally shut down, ignorant of their own feelings and results driven. It's not surprising that sex is one of the areas that can become difficult. It's not that these young adults aren't attractive to suitors or that they have any less longing for the safety and closeness of a secure relationship. In our culture, many children are raised with discomfort about their bodies, but the chances of shame or mishandled boundaries are greater in boarders. Their journey through puberty unfolded in a competitive, exposing environment where all children's bodies were under a strict regime with few choices, imposed boundaries and much hardening. Any difference, such as an early or later puberty or a same sex attraction, could mark a child out for unwanted scrutiny or outright bullying.

Abuse from teachers or other pupils will infect future relationships unless it can be healed. Johnson uses the term 'sealed-off sex' to describe the kind of sex with which avoidant partners are most comfortable, and for many boarding survivors, the same constraints will apply: they can only be close to a sexual partner by shutting down any emotional connection.¹³ In addition, boarders may lack the most available and helpful remedy that couples have when their sexual relationships get tangled – a capacity to talk about sex. Talking about anything intimate and vulnerable will threaten

to put them in touch with real internal feelings – until they can soften their internal fortress, this is forbidden territory, and they will avoid it.

What might therapy need to address?

Individual therapy can be very helpful for boarding survivors – many of them would say lifesaving. In some cases, couple therapy is badly needed and can be very effective if it provides a safe place for the former boarder to begin to know their own internal world. If the model allows cognitive or intellectual exits, the former boarder is likely to take these.

For most clients in any therapy, a key task is learning to distinguish between our self and the survival strategies we developed to get by. This is certainly the case for ex-boarders, and the points at which they're often motivated to seek therapy are when these survival strategies are impeding their close relationships. Some boarding survivors are motivated by their longing to offer their children the security their parents couldn't provide. There may also be a recognition that they need to learn to parent themselves, and very often there's a desire to achieve a satisfying relationship after a history of failed attempts. If therapy goes well, they'll be able to soften their defences and grow in these key ways which support secure relating:

- 1 Giving appreciation and respect to themselves and others
- 2 Having compassion for self and for others
- 3 Capacity to manage emotions and to help a partner regulate.

When we have enough strength in these three areas, we'll be much better equipped for relationship and more able to repair ruptures, to communicate from vulnerability and to compromise. Ultimately, the therapy work with a former boarder will have much in common with other work. As practitioners, we need to be alert to the protective strategies this group employ, so that our perception of privilege doesn't obscure the deprivation these adults have suffered. Many of them have the skills to produce a convincing show of confidence, while internally, they're crushed and bleeding.

These words of a former boarder remind us that being seen in the round is what makes therapy a safe and generative space for all clients: 'Only now in the safety of the therapy room am I discovering my shadow

self, the darker sides, accepting my anger and "nasty" bits. I am at last on a journey, and although it has been painful at times, I am flourishing in the knowledge that I'm getting to know myself. I'm getting to know who I truly am, discovering the various separated parts of myself. With my therapist's help, I am weaving myself back together another way; more authentic and real.'¹⁴ ●

This article is loosely based on a talk given on 9 November 2024 at the Boarding School Survivors Support annual conference in London.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anne Power has been an attachment-based therapist for nearly 30 years and has written widely on attachment. Her new book, *Contented Couples: magic, logic or*

luck?, published by Karnac Books, is based on interviews with 18 long-term couples from different traditions, including arranged marriage. It explains couple dynamics in an accessible way and describes how partners' complementary attachment patterns can work well together. Anne posts on Instagram (@and_attachment) with content for people who want to understand attachment in their relationships. Her TEDx talk, 'Attachment theory is the science of love', also addresses this theme and has been watched by over half a million people.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hz42pisg9w&t=560s
www.contentedcouples.com

YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

If you have a response to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter, or respond with an article of your own. Email: privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk

¹² Johnson SM. The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy: creating connection. London: Routledge; 2012.

¹³ Johnson S. Hold me tight: your guide to the most successful approach to building loving relationship. Boston, MA: Boston. Piatkus; 2011.

¹⁴ Okenby M. Boarding school musings. In: Simpson N (ed) Finding our way home: women's accounts of being sent to boarding school. London: Routledge; 2019 (pp77-86).