

# Baby Core Emotions in Relation to Mom: Jealousy

## Overview:

Let's start with a useful definition of jealousy.

1 – It is a three-party, triangular relationship based on whole objects (i.e. people).

2 – It is based primarily on love, a key point.

3 – The central issue in this 'love triangle' is the desire to have someone one loves return the love, and not give it to a third individual.

While jealousy can be an intensely painful emotion, the fact that it is predominantly linked to love makes it an "acceptable" emotion to have. This is in contrast to its ugly, older stepsister – envy. Because envy is more linked to hatred, it is felt instinctively to be undesirable. This is at the root of the common mislabeling of envy as jealousy. For example, regarding the phrase "I am so jealous of your new car," one never hears it the other way around, with jealousy mislabeled as envy!

## Jealousy's Early Origin:

Let's start this exploration of jealousy by going back to birth and the difficulty that is initiated by no longer feeling joined up to mother. If birth makes separation an immediate issue, jealousy is not far behind. The infant, whose entire mental life at that stage is riveted on mom's whereabouts and activities, can't help but notice when mom is attending to someone or something else. Since this infant is utterly dependent on mom, he will increasingly develop an awareness that what he is not getting attention from her, someone else may be at the receiving end instead. In addition, as he develops an awareness of how much he loves mom and wants her love in return, seeing her with someone else adds to the pain.

Since dad is often the first person, aside from mom, who spends a lot of time with the infant, he is usually the main "other" person in mom's life. If it is correct that infants are 'predisposed' to have an expectation of there being a father figure in their life (Bion's 'preconception'), from their phylogenetic inheritance, then that adds to the potential awareness of a "triangular situation" that is ripe for the development of jealousy. This is not to imply that dad cannot also be the primary object of jealousy. That will usually also develop, but probably later in infancy, since mom is usually the first primary object after birth, given the nine months inside her, and the attendant extensive awareness of her existence and qualities.

If we characterize the main primary parent the object of one's love and the other parent as the rival, then we have arrived at the "Oedipal" situation, which Sophocles so brilliantly highlighted in his plays.

Parenthetically, it always blows my mind when I hear an analyst-type person say that the "Oedipus Complex" doesn't exist or matter. Was he never a small child? If in doubt, try being a parent, meet your spouse at dinner time coming home from work, and kiss each other in front of a toddler sitting in his highchair, and watch his lower lip. He will start crying in 1.39 seconds!

## Coping with Jealousy in Infancy and Childhood:

This leads to the reality that if a developing infant has too many painful experiences of jealousy, whether brought on by actual loss of mom's attention (i.e. too many siblings born too close together in age) or whatever other cause, then he will resort to maneuvers to cope with the pain.

- The obvious, if extreme, maneuver to cope with jealousy would be to “diminish one’s love” for anyone.
- Alternately, as I tried in my early childhood, one can be in “possessive control” of the loved object, so that the loved object cannot be with anyone else. The control can be achieved from the outside of the loved object or by getting back inside it to become an “unborn, inside baby.”

A derivative of this latter phantasy is commonly seen later in life with a male’s overriding desire to be inside a female’s body, with his penis, in order to be in possession and control of her. The reverse phantasy on the part of a female toward a male is also possible but probably less biologically driven.

#### Sibling Rivalry, Envy, and Delusional Jealousy:

The combination of envy and jealousy largely account for the emotional situation that we commonly refer to as “sibling rivalry.” It is universal in all homes with more than one child and commonly more intense than parents expected, considering how adults have lost contact with it as an emotion after they moved beyond adolescence. It is still operative throughout the lifespan, often with the same intensity of childhood, but it is rationalized or denied and thus not appreciated for the direct continuation of childhood envy and jealousy that it actually represents.

Situations in which siblings were born too close together, sibling rivalry regularly manifests in lifelong distance and estrangement between siblings.

[Note: If twenty-four to thirty-six months is the most commonly ideal spacing, then jealousy increases very dramatically every month less than twenty-four months and becomes a logarithmic Richter scale for jealousy every month less than eighteen months apart.]

Setting obvious sibling rivalry aside, whenever one sees jealousy of an unusually intense sort, in childhood or later in life, it is useful to consider the possibility that it became amalgamated with early unconscious envy, but the envy is not so easily teased apart from the jealousy. There is even such a state as “delusional jealousy,” which may actually be more a product of unconscious envy but is constructed by the patient in such a way as to appear to be about jealousy.

One of the contributing factors to this confusion is the fact that as one traces jealousy back to earliest infancy, it shades into envy. This could be conceptualized with the idea that the earliest form of a triangular relationship is the infant with the two breasts where the infant feels left out of a “banquet” that the two breasts are going off to have with each other. In that phantasy, the infant is envying the pleasures the two breasts are giving to each other more than he is feeling jealousy about the love one breast is giving the other.

If one uses that as a model or prototype, then it is possible to see that some situations in adult life that superficially look like jealousy are actually more suffused with unconscious envy than anyone recognizes.

#### Summary:

Jealousy is one of the core emotions with which all infants must contend in relation to their beloved mothers, and to a lesser extent – at least in the beginning – daddy, as well. Since jealousy is linked to a developmentally desirable emotion – love – it may be painful, but jealousy is still in the realm of “goodness.” Generally, it will not rise to the level of being problematic unless external situations aggravate it significantly (e.g. sibling spacing, sleeping in parents bedroom, parental favoritism, etc.).

So let us now move on to the infinitely more problematic emotional situation: Unconscious envy.