



Worthy of Protection

Trauma survivors often struggle to accept needing care and protection from others.

When my friends entrust their two-month-old daughter to my arms, I feel instinctively, physically protective. My body wants to curl around her to keep her safe and well.

I feel emotionally protective of people I mentor, wanting to metaphorically spread my arms wide and shield them from politics and ill-will. Feeling protective of them does not diminish my recognition of their competence, strength, and ability to take care of themselves.

A baby's first job is to elicit protection and nurturing from a mother figure in order to survive. Growing children need to feel cherished both for their vulnerability and for their developing competence.

Not guard nor rescuer. Protection is not an armed guard at the door, active only when there is a threat. Protection is not a Rescuer looking down on a Victim and fearing a Perpetrator in a Drama Triangle.

Loving watchfulness. Protection is ongoing loving watchfulness, keeping the child's well-being in mind. Protection is gentle hands and a kind voice. Protection is not only respecting the child's boundaries, but teaching them to recognize and express their boundaries.

Protection draws a wider boundary, creating a home base where the child can relax and sense safety, where they know they belong. From there, the child can explore and

take risks, knowing that someone has their back, and they can return to home base whenever they want. Protection is part of secure attachment.

Healthy entitlement. A protected child feels a healthy entitlement to have their needs heard and met. They know their wants are important because they experience attuned attention to what makes them happy. They internalize the sense of protection as well as the right to be protected.

Missing protection. A child who is protected only for being fragile, without recognition of the ways they are strong, learns that they have to choose between protection and strength. They miss the support of being valued for all of themselves.

A child who is neglected or abused feels the lack of protection as a sign of their own lack of value. Instead of asking what is wrong with their parents for not caring, they ask what is wrong with them. Their Inner Critic tries to change them to deserve protection. Their Inner Nurturer argues that they always already deserved protection.

An unprotected child experiences the world without a bubble of safety around them. Their parents may guard them from some threats, and even restrict them “for their safety” in a controlling way, but guarding only increases the sense of threat instead of generating a sense of safety.

Walking into danger. An unprotected child might not seek out protection or recognize when it is offered, because it is outside their experience. At the same time, they may feel intense shame about neediness, vulnerability, and longing for protection.

When I came home from middle school one day and walked in on some men robbing the house, it did not occur to me to run to the kind neighbors across the street for help.

When the robbers left me with my hands tied, it did not occur to me to dial 911, even though, as a white girl, I could expect them to help me. As I struggled to dial a friend's number on the old-fashioned rotary phone, it did not occur to me that the operator who spoke on the line was offering help. I froze and waited until she went away before returning to my struggle.

I did finally connect with my friend, who called the police, who came and untied me. Despite fingerprint powder scattered everywhere, they did not catch anyone. It is only now, looking back, that I see some of the options I had then.

Sense into protection. When you think about protection, what do you sense inside? Was it a comfortable background growing up, something you could take for granted? Do you have people around you now who care about your well-being? How do you respond when you encounter someone who clearly does not care?

Or do you feel a void, confusion about how protection might feel? Do you push down a desire for protection, afraid of revealing vulnerability or need? Protection might feel like basking in warm sunlight after a long cold winter, or like finding shelter from a rainstorm.

Inherited lack of protection. By default, lack of protection moves down generations and across society. People learn to hate their own vulnerability, and react negatively to others who dare to be vulnerable, whether as babies, children, or adults. We shame each other and ourselves for neediness, rather than simply acknowledge it.

Invite protection. We can break that cycle, and quiet some of the internal yelling and criticism, when we let our own protectiveness meet our neediness inside.

Imagine holding a baby or pet, or stopping traffic for a

child to cross, or watching someone succeed at something you taught them. How does protectiveness feel in your experience, in your body? Sense for an anchor for this feeling, a way to return to it.

Invite neediness. Now open a space inside for neediness to arise. It can be a small space, carefully contained, or a larger space with softer boundaries. Allow the neediness to be there, and acknowledge its presence. Is there something in you that feels the need to fix or suppress it? Acknowledge that, too. How do neediness and vulnerability feel in your experience, in your body?

Gently move back and forth between protectiveness and neediness, spending some time in each place. Can they both be present at the same time? Do they remain the same, or do they change in each other's presence? Say hello to whatever you notice.

Needs are a sign of health. As humans, as mammals, we are hard-wired to need touch, warmth, support, connection, love. Those needs will spring up no matter how much we were hurt, and no matter how hard we try to eradicate them. We can give those longings a little more room inside, a little more acknowledgment that they are a sign of health, not brokenness. We all deserve protection for our needy, vulnerable places as well as recognition of our strengths.