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How Attachment Styles Affect Adult Relationships

Struggling with relationship problems? The cause may be the attachment style you developed with your primary caregiver as an infant. Here's how to recognize insecure attachment and build stronger, healthier connections.



What is attachment?

Attachment, or the attachment bond, is the emotional connection you formed as an infant with your primary caregiver—probably your mother. According to *attachment theory*, pioneered by British psychiatrist John Bowlby and American psychologist Mary Ainsworth, the quality of the bonding you experienced during this first relationship often determines how well you relate to other people and respond to intimacy throughout life.

If your primary caretaker made you feel safe and understood as an infant, if they were able to respond to your cries and accurately interpret your changing physical and emotional needs, then you likely developed a successful, *secure* attachment. As an adult, that usually translates to being self-confident, trusting, and hopeful, with an ability to healthily manage conflict, respond to intimacy, and navigate the ups and downs of romantic relationships.

If you experienced confusing, frightening, or inconsistent emotional communication during infancy, though, if your caregiver was unable to consistently comfort you or respond to your needs, you're more likely to have experienced an unsuccessful or *insecure* attachment. Infants with insecure attachment often grow into adults who have difficulty understanding their own emotions and the feelings of others, limiting their ability to build or maintain stable relationships. They may find it difficult to connect to others, shy away from intimacy, or be too clingy, fearful, or anxious in a relationship.

Of course, experiences that occur between infancy and adulthood can also impact and shape our relationships. However, the infant brain is so profoundly influenced by the attachment bond, understanding your attachment style can offer vital clues as to why you may be having problems in your adult relationships. Perhaps you behave in puzzling or self-destructive ways when you're in a close relationship? Maybe you repeatedly make the same mistakes over and over? Or maybe you struggle to form meaningful connections in the first place?

Whatever your specific relationship problems, it's important to know that your brain remains capable of change throughout life. By identifying your attachment style, you can learn to challenge your insecurities, develop a more securely attached way of relating to others, and build stronger, healthier, and more fulfilling relationships.

[\[Read: What is Secure Attachment and Bonding?\]](#)

Attachment styles and how they shape adult relationships

Attachment styles or types are characterized by the behavior exhibited within a relationship, especially when that relationship is threatened. For example, someone with a secure attachment style may be able to share their feelings openly and seek support when faced with relationship problems. Those with insecure attachment styles, on the other hand, may tend to become needy or clingy in their closest relationships, behave in selfish or manipulative ways when feeling vulnerable, or simply shy away from intimacy altogether.

Understanding how your attachment style shapes and influences your intimate relationships can help you make sense of your own behavior, how you perceive your partner, and how you respond to intimacy. Identifying these patterns can then help you clarify what you need in a relationship and the best way to overcome problems.

While attachment styles are largely shaped by the infant-primary caregiver connection, especially during the first year, it's important to note that the strength of attachment is not based solely on the level of parental love or the quality of care an infant receives. Rather, attachment is founded on the nonverbal emotional communication developed between caregiver and infant.

[\[Read: Nonverbal Communication and Body Language\]](#)

An infant communicates their feelings by sending nonverbal signals such as crying, cooing, or later pointing and smiling. In return, the caregiver reads and interprets these cues, responding to satisfy the child's need for food, comfort, or affection. When this nonverbal communication is successful, a secure attachment develops.

The success of attachment isn't impacted by socio-economic factors such as wealth, education, ethnicity, or culture. Neither is having an insecure attachment style as an adult reason to blame all your relationship problems onto your parent. Your personality and intervening experiences during childhood, adolescence, and adult life can also play a role in shaping your attachment style.

Types of attachment

Beyond categorizing attachment as secure or insecure, there are subsets of insecure attachment which give us four main attachment styles:

- Secure attachment
- Ambivalent (or anxious-preoccupied) attachment
- Avoidant-dismissive attachment
- Disorganized attachment

Secure attachment style: what it looks like

Empathetic and able to set appropriate boundaries, people with secure attachment tend to feel safe, stable, and more satisfied in their close relationships. While they don't fear being on their own, they usually thrive in close, meaningful relationships.

How secure attachment style affects adult relationships

Having a secure attachment style doesn't mean you're perfect or you don't experience relationship problems. But you likely feel secure enough to take responsibility for your own mistakes and failings, and are willing to seek help and support when you need it.

- You appreciate your own self-worth and you're able to be yourself in an intimate relationship. You're comfortable expressing your feelings, hopes, and needs.
- You find satisfaction in being with others, openly seek support and comfort from your partner, but don't get overly anxious when the two of you are apart.
- You're similarly happy for your partner to rely on you for support.
- You're able to maintain your emotional balance and seek healthy ways to manage conflict in a close relationship.
- When faced with disappointment, setbacks, and misfortune in your relationships as well as other parts of your life, you're resilient enough to bounce back.

Primary caregiver relationship

As someone with a secure attachment style, it's likely your primary caretaker was able to stay engaged with you as an infant and effectively manage their own stress as well as calm and soothe you when you were distressed. They made you feel safe and secure, communicated through emotion, and responded to your changing needs on a regular basis, enabling your nervous system to become "securely attached."

Of course, no parent or caregiver is perfect and no one can be fully present and attentive to an infant 24 hours a day. In fact, that's not necessary to establish secure attachment in a child. But when your caregiver missed your nonverbal cues, it's likely they continued trying

to figure out what you needed, keeping the secure attachment process on track.

The strong foundation of a secure attachment bond enabled you as a child to be self-confident, trusting, hopeful, and comfortable in the face of conflict.

Secure or insecure?

Some people may identify with some but not all of the characteristics of secure attachment. Even if your relationships tend to be stable, it's possible that you have specific patterns of behavior or thinking that cause conflict with your partner and need to be actively addressed. Start by seeing if you relate to any aspects of the following three insecure attachment styles.

Ambivalent or anxious-preoccupied attachment style

People with an ambivalent attachment style (also referred to as "anxious-preoccupied," "ambivalent-anxious," or simply "anxious attachment") tend to be overly needy. As the labels suggest, people with this attachment style are often anxious and uncertain, lacking in self-esteem. They crave emotional intimacy but worry that others don't want to be with them.

How ambivalent attachment style affects adult relationships

If you have an ambivalent or anxious-preoccupied attachment style, you may be embarrassed about being too clingy or your constant need for love and attention. Or you may feel worn down by fear and anxiety about whether your partner really loves you.

- You want to be in a relationship and crave feelings of closeness and intimacy with a significant other, but you struggle to feel that you can trust or fully rely on your partner.
- Being in an intimate relationship tends to take over your life and you become overly fixated on the other person.
- You may find it difficult to observe boundaries, viewing space between you as a threat, something that can provoke panic, anger, or fear that your partner no longer wants you.
- A lot of your sense of self-worth rests on how you feel you're being treated in the

relationship and you tend to overreact to any perceived threats to the relationship.

- You feel anxious or jealous when away from your partner and may use guilt, controlling behavior, or other manipulative tactics to keep them close.
- You need constant reassurance and lots of attention from your partner.
- Others may criticize you for being too needy or clingy and you may struggle to maintain close relationships.

Primary caregiver relationship

It's likely your parent or primary caregiver was inconsistent in their parenting style, sometimes engaged and responsive to your needs as an infant, other times unavailable or distracted. This inconsistency may have left you feeling anxious and uncertain about whether your needs in this "first" relationship would be met, and thus provide a model for your behavior in later relationships.

Avoidant-dismissive attachment style

Adults with an avoidant-dismissive insecure attachment style are the opposite of those who are ambivalent or anxious-preoccupied. Instead of craving intimacy, they're so wary of closeness they try to avoid emotional connection with others. They'd rather not rely on others, or have others rely on them.

How avoidant attachment style affects adult relationships

As someone with an avoidant-dismissive attachment style, you tend to find it difficult to tolerate emotional intimacy. You value your independence and freedom to the point where you can feel uncomfortable with, even stifled by, intimacy and closeness in a romantic relationship.

- You're an independent person, content to care for yourself and don't feel you need others.
- The more someone tries to get close to you or the needier a partner becomes, the more you tend to withdraw.
- You're uncomfortable with your emotions and partners often accuse you of being distant and closed off, rigid and intolerant. In return, you accuse them of being too needy.
- You're prone to minimize or disregard your partner's feelings, keep secrets from them, engage in affairs, and even end relationships in order to regain your sense of freedom.

- You may prefer fleeting, casual relationships to long-term intimate ones, or you seek out partners who are equally independent, ones who'll keep their distance emotionally.
- While you may think you don't need close relationships or intimacy, the truth is we all do. Humans are hardwired for connection and deep down, even someone with an avoidant-dismissive attachment style wants a close meaningful relationship—if only they could overcome their deep-seated fears of intimacy.

Primary caregiver relationship

An avoidant-dismissive attachment style often stems from a parent who was unavailable or rejecting during your infancy. Since your needs were never regularly or predictably met by your caregiver, you were forced to distance yourself emotionally and try to self-soothe. This built a foundation of avoiding intimacy and craving independence in later life—even when that independence and lack of intimacy causes its own distress.

Disorganized/disoriented attachment style

Disorganized/disoriented attachment, also referred to as fearful-avoidant attachment, stems from intense fear, often as a result of childhood trauma, neglect, or abuse. Adults with this style of insecure attachment tend to feel they don't deserve love or closeness in a relationship.

How disorganized attachment style affects adult relationships

If you have a disorganized attachment style, you've likely never learned to self-soothe your emotions, so both relationships and the world around you can feel frightening and unsafe. If you experienced abuse as a child, you may try to replicate the same abusive patterns of behavior as an adult.

- You probably find intimate relationships confusing and unsettling, often swinging between emotional extremes of love and hate for a partner.
- You may be insensitive towards your partner, selfish, controlling, and untrusting, which can lead to explosive or even abusive behavior. And you can be just as hard on yourself as you are on others.
- You may exhibit antisocial or negative behavior patterns, abuse alcohol or drugs, or prone to aggression or violence.
- Others may despair at your refusal to take responsibility for your actions.
- While you crave the security and safety of a meaningful, intimate relationship, you also

feel unworthy of love and terrified of getting hurt again.

- Your childhood may have been shaped by abuse, neglect, or trauma.

Primary caregiver relationship

If your primary caregiver was dealing with unresolved trauma themselves, it can lead to the intense fear associated with a disorganized/disoriented attachment style. Often the parent acted as both a source of fear and comfort for you as an infant, triggering the confusion and disorientation you feel about relationships now. In other cases, your parental figure may have ignored or overlooked your needs as an infant, or their erratic, chaotic behavior could have been frightening or traumatizing to you.

Causes of insecure attachment

There are many reasons why even a loving, conscientious parent may not be successful at creating a secure attachment bond with an infant. The causes of your insecure attachment could include:

Having a young or inexperienced mother, lacking in the necessary parenting skills.

Your caregiver experienced depression caused by isolation, lack of social support, or hormonal problems, for example, forcing them to withdraw from the caregiving role.

Your primary caregiver's addiction to alcohol or other drugs reduced their ability to accurately interpret or respond to your physical or emotional needs.

Traumatic experiences, such as a serious illness or accident which interrupted the attachment process.

Physical neglect, such as poor nutrition, insufficient exercise, or neglect of medical issues.

Emotional neglect or abuse. For example, your caregiver paid little attention to you as a child, made scant effort to understand your feelings, or engaged in verbal abuse.

Physical or sexual abuse, whether physical injury or violation.

Separation from your primary caregiver due to illness, death, divorce, or adoption.

Inconsistency in the primary caregiver. You experienced a succession of nannies or staff

at daycare centers, for example.

Frequent moves or placements. For example, you constantly changed environment due to spending your early years in orphanages or moving between foster homes.

Getting help for insecure attachment

If you recognize an insecure attachment style in either yourself or your romantic partner, it's important to know that you don't have to resign yourselves to enduring the same attitudes, expectations, or patterns of behavior throughout life. It is possible to change and you can develop a more secure attachment style as an adult.

Therapy can be invaluable, whether it's working one-on-one with a therapist or with your current partner in couples counselling. A therapist experienced in attachment theory can help you make sense of your past emotional experience and become more secure, either on your own or as a couple.

[\[Read: Finding a Therapist to Help You Heal\]](#)

If you don't have access to appropriate therapy, there are still plenty of things you can do on your own to build a more secure attachment style. To start, learn all you can about your insecure attachment style. The more you understand, the better you'll be able to recognize—and correct—the reflexive attitudes and behaviors of insecure attachment that may be contributing to your relationship problems.

The following tips can also help you transition to a more secure attachment style:

1. Improve your nonverbal communication skills

One of the most important lessons gleaned from attachment theory is that adult relationships, just like the first relationship you have with your primary caregiver, depend for their success on nonverbal forms of communication.

Even though you may not be aware of it, when you interact with others, you continuously give and receive wordless signals via the gestures you make, your posture, how much eye contact you make and the like. These nonverbal cues send strong messages about what you really feel.

At any age, developing how well you read, interpret, and communicate nonverbally can help improve and deepen your relationships with other people. You can learn to improve these skills by being present in the moment, learning to manage stress, and developing your emotional awareness.

[\[Read: Nonverbal Communication and Body Language\]](#)

2. Boost your emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to empathize with your partner, communicate more effectively, and deal with conflict in a healthier way.

As well as helping to improve how well you read and use nonverbal communication, building emotional intelligence can help strengthen a romantic relationship. By understanding your emotions and how to control them, you'll be better able to express your needs and feelings to your partner, as well as understand how your partner is really feeling, too.

[\[Read: Improving Emotional Intelligence \(EQ\)\]](#)

3. Develop relationships with people who are securely attached

Being in a relationship with another person who also has an insecure attachment style can make for a union that's out of sync at best, rocky, confusing, or even painful at worst. While you can work through your insecurities together as a couple, if you're single it can help to look for a partner with a secure attachment style to help shift you away from the negative patterns of thinking and behaving.

A strong, supportive relationship with someone who makes you feel loved can play an important part in building your sense of security. Estimates vary, but research suggests that 50 to 60 percent of people have a secure attachment style, so there's a good chance of finding a romantic partner who can help you overcome your insecurities. Similarly, developing strong friendships with these individuals can also help you recognize and adopt new patterns of behavior.

[\[Read: Dating Tips for Finding the Right Person\]](#)

4. Resolve any childhood trauma

As discussed above, experiencing trauma as an infant or young child can interrupt the attachment and bonding process. Childhood trauma can result from anything that impacts your sense of safety, such as an unsafe or unstable home environment, separation from your primary caregiver, serious illness, neglect, or abuse. When childhood trauma is not resolved, feelings of insecurity, fear, and helplessness can continue into adulthood.

Even if your trauma happened many years ago, there are steps you can take to overcome the pain, regain your emotional balance, and learn to trust and connect in relationships again.

[\[Read: Emotional and Psychological Trauma\]](#)

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Last updated: February 2021