



UNDERSTANDING ATTACHMENT STYLES

RELATIONSHIPS AND ATTACHMENT

SECURE ATTACHMENT TYPE

- Prefer being with their parents over others/strangers.
- Can separate from their parents without becoming overly upset.
- Look for comfort from their parents when they're afraid.
- Are happy to see their parents when they return.

ANXIOUS-PREOCCUPIED ATTACHMENT TYPE

- A need for reassurance and constant validation from partners.
- A desire for constant touch, interaction, and attention from partners or potential partners.
- Relationships with extreme highs and lows.
- An anxious or panicked feeling when away from a partner (even temporarily) relationship.
- A tendency to use blame, guilt, shame, and other forms of manipulation to keep their partners close.
- A tendency to neglect responsibilities due to a preoccupation with relationships or personal concerns
- A tendency to overreact when there is a perceived threat to the relationship. In some cases, these threats might be imagined.

Stuck like glue, human beings are simply made for attachment. Though you might often hear people describe themselves as a "people person" or a "lone wolf," make no mistake, we are biologically inclined to link ourselves with others. From the very first hours after birth into childhood, humans seek out security and align ourselves with others we can trust and depend on. Attachment theory says that it is these early experiences that shape our attachment styles and mold how we interact with others throughout our lifetimes. Clingy? Stand-offish? Unable to connect? Most likely, you can thank mom and dad, or your earliest caregivers.

Attachment styles impact our relationships with others as well as ourselves significantly. By understanding which type of attachment style we possess, we can become more self-aware and live a fuller, more authentic life. Having insight regarding different types of attachment can also lead to stronger connections and healthier relationships. In this article, you'll discover the science behind attachment theory, as well as the four attachment types, their common characteristics, and how you can begin to form stable, secure relationships.

THE SCIENCE BEHIND DIFFERENT ATTACHMENT STYLES

Back in the 1960s and 70s, psychologists John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth conducted groundbreaking research that birthed the concept of Attachment Theory. The pair surmised that attachment is a deep emotional bond connecting one person to another across time and space. As children, we naturally attach to our caregivers. As we learn to trust and depend on our parents for survival, we develop progressively-stronger attachments to them. Our parents' responses to our needs then shape the way we connect with others throughout our lives. Bowlby and Ainsworth's research led psychologist Kendra Cherry to discover what it is that keeps us securely bonded to our primary parent as a child. Below, we outline these important characteristics.

Characteristics of Attachment

Proximity Maintenance: This is about longing to be physically near the people we are attached to.

Safe Haven: The child can return to a parent for comfort and safety when they're threatened or afraid.

Secure Base: The parent acts as a base of security from which the child can explore the world around him or her. Separation

Distress: When the parent (or another attachment figure) is away, anxiety can occur.



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DISMISSIVE-AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT TYPE

- Are uncomfortable with deep feelings and intimate situations
- Set extreme emotional and/or physical boundaries
- May hide information from their partners
- Send mixed signals and disregard partners' feelings
- Are noncommittal and prefer casual sex
- Idealize past relationships

DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT TYPE

- A hot/cold attitude when it comes to relationships.
- Antisocial behavior and lack of remorse.
- A tendency to be selfish, controlling, and lack personal responsibility
- Recreating abusive patterns from their childhood in adult relationships.
- Drug and alcohol abuse, as well as criminal behavior.

Through their Evolutionary Theory of Attachment, researchers Bowlby, Harlow, and Lorenz explain that children primarily attach themselves to one person during early infancy and childhood (ages 0-5). Usually, it is the mother (or mother substitute), and this relationship provides a model for all future relationships. If the parent-child relationship ends, is disrupted, or is otherwise unhealthy, it can negatively affect future connections. It is these interactions (or lack thereof) that lead people to develop one of the following four attachment styles.

SECURE ATTACHMENT TYPE

Though Hollywood and current culture may categorize secure attachment as "boring" or "mundane," strong, healthy relationships are born from this attachment style. A secure attachment ensures each person in the relationship feels safe, cared for, and understood. Interestingly, it isn't perfect parenting or even a lack of parenting skills that determines attachment style. Secure attachment develops when a caretaker is able to make a child feel safe and protected through nonverbal communication. Factors that prevent a secure attachment from forming include:

- *Being mistreated or abused*
- *Only getting attention when acting out or behaving badly*
- *Having your needs met infrequently or inconsistently*
- *Being separated from parents (e.g., hospitalization, removed from the home)*

During childhood, kids who are attached securely to their caregivers:

- *Prefer being with their parents over others/strangers.*
- *Can separate from their parents without becoming overly upset.*
- *Look for comfort from their parents when they're afraid.*
- *Are happy to see their parents when they return.*

Similarly, adults who were securely attached to their caregivers as children tend to have long-term relationships in which they trust their partners and demonstrate a healthy level of self-esteem. Not only are these folks comfortable sharing their feelings, hopes, and dreams with their partners, but they're also able to seek support when needed. Secure individuals are also able to support their partners and comfort them when they're hurting. Individuals with a secure attachment style tend to make great partners.



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ANXIOUS-PREOCCUPIED ATTACHMENT TYPE

If you can't relate to the first attachment type, you likely developed an insecure attachment style during childhood. About 15 to 20 percent of people have an anxious attachment style, many of whom seek out counseling due to the difficulty they experience when trying to establish and maintain healthy relationships. Anxious caregivers are often preoccupied or otherwise unable to consistently meet their children's needs. People who form this type of attachment weren't abandoned as children, and in most cases, their parents expressed some care and concern for them; however, their inner feelings of security weren't fully developed as children. Inconsistent caretaking meant they could not depend on their parent or other caregiver. This inconsistency creates an emotional storm within the anxious child, which carries over into adulthood.

Like those individuals with a secure attachment style, people with an anxious attachment type crave love and intimacy, but they often feel a lack of self-worth. Their deep-rooted insecurities may lead to attention-seeking behaviors. Though often loving, fun, all-around good people, their clinginess, neediness, jealousy, and tendency to nag often drive loved ones away.

Common characteristics of an anxious attachment type include:

- *A need for reassurance and constant validation from partners.*
- *A desire for constant touch, interaction, and attention from partners or potential partners.*
- *Relationships with extreme highs and lows.*
- *An anxious or panicked feeling when away from a partner (even temporarily).*
- *A tendency to use blame, guilt, shame, and other forms of manipulation to keep their partners close.*
- *A tendency to neglect responsibilities due to a preoccupation with relationships or personal concerns.*
- *A tendency to overreact when there is a perceived threat to the relationship. In some cases, these threats might be imagined.*

If the above-mentioned characteristics describe your tendencies, you are certainly not alone. While an anxious attachment style can make it difficult to build and maintain strong long-term relationships, it's important to realize that attachment types are fluid and can be shifted with awareness, self-acceptance, and work.



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DISMISSIVE-AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT TYPE

A dismissive-avoidant attachment type is the polar opposite of the anxious-preoccupied attachment type outlined above. Though the two types have one similarity--they're both insecure--these attachment styles couldn't be more different. Emotionally distant and avoidant, individuals with a dismissive attachment type don't crave love; in fact, they run from it.

Interestingly, many anxious attachment types find themselves in relationships and marriages with dismissive-avoidant partners. The more the needy partner pushes for love and approval, the further the dismissive partner distances him or herself. Upset by this lack of intimacy, the non-avoidant partner may threaten to end the relationship, which will have little effect on the dismissive partner. Able to detach themselves from others, shut down completely, and live their lives inward, folks with a dismissive attachment style give off a pseudo-independence that suggests they do not need connection. Of course, this is simply untrue.

By now, you've probably noticed a pattern. The avoidance of intimate relationships is the result of childhood events in which a caregiver was unable or unwilling to parent in a way that would build a secure attachment. In some situations, parents were physically present, but for one reason or another, they weren't able to meet their children's emotional needs. In this case, the child learns to ignore and repress their emotions.

This unhealthy style of attachment carries into adulthood, and the grown individual dismisses the need for love and connection. The following characteristics are usually present if a person has an avoidant attachment type:

- *Are uncomfortable with deep feelings and intimate situations*
- *Set extreme emotional and/or physical boundaries*
- *May hide information from their partners*
- *Send mixed signals and disregard partners' feelings*
- *Are noncommittal and prefer casual sex/idealize past relationships*

Though avoidant individuals may have a deep desire for close relationships and intimacy, they are typically unable to fulfill their desires due to their deep-seated internal struggles. More likely to engage in sexual affairs and end up divorced, people with an avoidant attachment style must transition to a secure attachment style in order to form and maintain healthy relationships. As with any type, this shift in attachment type is possible if guided by a mental health professional who understands the attachment process. Because avoidant types find it difficult to discuss their feelings, pursuing therapy can be a daunting task, but it's an important and necessary step to help them move toward secure attachment.



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DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT TYPE

The final type of attachment isn't based solely on neglect or preoccupation, but also on intense fear. Parents of children with a disorganized attachment style are usually dealing with trauma themselves. Because of unresolved trauma, pain, or loss, the parent is unable to attach themselves securely to the child. Eighty percent of people who were abused as a child have this type of attachment. Because their primary caregiver's behavior was often erratic and fear-driven, adults with this type of attachment style have never learned to self-soothe. Their past is marked by pain and loss, and they may become aggressive, see the world as unsafe, and have trouble socially. Signs of this attachment style include:

- *A hot/cold attitude when it comes to relationships.*
- *Antisocial behavior and lack of remorse.*
- *A tendency to be selfish, controlling, and lack personal responsibility.*
- *Recreating abusive patterns from their childhood in adult relationships.*
- *Drug and alcohol abuse, as well as criminal behavior.*

If you think you may have a disorganized attachment type, don't be discouraged. Once again, knowledge is key. Education, willingness, and therapy can help you move toward a secure attachment style, so you can establish strong, healthy relationships.