

Thoughts on Attachment and Attachment Styles

Topic: Understanding Attachment

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Title: Are love and attachment the same thing?

Looking at definitions of these two concepts is probably a good way to begin to answer this question.

Attachment is “... establishing or maintaining intimacy with a special person to better cope with the world.” John Bowlby, 1988

Love is a strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties (i.e., the maternal love for a child); an attraction based on a romantic relationship (i.e., the affection and tenderness felt by lovers); an affection based on admiration, benevolence, or common interests (i.e., love for old friends). Adapted from Merriam-Webster Dictionary

It’s important to note that while Bowlby offers a single definition of attachment; implying it is a fairly uniform construct; there are multiple forms of love. For our purposes, we’re going to focus on comparing attachment with adult romantic love.

In the opinion of this writer, the best definition of adult romantic love is found in the study notes of the MacArthur Study Bible. “The supreme New Testament virtue, which centers completely on the needs and welfare of the one loved and does whatever is necessary to meet those needs.”¹

While attachment and love are both emotions directed toward a significant other, the key difference is the motive or purpose; that is, what does the person seek? With attachment, the person is seeking security or comfort; as Bowlby put it, “to better cope with the world.” With love, the person is seeking the good of the other. It is less self-centered; focusing on the needs or the well-being of the other person.

So, love and attachment share many emotions (what we feel for the person who provides us with a sense of security overlaps with what we feel for the person we love). But, they are not the same thing. Attachment has a self-centered purpose (i.e., my sense of safety). Love has an “other-centered” purpose (i.e., the good of the person loved).

Is this distinction important? If so, why? A client may profess love for a partner when in reality, they see that person as the source of their safety and security. Resolving attachment issues may require a very different approach than what a counselor might employ in exploring a client’s romantic feelings for their partner. So, it is a good idea to be able to differentiate between these two concepts.

¹ See study notes for Romans 12 verse 9 in the MacArthur Study Bible, (2006), p. 1685