

Attachment Styles & Their Role in Relationships



Attachment styles and the roles they play in relationships is a wide spread topic of interest, both in research and in peoples' personal drives to understand their patterns of thoughts and behaviors. This level of interest is entirely understandable as the different attachment styles in relationships can impact interpersonal interactions in unique ways.

Attachment types develop early in life and often remain stable over time. However, this does not mean that they cannot be changed into more secure forms of attachment—it just means that you may need to develop self-awareness through understanding and resolving attachment issues. The first step of this process is to learn how insecure attachment develops and influences thoughts and actions within the important relationships in our lives.

According to psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby, one's bond with their primary caregivers during childhood has an overarching influence on their future social and intimate relationships—and even their relationships at work. In other words, **this early bond creates a template or rules for how you build and interpret relationships as an adult.**

Attachment styles describe how individuals form emotional bonds and respond to intimacy and relationships, rooted in early interactions with caregivers. These styles influence how people relate to others throughout life. Below are the **four main attachment styles**, their causes, symptoms, and strategies to help each:

SECURE ATTACHMENT



Secure attachment style indicates that a person feels comfortable expressing emotions openly and forming connections, in contrast to the other three attachment styles (anxious, avoidant, and disorganized), which are classified as insecure and are often marked by challenges in building and maintaining healthy relationships. Therefore, adults with a secure attachment style can depend on their partners and, in turn, let their partners rely on them.

Relationships with someone with a secure attachment style are based on honesty, tolerance, and emotional closeness. Although someone with this attachment style often thrives in their relationships, they also don't fear being on their own. Secure attachers tend to have a positive view of themselves and others, so they do not overly seek external approval or validation—they can successfully identify and regulate their emotions, and even help a partner do so with theirs.

Cause:

- Caregivers were consistently responsive, nurturing, and emotionally available.
- The child felt safe and valued, developing trust in relationships.

Symptoms/Specifications:

- Comfortable with intimacy and independence.
- Trusts others and forms healthy, stable relationships.
- Effective communication and conflict resolution.
- Balanced view of self and others (not overly dependent or avoidant).

What Helps:

- Secure attachment is already healthy, but continuing to build emotional awareness, effective communication, and vulnerability in relationships can maintain it.

Anxious (Preoccupied) Attachment



Adults with an anxious attachment style tend to have a negative self-view, but a positive view of others. This means that they may view their partner as their literal “better half.” Because someone with this attachment style deems themselves to be less worthy of love in comparison to other people, the thought of living without their partner (or being alone in general) causes high levels of anxiety. In other words, they deeply fear abandonment.

To ease this fear of abandonment, people with the anxious attachment style strongly desire security within relationships, and attention, care, and responsiveness from a partner tends to be the “remedy” for their feelings of anxiety.

On the other hand, the perceived absence of support and intimacy can lead someone with the anxious attachment style to become more clinging and demanding, preoccupied with the relationship, and desperate for reassurance that they are loved.

In a nutshell, people with this attachment style value their relationships highly, but are often hypervigilant towards threats to their security, as well as anxious and worried that their loved one is not as invested in the relationship as they are.

Cause:

- Caregivers were inconsistent, sometimes attentive, other times neglectful or unpredictable.
- The child learned to seek attention and approval to feel secure.

Symptoms/Specifications:

- Fear of abandonment, excessive need for reassurance.
- Overly dependent on partners for validation.
- High emotional intensity and sensitivity to relationship dynamics.
- May cling to relationships even when unhealthy.

What Helps:

- **Therapy:** Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) or attachment-based therapy to address underlying fears of rejection.
 - **Self-awareness:** Learning to recognize and regulate emotions without seeking constant reassurance.
 - **Healthy boundaries:** Practicing independence and self-care to reduce dependency.
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Avoidant (Dismissive) Attachment

MENTAL HEALTH CLINIC

People with the avoidant/dismissive attachment style tend to have a positive self-view and negative one of others. Consequently, they prefer to foster a high sense of independence and self-sufficiency—especially on an emotional level.

Someone with the avoidant attachment style tends to believe that they don't have to be in a relationship to feel complete: They do not want to depend on others, have others depend on them, or seek support and approval in social bonds.

Adults with this attachment style generally avoid intimacy or emotional closeness, so may withdraw from a relationship if they feel like the other person is becoming reliant on them in this manner. They also tend to hide or suppress their feelings when faced with a potentially emotion-dense situation, such as conflict.

Cause:

- Caregivers were emotionally unavailable, distant, or dismissive of the child's needs.
- The child learned to suppress emotional needs and rely on themselves.

Symptoms/Specifications:

- Discomfort with intimacy, prefers independence over closeness.
- Avoids vulnerability and suppresses emotions.
- May seem aloof, distant, or overly focused on tasks/goals rather than relationships.
- Difficulty trusting others or relying on them.

What Helps:

- **Therapy:** Focus on exploring fears of vulnerability and increasing comfort with emotional expression.
- **Gradual intimacy:** Taking small steps to open up and trust others in safe, supportive environments.
- **Practicing empathy:** Actively listening and engaging emotionally in relationships.

Disorganized (Fearful-Avoidant) Attachment



People with the disorganized attachment style tend to vacillate between the traits of both anxious and avoidant attachment depending on their mood and circumstances. For this reason, someone with this attachment style tends to show confusing and ambiguous behaviors in their social bonds.

For adults with disorganized attachment, the partner and the relationship themselves are often the source of both desire and fear. On the one hand, fearful-avoidant people do want intimacy and closeness, but on the other hand, experience troubles trusting and depending on others.

People with this attachment style often struggle with identifying and regulating their emotions and tend to avoid strong emotional attachment due to their intense fear of getting hurt.

Cause:

- Caregivers were abusive, neglectful, or caused fear.
- The child experienced both a desire for connection and fear of caregivers, creating confusion about relationships.

Symptoms/Specifications:

- Mixed behaviors: Desires closeness but fears intimacy.
- High levels of anxiety and difficulty trusting others.
- May sabotage relationships due to fear of rejection.
- Often struggles with unresolved trauma.

What Helps:

- **Trauma-focused therapy:** EMDR or trauma-informed CBT to process past experiences.
- **Developing trust:** Building relationships with safe, supportive individuals over time.
- **Mindfulness and grounding:** To manage intense emotions and self-soothe.

General Tips for All Attachment Styles

- **Self-awareness:** Understanding your attachment style is the first step toward change.
- **Communication skills:** Learning healthy ways to express needs and emotions helps in all relationships.
- **Boundaries:** Developing healthy limits improves relationships and self-respect.
- **Therapy:** Attachment-based therapy can be helpful for exploring and healing attachment wounds.

Each attachment style is not set in stone—people can shift toward secure attachment with effort and support.

Where Do You Stand?

Now that you're familiar with the four adult attachment styles, you may have an idea of which one aligns with your actions and beliefs.

It's normal to recognize traits from one or more attachment styles in your romantic relationships. Keep in mind, however, that attachment styles can shift due to major life events or changes in relationships.

For example, someone with an insecure attachment style may develop a secure bond when paired with a securely attached partner. Conversely, a person with a secure attachment style might adopt unhealthy relationship behaviors after experiencing trauma or a significant loss. This means many people don't fit neatly into one specific attachment profile.

When Should You Be Concerned About Your Attachment Style?

Even if you believe your relationships are stable, there may still be patterns in your behavior that cause stress or unhappiness. For those who identify with one of the insecure attachment styles, these traits can often feel familiar or difficult to change.

If you notice yourself resonating with the characteristics of anxious, avoidant, or disorganized attachment styles, it's important to actively address these patterns. This can involve increasing self-awareness, focusing on personal growth, and, if necessary, seeking professional support.

Left unaddressed, strongly expressed insecure attachment styles can lead to ongoing relationship challenges, as well as mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, or low self-esteem. Taking steps to understand and improve your attachment patterns can significantly enhance your relationships and overall well-being.

