

Attachment Styles

The Attachment Project

It's human nature to seek contact and relationships, to seek love, support, and comfort in others. In fact, according to social psychologist Roy Baumeister, the 'need to belong' is one of the main forces that drives individuals.

Yet, love and relationships are rarely as perfect and problem-free as we would like them to be.

Have you wondered why you keep ending up in the same situation, even with different partners? Do you get too clingy or jealous? Or do you always seem to be more involved than your partner? Maybe you want to be with someone, but as soon as things get emotionally intimate, you back off?

If you have noticed a pattern of unhealthy and emotionally challenging behaviors in your love life, you might benefit from digging deep and exploring the way you attach to people in intimate relationships. Here is where knowing about attachment theory comes in handy.

What is attachment theory? Attachment theory has a long history and has been used as a basis for continuous research. The first step is to get acquainted with the basics and understand the different attachment styles.

There are four adult attachment styles:

- Anxious (also referred to as Preoccupied)
- Avoidant (also referred to as Dismissive)
- Disorganized (also referred to as Fearful-Avoidant)
- Secure

Before getting into what characterizes the four groups, it might be useful to point out how attachment styles develop in children.

How do attachment styles develop in early childhood? The behavior of the primary caregivers (usually one's parents) contributes to and forms the way a child perceives close relationships.

The child is dependent on his or her caregivers and seeks comfort, soothing, and support from them. If the child's physical and emotional needs are satisfied, he or she becomes securely attached.

This, however, requires that the caregivers offer a warm and caring environment and are attuned to the child's needs, even when these needs are not clearly expressed.

Misattunement on the side of the parent, on the other hand, is likely to lead to insecure attachment in their children.

How does each of the four attachment styles manifest in adults?

Anxious / Preoccupied: For adults with an anxious attachment style, the partner is often the ‘better half.’ The thought of living without the partner (or being alone in general) causes high levels of anxiety. People with this type of attachment typically have a negative self-image, while having a positive view of others.

The anxious adult often seeks approval, support, and responsiveness from their partner. They value their relationships highly, but are often anxious and worried that their loved one is not as invested in the relationship as they are.

A strong fear of abandonment is present, and safety is a priority. The attention, care, and responsiveness of the partner appears to be the ‘remedy’ for anxiety.

Avoidant / Dismissive: The dismissing / avoidant type would often perceive themselves as ‘lone wolves’: strong, independent, and self-sufficient; not necessarily in terms of physical contact, but rather on an emotional level. These people have high self-esteem and a positive view of themselves.

The dismissing / avoidant type tend 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 emotional closeness. They also tend to hide or suppress their feelings when faced with a potentially emotion-dense situation.

Disorganized / Fearful-Avoidant: The disorganized type tends to show unstable and ambiguous behaviors in their social bonds. For adults with this style of attachment, the partner and the relationship themselves are often the source of both desire and fear.

Fearful-avoidant people do want intimacy and closeness, but at the same time, experience troubles trusting and depending on others. They do not regulate their emotions well and avoid strong emotional attachment, due to their fear of getting hurt.

Secure Attachment: The three attachment styles covered so far are insecure attachment styles. They are characterized by difficulties with cultivating and maintaining healthy relationships.

In contrast, the secure attachment style implies that a person is comfortable expressing emotions openly. Adults with a secure attachment style can depend on their partners and in turn, let their partners rely on them.

Relationships are based on honesty, tolerance, and emotional closeness. The secure attachment type thrive in their relationships, but also don't fear being on their own. They do not depend on the responsiveness or approval of their partners, and tend to have a positive view of themselves and others.

In conclusion: It is completely normal to recognize features of different styles in your history of intimate relationships. Attachment styles can change with major life events, or even with different partners.