

Attachment Styles

A roadmap to understanding yourself and others in relationships

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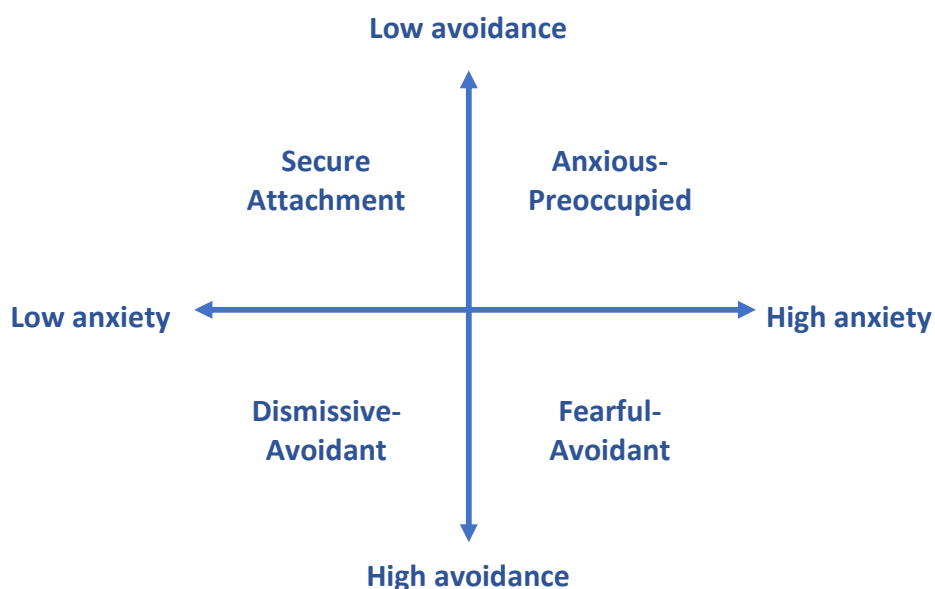
Have you ever been in the middle of a conversation and found yourself craving and wishing that the other person shared more about his or her feelings or personal life? Have you been on the other side and felt pressure to speak or consider things that you'd prefer to keep private or hidden even from yourself? Do you ever find yourself wanting to spend more and more time together, while the other seems to be pulling away? Or, have you ever wished you could have more space and not understood why others don't feel the same way? These sorts of differences emerge frequently in all types of relationships and are often a source of discontentment, disagreement, and sometimes even conflict. However, they don't have to be. With a growing awareness and understanding of these differences, one can learn to navigate relationships more effectively, make better behavioural choices, and have greater clarity over their own mind and reactions.

The differences outlined above are often caused by differences in where each person lies on two scales:

1) **AVOIDANCE** of intimacy, relationships, and emotional connection

2) **ANXIETY** relating to the security and stability of a relationship

By mapping where you are on each of these scales, you can find which attachment style you relate to the most (see graph below).



The Four Attachment Styles

Secure attachment

These people are high in their desire for emotional and physical closeness, and are low on their insecurity and anxiety about their relationship.

- Have a positive view of themselves and others
- Show comfort in being emotionally and physically close
- Value time together and time apart
- Value and respect their self-identity and identity of others
- Show comfort in separating temporarily from someone and then reuniting later in the day
- Feel comfortable depending on others and having others depend on them
- Find that love and trust generally come easily to them

Anxious-preoccupied attachment

These people are high in their desire for emotional and physical closeness, but also high in their insecurity and anxiety about their relationship.

- Negative view of themselves and positive view of others
- Have a strong pull towards emotional and physical closeness
- Often feel that they want to be closer and more intimate with others, and that others often don't reciprocate this desire with the same intensity
- Show discomfort when not close to relationship partner
- Can often experience anxiety and even distrust when they spend time apart from their partner
- Worry that they may be too much or need too much from others
- Fear and show sensitivity to abandonment and rejection in a relationship
- Can become overly dependent on partners
- Can have high levels of emotional expression and worry, and often exhibit signs of emotion dysregulation and impulsiveness in the relationship
- In arguments, they are more likely to persist and pursue the person they are arguing with

Dismissive-avoidant attachment

These people show a strong preference towards independence and low levels of anxiety and insecurity about the security and stability of relationships.

- Positive view of themselves and negative view of others
- Report a comfort or desire to be without close emotional relationships
- Place strong value on independence and self-sufficiency, often far above emotional closeness
- Avoid strong attachments
- Tend to suppress or hide their feelings
- Can appear distant to others
- Often report that no partner can meet their standards
- In arguments and disagreements, they are more likely to withdraw physically and emotionally

Note, given the assumption that human beings are social creatures and do want and need relationships in their life, it has often been argued that people categorised as dismissive-avoidant may be using this style as a defence (i.e. they suppress their need and desire for other people).

Fearful-avoidant attachment

These people have a high level of anxiety and insecurity in their relationship, as well as a high level of avoidance in a relationship. Note, their high level of avoidance is often due to a fear of getting hurt, rather than a lack of desire for relationships.

- Fluctuating view of themselves and others
- Want emotionally close relationships, but at the same time can be uncomfortable getting too close and struggle to truly trust others
- Fear of getting hurt, rejected, abandoned, if get too close
- Often suppress, hide, and deny their feelings and desires
- Show discomfort in expressing affection and their desires for intimacy
- Can often feel confused and can often give off mixed messages
- More likely to express desires and wishes in ineffective and unclear ways
- Can have difficulties with emotion regulation, anger, worry, sadness, and anxiety.

Where do these attachment styles come from?

It is argued that attachment styles develop early in childhood, where one develops a working model of relationships. The experiences that a baby and young child has in his or her relationship with important people (e.g. their caregivers/parents), will influence and shape how they view themselves and others. Early in life, a child may learn which behaviours are effective in getting their needs met and which aren't. They may develop certain expectations of others, which may continue to influence and shape their reactions and behaviour as they reach adolescence and adulthood. Some children may learn that it's ok to express emotions and to signal clearly for what they need. Others may learn that they either have to suppress their emotions and needs, or that they have to express their needs in cryptic ways. Some may learn that the only way they can get even a glimpse of what they need is with escalation, anger, and perhaps even aggression. Others may learn that there's no point in asking for what one needs and that one can only rely on oneself.

It is important to note that while early childhood experiences often play a strong role in the development of attachment styles, particular experiences later in life can also shift a person from one category to another or cement them in an attachment style even further. Such experiences can include but are not limited to: Changes in caregivers, changes in caregiver's physical or emotional health, loss of a caregiver, traumatic experiences (physical, psychological, and/or sexual), negative or positive experiences at school, bullying, negative or positive social and/or romantic experiences later in life.

Although there are a number of important factors to consider in early childhood (and later in life too), it is worth looking at three in particular. When considering where you fall on the two continuums and why, pay special attention to your experiences of the following:

Safety, stability, security

Children are small, underdeveloped, and vulnerable. They need to feel safe. For children to develop a trust in others and a confidence in separating and exploring the world, they need to feel that their primary caregivers are stable, reliable, and will be there when they need them.

When this need isn't met, a child can experience significant anxiety. They feel unprotected and unsafe. They may cling to their attachment figure and exhibit signs of separation anxiety, fearing that if they let go of the base it will not be there when they return. They can learn that others are unreliable and cannot be trusted. Others may go on to learn that they cannot depend on anyone but themselves, as there is no reliable base to return to.

Independence, separateness, and autonomy

For a child to develop confidence and a sense of safety in themselves, others, and the world, their need for independence and separateness must be met in a gentle yet encouraging way. Children need to feel that they can explore the world and learn how to do so safely. They need to feel that they can master new skills. They need to develop an awareness of their interests, likes and dislikes, and preferences, and feel accepted for who they are even if they are different to their parents.

When this need isn't met, a child can develop a number of problems. If a parent expresses fear when a child separates or tries a new skill, a child may end up developing a fear of separation, a fear of others, and low confidence in their ability and competence. If a child is not able to experience significant separation, their sense of self and self-identity may be impaired. They may grow up feeling unclear of who they are and may struggle to identify what their needs and wants are. They may find that they quickly merge with another's identity and struggle to make sense of who they are, separate to their attachment figure.

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Sense of emotional closeness, safety, validation, and understanding

A young child is navigating a world of intense and ever-changing emotions. It can be a confusing place and they need someone to help them make sense of their internal world. It is important that a young child is guided through their emotional experiences. Caregivers can provide their children with labels for their emotions. They can help soothe their children when they are younger, which in turn helps the child develop their own skills in soothing and regulating their emotions. Children need to feel that their emotions are acceptable, normal, and manageable and aren't scary to the parents.

This need can be unmet in many different ways.

- Emotional closeness – if a parent does not express emotional warmth and affection, in close proximity to the child, a child may learn that they are unworthy. A child may also develop a discomfort with emotional closeness and expression, and tend to keep an emotional distance from others.
- Feeling safe in their emotions – if a parent reacts to a child's emotion with fear, a child can learn that his or her emotions are dangerous and uncontrollable. This can lead to a fear of their own emotions. If a parent reacts to a child's emotion with anger, a child can learn that their emotions are wrong and shameful. This can lead to very poor self-esteem.
- Feeling validated and understood - if a parent does not provide opportunities for the child to express and make sense of their emotions in a safe space, the child may learn that emotions should be kept hidden and should not be spoken about. This can interfere with their ability to develop an awareness and understanding of their emotional world. It can also interfere later in life with their ability to connect with others on an emotional level.

Where do I go from here? Can I change anything?

The first step in self-development is building an awareness and understanding of yourself and others. Use this information with kindness. Show yourself and others more compassion and recognise that attachment behaviours come from early experiences that continue to have strong influences today. You can use this information as a starting point in a conversation. Use it like a road map to navigate your interactions and relationships moving forward. Change can be achieved, but it often takes time and patience.

Psychological therapy can also help you on your path of self-development. Through therapy, you can:

- Develop a stronger understanding of yourself, your reactions, and your behaviours
- Gain a better awareness of maladaptive patterns you may fall into
- Learn more effective ways of communicating and asking for what you need
- Work on improving your general social interactions and relationships
- Learn ways to interact with people who have different attachment styles to you
- Work through old emotional wounds, so that you can learn to trust and open up more to others
- Learn strategies to manage low mood, anxiety, jealousy, and anger

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Dr Liza Chervonsky is a clinical psychologist at Inlight Psychology in Bondi Junction. She has a Doctor of Clinical Psychology and a PhD. She works from a number of therapeutic modalities, including schema therapy, CBT, DBT, ACT, and mindfulness. She takes a directive approach early in therapy, to help a person develop insight and awareness into their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. She has a strong focus on helping people develop skills and strategies, so that they feel more able to tackle problems in life. She treats low mood, anxiety, anger issues, emotion regulation difficulties, social and relationship issues, and work and academic difficulties.

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