

The cycle of attachment styles

How early bonds become adult patterns, and what to do about it

Our relationship with our parents or caregiver creates an "attachment style"—a blueprint for how we handle close relationships later. An attachment style develops early in life and is a specific pattern of behavior in and around relationships. Founded by psychoanalyst John Bowlby in the 1950s and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, attachment theory outlines how your bond with your primary caregivers sets the foundation for navigating relationships throughout life. The theory states that the primary goal of a human infant is to maintain proximity to its caregiver, [which] was necessary for survival during our evolution. There are four adult attachment styles: secure attachment, anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, and fearful-avoidant (aka disorganized) attachment.

THE FOUR STYLES AT A GLANCE

SECURE	AVOIDANT	ANXIOUS	DISORGANIZED
- Has a positive model of themselves. - Has a positive model of others. Low anxiety Low avoidance	- Has a positive model of themselves. - Has a negative model of others. Low anxiety High avoidance	- Has a negative model of themselves. - Has a positive model of others. High anxiety Low avoidance	- Has a negative model of themselves. - Has a negative model of others. High anxiety High avoidance

How this handout is laid out. Pages 2 and 3 follow each style through childhood, adulthood and parenting. Page 4 compares their characteristics. Pages 5 and 6 give tools for each style. Page 7 is a worksheet for working out where you sit, and what to try.

A style is not a sentence. Attachment styles are learned, which means they can be relearned. Most people are a mix, and the mix shifts with the relationship they are in.

The cycle of attachment **disorder**

Children, adults, parents: how the pattern is passed on

SECURE

- CHILDREN** Secure attachment describes an attachment where a child feels comforted by the presence of their caregiver. Securely attached children feel protected and that they have someone to rely on.
- ADULTS** Adults that had a secure attachment are empathetic and able to set appropriate boundaries, that tend to make them feel safe, stable, and more satisfied in their close relationships. While they don't fear being on their own, they usually thrive in close, meaningful relationships.
- PARENTS** Parents that show a secure attachment to their child acknowledge and meet their needs, and act as a safe home base. They are responsive, warm, and emotionally available.

AVOIDANT

- CHILDREN** Avoidant attachment is characterized by a child who avoids their caregiver and does not seek comfort from them. These children will show little to no preference for their caregiver over a stranger. They will not seek out their parents when in times of distress.
- ADULTS** Adults that had an avoidant attachment are often independent, self-directed, and uncomfortable with intimacy. They regularly complain about feeling “crowded” or “suffocated” when people try to get close to them.
- PARENTS** Parents of children with an avoidant attachment tend to be emotionally unavailable or unresponsive to them most of the time. They disregard or ignore their children's needs, and can be especially rejecting when their child is hurt or sick.

The cycle of attachment **disorder**

Children, adults, parents: how the pattern is passed on

ANXIOUS

- CHILDREN** Children that receive an anxious attachment are clingy to their caregiver, yet when their caregiver attempts to comfort them, the child remains distressed. Children are often confused and strive for love and connection.
- ADULTS** As adults they are often nervous and stressed about their relationships. They need constant reassurance and affection from their partner. They have trouble being alone or single. They'll often succumb to unhealthy or abusive relationships.
- PARENTS** Parents show inconsistent parenting. A caregiver can be supportive on some days and unsupportive just as frequently. They may be neglectful, abusive, or emotionally unavailable.

DISORGANIZED

- CHILDREN** Children will show an inconsistent connection with their caregiver and often hold fear towards them. The child must rely on the caregiver for survival, but the caregiver is also a source of fear.
- ADULTS** Adults are not only afraid of intimacy and commitment, but they distrust and lash out emotionally at anyone who tries to get close to them. They may spend much of their time alone and miserable, or in abusive or dysfunctional relationships.
- PARENTS** Parents consistently fail to respond appropriately to their child's distress, inconsistently respond to their child's feelings of fear or distress. Parents are not responding to their child's emotional or physical needs.

Attachment styles in relationships

Models of self and others, anxiety and avoidance, and what each looks like

SECURE	AVOIDANT	ANXIOUS	DISORGANIZED
MODELS	MODELS	MODELS	MODELS
- Has a positive model of themselves. - Has a positive model of others.	- Has a positive model of themselves. - Has a negative model of others.	- Has a negative model of themselves. - Has a positive model of others.	- Has a negative model of themselves. - Has a negative model of others.
ANXIETY / AVOIDANCE	ANXIETY / AVOIDANCE	ANXIETY / AVOIDANCE	ANXIETY / AVOIDANCE
CHARACTERISTICS	CHARACTERISTICS	CHARACTERISTICS	CHARACTERISTICS
- Low anxiety - Low avoidance	- Low anxiety - High avoidance	- High anxiety - Low avoidance	- High anxiety - High avoidance
- Empathetic - Sets healthy boundaries - Satisfied in close relationships - Feels safe and secure - Confident - Comfortable with intimacy	- Avoids emotional connection - Doesn't rely on others - Independent - Uncomfortable with their own feelings	- Overly needy - Lacks self esteem - Anxious - Craves emotional intimacy - Worries about their relationship	- Finds intimate relationships confusing - Swings between emotional extremes of love and hate for their partner. - Insensitive towards their partner, selfish, controlling, and untrusting.

Reading the four columns, which one or two sound most like me?

And which one sounds like the person I am closest to?

Tools for your attachment style

Ten things to practise for each style

Ways to rewire your attachment style to be more secure: Knowing yourself, building self-esteem, and finding self-compassion are typically a few steps forward. Here are some steps that can assist you further.

SECURE

- 1 Keep developing the things you are already good at and the things you love, so you spend more time in flow, or immersion in your loved pursuits, living passionately.
- 2 Take some measured risks (nothing dangerous), but try things that push you out of your comfort zone.
- 3 Get physically strong because the process of it strengthens your head as well.

AVOIDANT

- 1 Acknowledge your painful childhood
- 2 Accept your need for security
- 3 Communicate what you need to others
- 4 Talk to others when you feel anxious
- 5 Choose a partner that is empathetic and emotionally available
- 6 Avoid avoidantly attached people
- 7 Take accountability when you act out from your triggers
- 8 Question the validity of your triggers and fears
- 9 Be compassionate with yourself
- 10 Get professional help to address your childhood, concerns and worries

Which of these do I already do, and which have I been avoiding?

Tools for your attachment style

Ten things to practise for each style

ANXIOUS

- 1 Educate yourself about this attachment style
- 2 Acknowledge your childhood
- 3 Speak to your parents
- 4 Accept your childhood pain
- 5 Set firm boundaries so that you don't over give to people and then become resentful towards them
- 6 Acknowledge that your anxiety increases when you start to depend on others
- 7 Allow yourself to depend on others
- 8 Discuss your concerns around intimacy with your partner
- 9 Learn to distinguish between those that genuinely want to give to you and those that want to use you
- 10 Don't push people away when they try to get close to you

DISORGANIZED

- 1 Acknowledge your painful childhood
- 2 Recognize your triggers for feelings of abandonment
- 3 Learn how to self soothe
- 4 Learn how to communicate your needs appropriately
- 5 Practice managing your anger
- 6 Take personal space when you need it
- 7 For example, "Look, things are getting a little heated at the moment. Can we take a break for a couple of minutes and talk about things after that?"
- 8 Challenge your inner critic
- 9 Be patient and consistent in personal growth
- 10 Develop consistent and trusting relationships

The one tool I will try this week, and with whom

Where do I see myself?

Most people are a mix. Tick what fits, then write.

SECURE	AVOIDANT	ANXIOUS	DISORGANIZED
☐ Empathetic	☐ Avoids emotional connection	☐ Overly needy	☐ Finds intimate relationships confusing
☐ Sets healthy boundaries	☐ Doesn't rely on others	☐ Lacks self esteem	☐ Swings between emotional extremes of love and hate for their partner.
☐ Satisfied in close relationships	☐ Independent	☐ Anxious	☐ Insensitive towards their partner, selfish, controlling, and untrusting.
☐ Feels safe and secure	☐ Uncomfortable with their own feelings	☐ Craves emotional intimacy	
☐ Confident		☐ Worries about their relationship	
☐ Comfortable with intimacy			

In my closest relationship, I notice myself

When I feel threatened or hurt, I tend to Pull away, cling, lash out, go quiet, fix things, something else.

What this pattern has protected me from

What it costs me now

One tool from pages 5 and 6 I will practise, and with whom
