

Attachment Styles

The concept of attachment theory began with a British psychologist named John Bowlby. In the 1950s, he was fascinated by how children form emotional bonds with their primary caregivers. He believed that these early relationships shape our ability to connect with others for the rest of our lives, and his philosophy revolved around the idea that infants are biologically wired to seek closeness to a caregiver, not just for physical needs like food and shelter, but also for emotional connection too. This bond is our first model of love, safety, and trust. If that bond is consistently warm and responsive, the child learns the world is a safe place, that people can be trusted, and therefore internalizes these feelings.

At the same time, if it's inconsistent, neglectful, or even frightening... the child adapts to this fear, but not always in healthy and effective ways. In the 1970s, psychologist Mary Ainsworth took Bowlby's original research a step further with her famous 'Strange Situation' study. During which she spent time observing how infants react when their primary caregiver leaves them for a period of time and then returns. This research helped with the identification of the different styles of attachment. Particular behaviours we develop in relationships as humans, throughout the early years of life.

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~Steven Morris RP.

As a result of the culmination of all of this work, it was originally hypothesised that there were 3 styles of attachment. Then later, as the research continued, a 4th style was added to the theory. The following is a list of these 4, and if you're inclined to go through your own research into this subject, you may find different terminology for each of them. But to be quite honest, this is mainly just semantics, as whatever language we choose to refer to them as, these are the 4 Attachment Styles that are widely accepted by all.

- Secure
- Anxious
- Avoidant
- Disorganized (added later by other researchers)

Next, we're going to spend some time breaking down each of these four main styles and shedding some light on which one may be most dominant for you inside of your own relationship dynamics. It can be helpful to think of your attachment style as your "relationship blueprint," which when we

integrate this into our work with Schema Therapy and DBT, begins to make a hell of a lot more sense as to why we do what we do. It's also really important to keep in mind that whichever attachment style you recognize, or even identify with for yourself, it is on a continuum of intensity.

In other words, it's not as black and white as being connected to a rigid on or off switch. On one side of the continuum, we have a sense of secure attachment, and on the other we are completely disconnected, with no sense of attachment whatsoever. The more meaning a relationship has to us, the more emotional distress gets activated when things are either not going the way we want them too, or they're going way better than we expected. So as a result, the probability of insecure attachment behaviours getting activated in our personality system increases, and our maladaptive coping mechanisms begin to play out. It's also true that, to some degree, everyone has their insecurities inside of important relationships. As I said before, the more meaning a relationship has for us, the more our insecurities play out.

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If when these insecurities begin to show up, I am able to process them in an adaptive and effective way, then I remain within my window of opportunity for emotion regulation, and I behave in ways that help me to be who I want to be inside this important relationship. If we don't have the skills to handle the distress that comes with our activated insecurities, our system leaves the window of opportunity, and we're now in a primal state, seeing everything through the lens of either Fight, Flight, Freeze Submit or Distract. At the same time, when we feel safe and secure within a relationship dynamic, most people display a sense of secure attachment in what they do and how they behave. So, let's start at the core of what it means to feel a sense of security in our interpersonal relationships by talking about the Secure Attachment Style.

Secure Attachment

When we feel securely attached, we feel safe with intimacy, vulnerability, and any close one-on-one or group situations. At the same time, we're also pretty cool with being completely on our own. We have a general sense of trust for people, and we have the capacity to communicate what we want, and what we need in a healthy, effective, and adaptive way. We have a level of emotional maturity that's in line with our physical age, and this plays out in our ability, capability, and willingness to communicate what we want and need, as well as setting healthy boundaries whenever our values are perceived to have been compromised.

As I said before, most people have the capacity to feel securely attached when the relationship dynamic feels safe. When there's a shift in the story about this sense of safety, it activates all of the stories connected to our unmet childhood needs, and we begin to move up on the continuum of insecure attachment. So next, let's take a look at the 3 insecure attachment styles, and what they look like in terms of behaviour.

Anxious Attachment

This insecure attachment style often looks like we are in need of constant reassurance about the state of the relationships we're in. When we have an anxious attachment style, we tend to have an underlying fear of rejection or abandonment and when the stories connected to these fears get activated in our system, we begin to ruminate and overthink the other person's every single move. If this person is our intimate partner, we need to be reassured that we're loved, that we're wanted, and even that we're needed in the relationship on the whole. If this plays out in friendships, or in the work environment, we can find ourselves wondering if we're in trouble, concerned that we've done something wrong, that people don't like us, people are talking about us, which leads us to an overwhelming need for reassurance that everything's ok within this particular space.

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The more meaning the relationship has for us, the more afraid we are that it's not where we want it to be when our stories get activated, and the more insecure we become. This in turn, ramps up the need for more and more reassurance. Then the more we don't get what it is we are looking for, the more anxious and fearful we become. Which can obviously lead to some pretty maladaptive, and extremely ineffective behaviours in an attempt to cope with the underlying fears. And it's often the case that the more we look for reassurance in these maladaptive ways, the more we push people away, which just confirms the dominant stories of abandonment, rejection, mistrust, or social isolation.

Avoidant Attachment

People with an Avoidant attachment style are also insecurely attached when fear enters into the relationship dynamic. Understanding that this is also a fear-based reaction is often a point that's missed with this particular attachment style. On the outside, it can appear as though a person with an avoidant, often dismissive style of attachment, has it all together. They are in control of

themselves, and they understand themselves with a sense of security. If we fall into this category of attachment style, we may have a story running around within our personality system that we don't need to connect with others because we "value independence." The problem with this projected appearance of "having it all together" is its generally a mask that's only prevalent on the outside. Within our personality system, the fear of intimacy, vulnerability, and emotional connection has us spiralling out of control, filled with chaos and rigidity.

We avoid conversation about feelings, or emotions like the plague. We push people away because our fear of the vulnerability, and rejection that might come from this type of discussion is, to say the very least, just not our favorite thing to deal with. In its basic form, an Avoidant Attachment style has us dismissing the need for conversation about feelings or emotions. Which we can justify by claiming this is something that's just not important for us to do. Usually this is because we feel uncomfortable when conversation gets into this kind of topic. When we look underneath these uncomfortable feelings, it's often because we have an underlying belief we'll be abandoned or rejected if we open up and talk. So, we dismiss this type of conversation as being silly, stupid, or ridiculous, labelling people who talk about these things as being way too sensitive, or overreacting when they make attempts to have this type of discussion.

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This deep rooted desire to avoid, can also be because we've buried our connection with emotions deep within our personality system in a maladaptive attempt to keep us safe from emotional pain. So much so, that anger can become the only way we can avoid, escape from, or mask the presence of these unwanted, uncomfortable feelings, within our personality system. Pushing people away who want to talk about these things with aggressive words and behaviours to shut down their activation. Ultimately, we're left with a frustration about relationships, a resentment regarding why other people won't do things the way we want them too, and a general sense of loneliness that we don't really understand.

Disorganized Attachment

When we've developed a disorganized attachment style, we have a desire to feel a sense of close connection with other people, while at the same time, we have a deep-rooted fear of the rejection we might feel if we actually connect with somebody in this way. Relationships often feel really

chaotic. Our behaviours are unpredictable as we spiral back and forth between the different aspects of learned responses connected to both the anxious, and the avoidant attachment styles.

Constantly searching for reassurance that everything is OK within the relationship dynamic. Then, when this reassurance is not received, usually in the exact way we want it to be, we react with avoidant behaviors in a maladaptive attempt to keep us emotionally safe. In relationships that hold a lot of meaning for us, there are parts of our personality that are polarized with feelings of longing and dread.

This can cause a significant number of issues inside of interpersonal relationship dynamics, as our behavioral responses often match this polarized state. We send mixed signals to the world around us. Mode flipping between parts of our personality that feel a need to be very clingy, and parts that want to be very distant. This flip plays out with little to no warning, unpredictably, and seemingly at the toggle of a switch.

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If there's a dominant schema of mistrust, this can present as being overly suspicious, jumping to conclusions, with little to no evidence for the assertion we are making, other than a feeling. There can also be a heavy tendency to shut down, or go emotionally numb during any kind of confrontation, due to the activation of a detached protector mode. Once again, this is done with safety and security in mind, an attempt to keep us hidden from the perception we have of extreme emotional danger.

We can also find ourselves self sabotaging important relationships. Even when there is absolutely no need to do so. We find an excuse to end them, or we do something extreme that causes the other person to end the relationship for us. Usually this is a desperate attempt to control something we feel is spiralling out of our own personal control. A thought process that's based in the philosophy that, I'm going to fuck this up before you inevitably leave me, because I can't handle the uncertainty of it all, and at least I'm in control of it this way.

In some circumstances, there can be a tendency to choose unsuitable partners. People we're subconsciously drawn towards. Usually this is because of familiar personality characteristics connected to an important person from the past. This plays into what I call, trying to win the

unwinnable argument, by attempting to meet an unmet childhood need with a representation of the person from the past that the need was not originally met with.

In extreme situations, when the disorganized attachment style is in full swing, we can subconsciously, or sometimes even deliberately, create unhealthy relationship dynamics. Picking fights when there's really no need to or intentionally hurting the other person through the activation of a bully attack mode of behaviour. Once again, this leaves us with frustrations about relationships, resentments for the people we feel are not doing what we want them to do, and a general sense of loneliness that we don't know how to "fix."

The Solution

The important thing to understand about each of these attachment styles is that nothing is cast in stone, and almost everything we do can be changed. In fact, the only thing we simply cannot change in any of the work we do, no matter what type of work it is that we're doing, is the physical events of the past. We just can't change what's happened to us, as this is just impossible. But we can change our perception of the past, which in turn, helps to bring us into a space of distress tolerance, and ultimately, emotion regulation.

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Over the years, attachment theory has become a cornerstone in understanding the patterns of human connection and emotional regulation across our entire lifespan. These styles are not merely academic classifications; they profoundly influence how individuals navigate intimacy, conflict, and vulnerability in adulthood. For individuals with insecure attachment styles, which I personally think is probably way more people than the academics would have us believe, these patterns can perpetuate emotional dysregulation, interpersonal difficulties, and chronic dissatisfaction inside of relationship dynamics.

They reflect deeply ingrained emotional and relational schemas, often formed by the stories we develop, as result of our experiences, in early childhood. DBT and Schema Therapy, with their respective emphases on mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation, interpersonal functioning, and transformation in perception of stories, offer complementary pathways for healing, and as I said before, fortunately, change is completely possible. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) and Schema Therapy both offer potent skill sets for addressing the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral patterns that underlie attachment insecurity.