



How Attachment Styles Impact Relationships

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We are created for connection—to be in meaningful, connected relationships with God and others. He made us to be loved by Him, to trust and love Him, and to connect with other people deeply.

But why are relationships so difficult? And why do so many people struggle with intimacy? At the core, our most important relationship—the one with our Creator—was fractured by sin. In a broken world, our relationships often fall short of the deep connection and closeness we were designed to experience. Yet, we still long for intimacy and seek it from others.

From infancy, we begin learning who we are and how to relate to others through our earliest interactions with primary caregivers. These formative experiences shape our unconscious strategies for handling disappointments in relationships. Some actively pursue the love they crave, while others avoid dependence altogether, choosing self-reliance instead.

These strategies become **attachment styles**, which we will explore over the next two Toolkits. This month's Toolkit explains attachment styles, their characteristics, and how they affect a relationship. The second Toolkit will offer guidance on how to help couples navigate hurts that develop from differing attachment styles and relationship expectations.

Attachment Theory was first developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth by observing babies and their caretakers. Based on these studies, three basic types of attachment styles emerged: 1) **secure**, 2) **anxious**, and 3) **avoidant**. Subsequent studies showed that these attachment styles persist into adulthood and affect close relationships. The attachment styles have similar descriptive names for adult behaviors: anxious is called **preoccupied**; avoidant is **dismissive**; and secure is **autonomous**.

ANXIOUS (PREOCCUPIED) ATTACHMENT STYLE

The anxious attachment style pursues closeness and fears losing it. People with this attachment style love the idea of attachment to others. They long to be in a relationship where they feel understood and cared for, but they are anxious that the other person will disappoint them or leave them in distress.

An anxious attachment style develops when an early caretaker is unreliably attentive. At times, they are warm and sensitive to the baby's needs, and at other times, they are not as available to them. Unsure which version of their caretaker they will get, babies with less reliable or attentive caretakers respond to stressful events with more extreme distress. In an unconscious attempt to keep their caretaker's attention, they have difficulty allowing themselves to be soothed.

For adults with an anxious attachment style, the beginning of their relationships are often filled with hope, possibility, and even idealism. But at some point, the other person disappoints them, does not understand, gets distracted, and misses

opportunities to show care. These disappointments unconsciously trigger previous experiences where a meaningful person let them down or was not consistently there for them. Fearful that their current partner will not be there for them too, they will start to express strong emotions of anger, threats, and judgments: "You don't care about anyone but yourself;" "You never really loved me;" or even "I hate you."

This intense feeling may pass and the injury may be partially repaired, but the pattern repeats itself. Unfortunately, the way an anxiously attached person pursues their partner can produce the opposite effect of what they want and need. Their partner likely feels criticized, never good enough, and that their significant other only ever talks about the state of their relationship. They may describe their anxious partner as hard to please.

EXAMPLE

Shannon prepared dinner for Paul, who was ten minutes late coming home from work and did not call. Rather than expressing her disappointment that dinner became cold and explaining that she would like to be called in advance next time, Shannon experienced this moment as evidence that Paul did not love or care about her. She started to worry about what he might have been doing in those ten minutes and demanded evidence of his whereabouts. To Paul, this felt like an extreme reaction, and he became defensive. His defensiveness only further confirmed to Shannon that her worst fears were true and her anger escalated.

AVOIDANT (DISMISSIVE) ATTACHMENT STYLE

The avoidant attachment style unconsciously avoids closeness and fears both vulnerability and the loss of independence. People with an avoidant attachment style tend to either rush through conflict or avoid it altogether. They are less likely to voice their concerns or directly communicate their needs and feelings, though they may express their dissatisfaction in indirect ways. At times, they do not even recognize their own negative emotions or suppress them entirely. Instead of addressing problems, they might deny or ignore them, and, in extreme cases, they may turn to substances as a way to escape discomfort rather than seeking support from others.

Those with an avoidant attachment style had early experiences that taught them there was insufficient help available to navigate their painful emotions. For whatever reason, their caretaker was uncomfortable with negative emotions, so they had to soothe themselves in times of crisis and be their own support system. In many cases, they received positive attention from a caretaker when they did something right, were being good or helpful, or were not causing difficulty or concern to others. Minimizing their own emotions and needs and focusing on serving others were logical ways they tried to gain a connection with their caretaker.

People with an avoidant attachment style come across as nice and easy-going to many acquaintances. However, their partner may complain that it is difficult to feel close to them. They may be hurt that their spouse will not talk about emotions or checks out when there is a problem. They sometimes feel abandoned by their avoidantly attached

partner when they shut down difficult conversations or when they feel their concerns or emotions are dismissed with shallow, quick fixes.

EXAMPLE

Jermaine's wife Sheila enjoys open communication. In their relationship, she consistently expressed her desire to deepen their connection and initiated activities to create opportunities for them to talk together, such as hikes in the mountains, long car rides, and weekend getaways. Jermaine reluctantly agreed to these outings but quickly felt overwhelmed. He started to pull away and had difficulty coming up with topics of conversation, which hurt Sheila's feelings. The closeness and connection were uncomfortable for Jermaine. Seeing that the scheduled times with Sheila only seemed to strain their relationship, he started to avoid them.

SECURE (AUTONOMOUS) ATTACHMENT STYLE

A secure attachment develops when a child's caretakers are consistently and warmly attentive to their needs and sensitive to their cues. The child can go to their caretakers when they are angry, sad, or distressed. Caretakers accept their negative emotions and help them express their feelings in healthy ways.

In couples, the securely attached person can communicate openly about their feelings and needs and listen to their partner's needs. They are able to stay present in conflict and resolve it in a healthy way, without escalating the argument or becoming overly defensive. Their partner feels comforted and nurtured in the relationship. They know the securely attached partner offers safety and stability in difficult times.

This does not mean securely attached people are immune to any relationship problems. They make mistakes and may occasionally be defensive or reactive. However, they tend to quickly mend relational ruptures and more easily bounce back from disappointments. They have more resilience when their relationships are facing troubled times.

EXAMPLE

In arguments with her husband James, Amy learned to express her feelings calmly and listen to his perspective. She did not shut down or become overly defensive. Because she trusted him, she did not constantly seek his reassurance about his love and commitment. When he went to bed without saying goodnight, she assumed he was simply exhausted and gave him the benefit of the doubt. She teased him about his

occasional forgetfulness and did not take it personally when he did not remember something. However, she has gently expressed her disappointment and asked him to write things down in his phone’s notes app to remember important items. They agreed to work together and occasionally update the list. She respects his needs while maintaining her independence. Outside of James, Amy has other friends with whom she finds emotional connection and support.

We hope these descriptions and examples provide insights into couple dynamics and the influence of attachment styles. In part two, we will offer guidance on how to help couples understand and navigate their attachment differences. The chart below is a helpful reference for the three attachment styles.

Attachment Styles

IN CHILDREN	ANXIOUS	AVOIDANT	SECURE
Precursor/ caretaker’s behavior pattern	Inconsistent care of emotions	Emotionally unavailable	Consistent attunement
Child’s strategy when upset	Cries but is not easily comforted	Does not cry	Cries and is comforted
IN ADULTS	ANXIOUS/ PREOCCUPIED	AVOIDANT / DISMISSIVE	AUTONOMOUS
Outcomes	Preoccupied with relationships	Avoids intimacy, focuses on things	Values relationships
	Cannot tolerate distress or anxiety	Emotion unimportant	Gives and receives care