



Helping couples move toward secure attachment

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Now that we understand basic attachment styles, how they form, and how they can create barriers to intimacy in relationships (refer to the [February 2025 Toolkit](#)), let's explore some ways we can help couples connect with each other as they learn to understand both themselves and one another. How couples perceive their spouse often reflects how they experience their relationship with God. The more secure and connected they feel to God, the more connected they can be with their spouse. The reverse is also true. Growth in either of these crucial relationships tends to have a positive impact on the other.

When we help couples work through attachment style differences, we want to take a non-judgmental stance. While it would be ideal if everyone had a secure attachment style, we do not want one partner viewed as the “healthy” partner and the other as the “problem.” No one is perfectly secure. As we help couples understand how their attachment style was formed, we want to foster understanding and compassion for themselves and their partner.

Furthermore, we want to relieve them from feeling like they have to defend themselves or their parents. Most parents do the best they can and try to love their children well, but for whatever reason—either their own upbringing or things they were going through at the time—they were not always able to fully meet their child's need for connection. Here are some tips on how to help couples grow more secure in themselves, God, and their relationship.

STRENGTHEN AWARENESS

To increase awareness of their own attachment style and how it impacts the relationship, have each partner write down responses to prompts, such as:

- What did love and security look like in my childhood?
- When I feel hurt, do I tend to withdraw or seek reassurance?
- What 3 situations trigger me? E.g., feeling ignored, being criticized, and/or feeling overwhelmed
- What is my go-to strategy with my partner when I get triggered? Do I complain, accuse, or attack? Do I defend, walk away, or shut down? What is the effect that my strategy has on my partner? Does it help or make things worse?
- What do I need from my partner to feel emotionally safe?

ANXIOUS (PREOCCUPIED) ATTACHMENT STYLE

With some coaching, the partner with an anxious attachment style can develop greater self-awareness and become more effective in having their needs met.

- The anxious partner can pause before seeking reassurance and can self-soothe first (5-10 minutes of breathing, walking, or praying).
- They can practice self-compassion during moments of anxiety, understand the fears behind it, and choose to respond wisely rather than reacting impulsively.
- They can foster greater relational security with God. Encourage them to go to God first with their needs for care and security before seeking to get them met by their partner. Help make

sure they not only tell God their feelings but also receive God's comfort and love to feel soothed. Their increased dependence on God can reduce over-dependence on others for feelings of security and acceptance.

- They can practice communicating their feelings and needs in a vulnerable, kind way to reduce misunderstandings and give their partner time to respond effectively. Have them start by addressing difficult topics calmly and respectfully, using "I statements" to avoid blame and the resulting defensiveness. [This Toolkit](#) trains on the skill, "describe rather than judge," which can help build healthy communication.
- They can seek out other sources of connection and learn not to rely on one person to provide the security and emotional connection they need.

AVOIDANT (DISMISSIVE) ATTACHMENT STYLE

Likewise, the partner with an avoidant attachment style can learn to tolerate emotional distress and grow in their ability to better connect with their partner. Since those with avoidant styles value independence and may avoid intimacy out of fear of rejection or loss of independence, caregivers should create a safe environment that encourages empathy and patience, where the avoidant partner can practice and grow.

- Help them recognize avoidant patterns and find language to label what happens inside when they move away from their partner. "I feel suffocated." "I feel cornered."
- Educating partners about their attachment style may help them see

their avoidance as a coping strategy meant to protect them from emotional pain. We want to help them make sense of their behavior and reduce their internalized shame and judgment around avoidance.

- When they start to feel overwhelmed, help them learn to ask for a time-out to calm down. When asking for a time-out, they should tell their partner a specific time they'll return to the conversation, present and responsive. This [Toolkit on time-outs](#) provides guidance.
- Help them learn and practice self-soothing techniques, such as: *stop and become aware of 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste*. A mindful walk, a prayer, or a soothing touch may also help them regulate.
- The avoidant partner should grow in experiencing how God cares for their feelings and the seemingly small needs that come up throughout the day. Encourage them to share their feelings with God at least once a day. As they do this, help them practice receiving God's comfort, love, and acceptance.
- Building routines of expressing their feelings daily will help them grow in vulnerability and security. Each day, they can identify one negative and one positive emotion and share both with their partner. For example, "Honey, I'm feeling steady and open with you, but I feel stressed about work." The "How We Feel" app is a helpful tool that can increase emotional awareness and provide language for expressing feelings.

BUILD EMOTIONAL SECURITY TOGETHER

Have each partner choose a daily or weekly ritual to reinforce security, such as:

- A **20-second hug** at the end of each day. This produces oxytocin and helps couples to bond.
- A **check-in question** like, "How can I love you best today?" or "How can I best support you today?"
- A **gratitude practice** where they express appreciation for one small thing the other did. Try doing this at least weekly or, even better, daily.

MEET EACH OTHER'S NEEDS

Through your time together, help the couple identify and more effectively meet each other's emotional needs.

- Have the couple share the triggers they identified with each other.
- Instead of reacting impulsively to the other's behavior, encourage them to ask, "What is my partner protecting right now?"
- Ask each partner to write how they would like their partner to respond and then share. For example, "When you abruptly end our conversation, I feel dismissed and disregarded. It would help me if you could at least acknowledge that you need some time to think so I know you value what I've said."

- Practice sharing responses with each other that show empathy and attunement. For example, if one partner says, “When I’m stressed, I need reassurance, not solutions,” have the other partner practice responding with comfort and understanding rather than offering solutions. Adjusting their habitual response of giving advice or offering solutions will take time and practice.
 - With compassion, help partners to reframe, recognizing that both are working together to foster relational safety and are learning new skills to connect. Help shift their perspective from “my partner attacks” or “my partner withdraws” to “we are both seeking safety in different ways.”
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Please note that couples counseling alone will not always provide enough care. For example, if one or both partners’ past relational and/or childhood wounds are deep, long-term, and still raw (making their couple dynamic overly negative), consider referring them to individual counseling to help work through past traumas.

We can encourage couples to recognize their shared desire for connection and protection in both themselves and their partner. We can help them reframe their clashing attachment styles as missed bids for connection. With a shared goal of increasing healthy connection, couples can listen more effectively and choose a softer, more engaged approach. As they practice skills to reshape their avoidant or anxious tendencies individually and with their partner, they can build a healthier, more secure relationship.