

Attachment & Intimate Relationships

What is attachment?

Attachment is the emotional bond, or closeness, formed between two people. Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby and generally refers to a primary caregiver-child relationship. We also experience attachment in intimate relationships as adults. It is rooted in the biological concept that we need people to survive. Prehistorically, this meant another person could help protect or defend against danger and provide additional means of gathering food. Being alone was likely to lead to death. While we might not face the same types of situations as our ancestors, our response to a disruption in emotional and physical closeness is similar. Forming close bonds is still a basic need, and when that need is threatened we respond accordingly.

How does this play out in intimate partner relationships?

There are 4 different attachment styles or ways in which we respond to others with whom we are in a relationship. While attachment styles are largely impacted by our relationships with our primary caregivers in infancy, they continue to exist in intimate partner relationships too.

1 Secure

This person had predictable and consistent caregivers and learned they can depend on others physically and emotionally. Their needs were met and they had the space to explore and develop confidence in themselves and their abilities. They also learned to regulate their own emotions.

- As adults, they have healthy boundaries with others and thrive in relationships but do not fear being alone. They show genuine interest in others, can be vulnerable, and can communicate openly.

2 Avoidant

This person's needs were often unmet by an emotionally and/or physically unavailable caregiver. They learned to shut down when feeling vulnerable because expressing emotions led to harm or abandonment.

- As adults, they often distance themselves from close relationships and are highly independent. They are uncomfortable with intimacy and may even pull away if they feel the other person desires emotional closeness.

3 Ambivalent

This person had inconsistent responses from a caregiver who was sometimes available to meet their needs and other times rejected or punished them. This unpredictable response led to an overactive awareness of the primary caregiver's needs in the hopes that they would be able to determine whether their response would be safe or not.

- As adults, they fear abandonment and deeply desire responsiveness, attention, care, and reassurance from their partner. They are often hypervigilant toward any threat to the relationship and are very attuned to the needs of their partner, denying their own needs to ensure relationship security.

4 Disorganized

This person's primary caregiver was the source of both fear (I am afraid you will hurt me) and desire (I need you to comfort and protect me). This led to a worldview that others are unsafe and not dependable. This attachment style is usually associated with abuse and trauma.

- As adults, they often feel unlovable and distrust support from others or their attempts at connection, constantly looking for signs of rejection or betrayal. They have trouble regulating their own emotions and struggle to be open and vulnerable, expecting to be hurt.

The relationships formed in early childhood have a tremendous impact on our relationships throughout life. If you are struggling in your relationship with your partner, or looking to grow in emotional connection, it can be helpful to explore each of your attachment styles and consider how they impact your relationship.

