

Attachment Styles and Adult Relationships

By Cherrie Phillips, M.S., LMFT
SoCal Therapy Center



“True love is not a hide and seek game: in true love, both lovers seek each other.”

— Michael Bassey Johnson



What is Attachment Theory?

Historically, attachment has been understood as a pattern of feelings, behaviors, and thoughts which are a result of their caregiver's ability or inability to meet an infant's need for affection (Myrick, Green, & Crenshaw, 2014). What happens during the beginning of an infant's life will go on to affect almost every aspect of the child's life as they grow (Bowlby, 1973). According to an article written by Williams and Kelly (2005), Ainsworth (1989) uses attachment theory to suggest that children will internalize their early parent-child relationship experiences, and go on to create an internal working model for their later life interpersonal relationships. The child goes on to use the model in order to form their beliefs about their own self-worth and expectations in regards to the receptiveness of others (Williams & Kelly, 2005).

The Four Attachment Styles

Developmental psychologist, Mary Ainsworth, categorized attachment styles into three distinct patterns; secure attachment, avoidant attachment, and ambivalent attachment (Wallin, 2007). One of Ainsworth's students, Mary Main, went on to discover disorganized attachment (Wallin, 2007).

Secure attachment is categorized by the caregiver's ability to be responsive to their infant's signals and communication. Securely attached caregivers tend to be sensitive, accepting, cooperative, and emotionally available (Wallin, 2007). Moreover, upon being returned after a separation from their caregiver, a securely attached infant will feel reassured through physically reconnecting with their caregiver and are able to self-regulate and resume play (Wallin, 2007).

According to Wallin (2007), an infant's avoidant attachment is a result of the caregiver's rejected opportunities for connection, suppression of emotional communication, and aversion to physical contact or abruptness when touched. These infants do not display attachment behavior, and their seemingly lack of distress when faced with the separation and rejoining of their caregiver is often mistaken for calmness (Wallin, 2007). The avoidant infant has come to the assumption that their caregiver is unable to respond to their need for comfort and care, and therefore has, so to speak, given up on obtaining that nurture from their caregiver (Wallin, 2007).

The Four Attachment Styles

Ambivalent attachment is characterized by the caregivers who tend to be infrequently available, discouraging of the infant's autonomy and inept responsivity to their infant's signals of need (Wallin, 2007). There are two types of ambivalent infants; angry and passive. Upon being separated from their caregivers, both types of ambivalent infants were unable to explore their surroundings due to their overwhelming distress and anxiety in regards to their caregiver's location (Wallin, 2007). Once rejoined with their caregivers, the passive and angry ambivalent infant appeared to be neither relieved from their distress state, nor end their preoccupation with their caregiver's whereabouts.

Wallin (2007) continues with attachment theory and disorganized attachment. Disorganized attachment occurs when the primary caregiver is simultaneously viewed as a source of security and danger for the infant. This transpires when the interactions between the caregiver and child are not only frightening for the child, but the child perceives that the caregiver is frightened as well (Wallin, 2007). The caregiver's fear arises in response to the child and this in turn leads the caregiver to respond with physical withdrawal or retreating. Caregivers of the disorganized infant are often frightening, frightened or disconnected (Wallin, 2007). For the purpose of this presentation, we will not be exploring how this attachment styles shows up in adult romantic relationships.

Why is this important?

We know that when adults are in the process of coupling (i.e. new relationships of less than 3 months), they often seek out closeness to their potential partner, which tends to be the most dominant feature of the newly developed relationship. This is often followed with beginning to see your new partner as a safe person to let in emotionally, and ultimately develop a healthy dependency and attachment to their romantic partner. This pattern leads us to believe that adults have a tendency to mirror the similar sequences infants go through in order to attach to their primary caregiver, in their romantic relationships (Heffernan, Fraley, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2012).

Attachment Styles in Romantic Adult Relationships

Secure Attachment

Authors Amir Levine and Rachel Heller (2011) suggest that those adults with secure attachments tend to feel more at ease with the idea of intimacy and are typically more loving and warm towards their romantic partners. Adults with secure attachment style have a natural ability to be intimate in relationships and do not fear that they will either lose themselves by being engulfed by their partner, nor do they feel unworthy of their partner's love or fear that their partner will abandon them in a matter of time. Securely attached adults tend to be more patient in romantic relationships, effectively communicate their needs/wants to their partners and are able to notice when their partner is in distress. They are able to create and maintain a healthy level of emotional dependence on their partner.

They believe something to the extent of: "I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me. (Levine, Heller, 2011, pg. 23)

Attachment Styles in Romantic Adult Relationships

Anxious Attachment:

Those with an anxious attachment style often crave intimacy, overly concerned about their relationship, and tend to fear that their partner does not love/care about them as deeply as they do their partner. Anxious adults tend to be in love with the idea of love, enjoy intimacy and tend to grow to be very close with their romantic partners. While adults with an anxious attachment style enjoy and crave intimacy, they are in a constant state of worry that their partner does not feel the same.

A major worry/fear that their partner does not share that same desire to be as close. Since the relationship consumes so much of their time, thoughts and energy, they tend to take things personally, are easily hurt and overreact or act out when you notice a change in their partner's emotions or actions. Unfortunately, anxious adults tend to be right about what they are sensing from their partner, however, after lashing out on their partners, they tend to later regret their behaviors. (Levine, Heller, 2011)

Attachment Styles in Romantic Adult Relationships

Anxious Attachment continued:

Conversely, if the anxious adult is in a relationship with a securely attached adult, a person who is able to meet their emotional needs and desire for intimacy and provides security and reassurance, the anxious adult is more able to manage and control their maladaptive behaviors and irrational thoughts.

They tend believe something to the extent of: “I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person and this desire sometimes scares people away.” (Levine, Heller, 2011, pg. 24)

Attachment Styles in Romantic Adult Relationships

Avoidant Attachment

Adults with an avoidant/dismissive attachment style often see intimacy as a loss of their independent self and often will attempt to minimize any closeness with their partner. While avoidant adults often do want to be close to others, too much closeness and vulnerability makes them feel uncomfortable, so avoidant adults will keep their partners at an emotional distance. These adults value autonomy, and in fact, prefer it to intimate relationships. They enjoy a sense of self-sufficiency and independence, and therefore, thoughts of rejection or thoughts about their relationship do not consume them. When in a relationship, the dismissive adult's partner will often feel distant from the dismissive adult while the dismissive is overly sensitive to feeling as if their partner is possessive or controlling. (Levine, Heller, 2011)

They tend to believe something to the extent of: "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being." (Levine, Heller, 2011, pg. 24)

Determining Your Attachment Style

After learning about the different styles, it's typically fairly easy to determine your own attachment style. However, if it is still too difficult to determine, there are plenty of free and paid assessment quiz available online. Here are a few:

[Relationship Attachment Style Test](#) - This assessment will provide you with an introduction to your general attachment style, however, you will be required to pay prior to receiving the full results of the assessment and it takes about 15 minutes.

[Relationship Attachment Style Test](#) - This assessment provides you with a snapshot report on your attachment style, however, you will be required to pay for the full assessment and takes about 15 minutes.

[Attachment Styles and Close Relationships](#) - This assessment provides you with a break down of your attachment style in general, and goes on to provide feedback with regards to your attachment to your primary care givers, romantic partner and your close friends. It is free, and takes about 10/15 minutes.

How do I change my attachment to be secure?

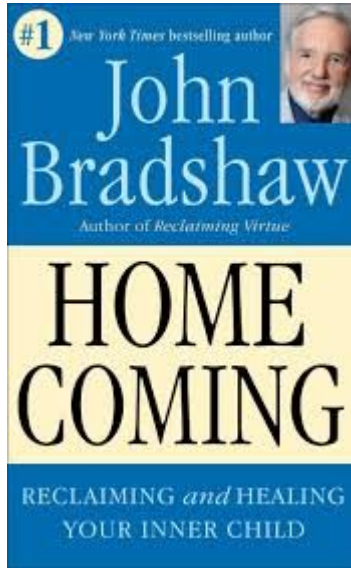
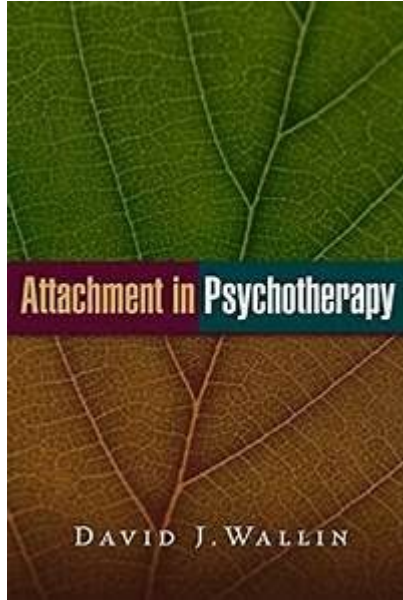
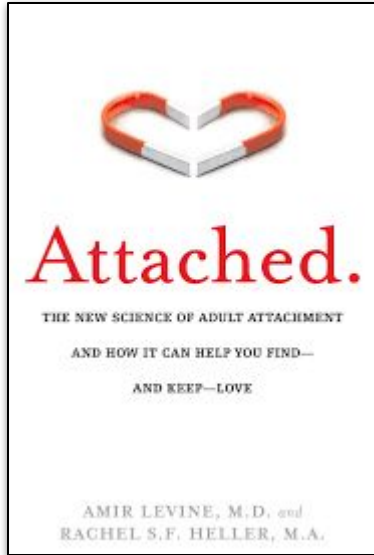
Typically, your attachment style won't change much over time. However, one can make a conscious effort to heal past emotional wounds and move to a more secure attachment style. Therapy is always a safe place to start unpacking early emotional traumas and gain more clarity on how those early childhood wounds currently manifest in your life. There other factors that influence your attachment style, such as genes and environment, so also uncovering how experiences throughout your life span have informed your attachment style can be beneficial as well. This can lead to higher self esteem, more emotionally regulation, healthier boundaries and many other emotional/mental benefits.

Secure: If you have a secure attachment style, be sure to pay attention that you're not over tolerating your partner's poor behavior. Those with a secure attachment tend to stay in a relationship longer than they should since they can tolerate their partners maladaptive behaviors.

Anxious: Learn how to use effective communication and be more assertive with your partner. Learn how to identify your emotional needs and how to express them in a constructive manner. Learn how to accept yourself and feel worthy of love.

Avoidant: Start to notice when you are becoming distant from your partner. Be mindful of strategies you typically use to keep your partner at distance, and as your noticing these behaviors, remind yourself that you do value intimacy. Learn how to be kind to yourself, and allow yourself to be in a relationship with our fear of being engulfed by your partner.

Resources



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