

Attachment Styles and How They Impact Relationships

You may or may not have heard of the Attachment Theory, and you may be wondering what that has to do with your relationship.

**Childhood**

I’m starting by saying our parents or caregivers generally did the best they could with the tools they had.

**When a child has all of their physical and emotional needs met promptly, thoroughly, and reliably, they are able to form a secure attachment with their caregiver**.

I would ask you to read that again, and ask yourself whether that was true for you. I’m not suggesting that your caregiver was bad if this wasn’t your experience. Life can be hard, and providing the basics for the family, - the physical needs - such as a home that is warm, safe and comfortable, as well as sufficient food are essential and foremost in their list of priorities. This may have meant that one or other caregiver may have not been around much, because of their job, or perhaps you only had one caregiver, which would have been even tougher.

At the same time, parents don’t get a hand book on how to parent and they would have mainly learned as a result of the parenting they received, and their parenting would likely to have been based on the parenting styles they experienced..

So, there may have been times when emotional needs weren’t met, they were lacking or in some cases, completely missing.

**What are Emotional Needs and Attachment Styles?**

The ideal is a Secure Attachment, where the parent/ caregiver is emotionally and physically available, trust is built, the child feels loved and supported, even when things go wrong. This provides a strong foundation / base from which the child can explore the world, knowing their caregiver will be there – whatever.

However, with the best will in the world, parents don’t always get it right. For example, a parent may dismiss a toddler’s need for comfort, believing that doing so will make the child more independent. In the past it was thought that babies should be left to ‘cry it out’. But this is now believed to cause harm to the baby as they feel abandoned. Decades of research show that children need to feel secure in their relationships before they can develop authentic autonomy.

Some parents may have difficulty with the exploration phase, fearing for their child’s safety. If they convey this anxiety to the child, they can send the message that the world is not safe or worse, that the child isn’t competent. That child can become overly dependent on their parents as they don’t feel safe.

**So, what does this have to do with adult relationships?**

Quite a lot as it happens, and I’m going to explain the different attachment styles and how they affect adult relationships.

**Secure Attachment**

If you felt secure as a child you are more likely to feel confident, and able to interact with others, getting your own needs met and meeting the needs of others. So when are in a relationship with a partner who also has a secure attachment style, you are -

·   Able to offer support when your partner feels distressed

·   Comfortable going to your partner for support when you need it

·   In a relationship that is likely to be honest, open, and equal. Each feeling independent, and at the same time loving and respectful towards each other.

However, there are those whose attachment style wasn’t secure as a child, as I explained, and as a result their way of relating in an adult relationship can be more difficult.

**Anxious Attachment**

If you developed this style of attachment, you were probably fearful of being abandoned as a child or was, either because one of their caregivers left, due to parents splitting up, or if sadly one of them died. Leaving you fearful of being abandoned in adulthood, and especially in a relationship.

·   You often worry your partner will leave you

·   You constantly seek reassurance, and validation

·   You can be needy or clingy, feeling anxious when your partner is late home, doesn’t reply to your call or text back quickly

·   You can become possessive, not wanting your partner to spend time with their friends

·   You may constantly worry that your partner doesn’t care about you

The irony is, that despite worrying you will be abandoned, you can unconsciously push your partner away, as though testing them, and then when it does happen, it reinforces your belief that you were right all along.

**Avoidant Attachment**

If you developed this attachment style. you probably felt your caregiver wasn’t reliable. So, you learned to be independent. As a result in adulthood -

·   You have a fear of intimacy.

·   You have trouble getting close to others, or trusting others in a relationship,

·   Sometimes feel suffocated in relationships.

·   You tend to maintain distance from your partner, being emotionally unavailable to them.

·       You tend to be independent and rely on yourself, as you learned to do in childhood.

You can often come across as focussing on your needs and comforts, and in heated arguments, can appear detached, able to turn off your emotions and feelings, and not react.

**Disorganised Attachment**

Disorganized attachment is a form of insecure attachment. The child doesn’t view the parent as a secure base because they cannot get their emotional or physical needs met. This is considered an extreme form of Insecure Attachment. Often as a result of abuse or trauma in childhood. As an adult -

·   You have an extreme fear of Rejection

·   You struggle to cope with any kind of negative feeling, as a result of not being taught how to self-soothe as a child.

·   You may have negative self-image and low self esteem

·   You struggle to regulate your emotions

·   You may suffer from chronical depression or anxious

The good news is that Sixty percent of adults are securely attached while 20% are Avoidant and 20% are Anxious. The other good news is your reactions are greatly influenced by the relationship you are in, and the style of attachment your partner has, as well as the degree to which your attachment styles affect you. Awareness can help, as well as working at managing your attachment style.

You may have a combination of attachment styles, and you can work on them, as well as supporting and being supportive to your partner.

**Understanding Your Attachment Style and that of Your Partner**

I am a great believer in awareness. Without awareness we don’t have choices. It can often be like being your own detective and looking for clues and then putting together evidence to support it. Then thinking about your childhood, and what kind of experiences you had.

We each find coping mechanisms as children to survive the best way we could. Because as a child we can't survive on our own.

Whilst those coping strategies may have worked really well given the circumstances at the time, they don’t always translate well into adulthood. Especially in relationships.

The child who was frightened of being abandoned, and needed reassurance, may well have acted out, behaving badly to get attention, (craving to feel attached to their caregiver) negative attention it may have been, but that was better than no attention at all. But the same tactics don’t work in relationships.

The child who didn’t get the support they needed, because their parent wasn’t around, would have become fiercely independent, relying on themselves, but in a relationship, they tend to shut their partner out, because they are fearful of being abandoned.

You can see who those two attachment styles can cause problems when each partner has one of these different attachment styles and are put together, especially at times of stress.

By having awareness and understanding and the willingness, as well as having an open heart, not only to change your behaviour, but also to support your partner too, you can make positive changes to your relationship.

It will take time and patience on both your parts. Remember these attachment styles and resulting behaviours have been developed over many years – often decades.