

Introduction to Anxious Attachment & How to Heal

Topics covered:

- What is Attachment?
- Developmental Conditions That Lead to Anxious Attachment
- Characteristics of Anxious Attachment in Adults
- Healing Anxious Attachment
- Loving an Anxious Partner

What is Attachment?

Imagine yourself as a helpless infant, unable to care for yourself, dependent on the affection and attention of another, and lacking language that enables you to communicate your needs. During this period of time, we develop attachments to our caregivers as a method of survival and having our basic needs met. We learn to behave in a way that helps us get what we need and want for our survival – food, affection, love, trust, warmth, nurturing, safety, protection, consistency, and most of all, responsive presence. The attachment we develop shapes the way we relate to our caregivers, the way we express our needs and how we get our needs met.

When attachment is developed securely, adults and infants are attuned to one another – meaning the two are connected and able to feel one another. This quality of secure attachment provides the foundation for healthy relationships in the future. Attachment defines the child's sense of stability, quality of social interactions, and emotional and cognitive development as they grow into adulthood.

The attachment pattern we form in childhood carries into our adult lives as we attempt to have our more complex adult needs met in romantic relationships and friendships. If secure, our attachment pattern can help bolster of healthy, secure relationships, but if insecure, may also undermine our ability to establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships and friendships.

Attachment in adulthood influences how we build relationships and manage the highs and lows of social interactions – how we communicate, repair ruptures, and relate to one another. Adult attachment addresses our ability to connect, feel satisfied in our relationships, and how we develop and maintain intimacy.

Understanding Secure Attachment to Understand Insecure Attachment

When parents are attuned and connected to their child, the child learns that it is normal for others to be responsive to their needs. They also learn that others are reliable and that having and expressing needs is okay.

If you watch the way small children interact with their parent at a park or playground, you will often see toddlers and young children departing from their caretaker and heading out on their own to explore and interact with their novel environment. Look closely and you'll see that some children periodically look toward, or run back to their parents, as though their parent is a "home base." If the child falls down or feels startled by something, they often cry out and reference the parent. If the parent is attuned, they will respond to the cry of their child, comforting and consoling them until they feel calm and settled once more. This is an example of secure attachment at play.

As the child grows, they learn to distinguish between moments when they need their parents to comfort them, and when they can comfort themselves. Because the child learned emotion regulation and experienced safety through their parent, they can more easily engage in regulating and creating safety for themselves. At this point, parents will often notice when a child falls down yet wait to see their reaction before responding, giving the child an opportunity to choose their own response. Regardless, they are attuned and alert to the needs of their child.

Another example: Very young children who are securely attached will often become upset when their parent leaves, and they will feel comforted when upon their parent's return. As children mature, they develop trust that their caregiver will indeed return and feel confident that they are not being abandoned. This gives them confidence in their secure base and builds the foundation for future relationships that also resemble security.

Developmental Conditions That Lead to Anxious Attachment

Recall the narrative of a family at the park or playground. The toddler wanders off from the parent to explore their surroundings and falls down, hurting themselves. The child cries out, but the parent ignores their cries at first. Sensing that no one is noticing them, the child goes into full-on tantrum and panic mode, raising the level of their cry until their caregiver responds to their needs. The parent might seem annoyed by the child's need for soothing. Or worse, scolds the child for crying out – maybe they minimize the child's experience by saying something like, "It's not a big deal, why are you crying?" or "You're such a wimp!" Other times, the parent might be overly nurturing, emotional or dramatic. The parent might sometimes be loving, and other times distracted, which lends itself to an "on-again, off-again" parenting style which feels inconsistent to the child.

This inconsistency in attuning to the child's needs leads the child to over-focus on the parent – meaning the child becomes an expert in reading other people and adjusting their needs and emotional states to accommodate others. This over-focus on others creates anxiety in the child when they are alone, as well as when they are with others. People with anxious attachment patterns also tend to ignore their own needs as adults, leading them to become a caregiver to others or smothering to their partner. Deep down, they feel emotional starvation and a constant need to connect because they never received this as children.

In other cases, children are expected to care for their parents or younger siblings. Perhaps they're put in emotionally complex situations before they are developed enough to understand them (such as abuse, neglect, or early life trauma). Parents of anxiously attached children might have also looked to the child to fulfill their own attachment needs, confusing their own need for love with love for the child.

Characteristics of Anxious Attachment in Adults

Because love was unpredictable during childhood, anxiously attached people tend to seek out love and approval from others while low self-esteem and little awareness or recognition of their own needs or what healthy relationships look and feel like.

If you have an anxious attachment pattern, you might identify with some or all of the following characteristics in adulthood:

- You have a constant need to connect or be close to your partner.
- You might be prone to feeling unlovable or unworthy of love, yet deeply desire to be loved
- You feel anxious or insecure when your partner is absent.
- You feel like your "love tank" never really gets full or it might feel like you need an excessive amount of love, care and attention to get your love tank full.
- You could engage in people-pleasing to avoid anxiety of saying no or setting boundaries.
- Self-care might feel selfish, uncomfortable or difficult.
- You might find yourself ruminating about the past or attempting to control the future.
- You often give too much and then grow resentful when it is not returned or appreciated.
- You have a tit-for-tat mentality and tend to keep score.
- You fear abandonment but this fear actually perpetuates it.
- You could have low self-esteem
- You crave romantic relationships, yet you have low trust/confidence in relationships.
- You have a crippling fear of losing your partner and your connection, especially after fights or disagreements.
- You need constant reassurance of your partner's love and affection toward you
- You go from being anxious or disappointed to being angry or infuriated when your partner fails to respond
- You have unrealistic expectations of yourself and others
- You might unconsciously smother your partner or push them away with unrealistic demands or expectations.

Healing Anxious Attachment

"Deep down, all of us are designed for intimacy, connection, awareness, and love."

– Dr. Diane Poole Heller

Despite attachment injury, our brains are hardwired to seek healing – this should give you hope! We all have the capacity to move toward secure attachment because we can all rewire our brain, create new neural pathways, and form new patterns of relating to ourselves and others.

That said, healing attachment injury isn't easy since our relational habits and responses are deeply ingrained in the brain throughout childhood. Breaking the cycle of behavior you learned in childhood as a matter of survival is difficult, but not impossible. Remember that healing is always possible – at any age! By learning and regularly practicing secure attachment skills, you can move toward more secure attachment.

Suggested practices for this pattern:

- Learn to recognize and meet your own needs instead of depending on others to regulate your emotions or meet your needs for you.
- Do things for yourself that you would quickly do for others.
- When tempted to over-give to others, give to yourself first.
- Practice regulating yourself first, then turn to others (or your partner) for additional support.
- Learn to ask for help. You can start small! Remember that people like to be helpful – you're one of those people.
- Learn to calm your inner critical voice by developing your inner witness.
- When you feel activated by something someone else did, write an accurate narrative of your experiences to make sense of them.
- Avoid desperate actions for attention that push your partner away. Such as calling or texting excessively, projecting your anxieties onto others, passive-aggressively posting on social media, or starting fights due to your insecurities.
- Practice giving your partner time and space and learn to sit with the discomfort that brings up without trying to numb, distract yourself or reduce the charge.
- Find a couples' therapist with attachment experience, enroll in an online attachment course, or read a book on attachment.

Loving an Anxiously Attached Partner

Loving an anxiously attached partner requires understanding your partner's needs and learning how they are wired for love – so you're in the right place! Learning about their childhood experiences and being able to identify their anxious patterns can help you navigate behavior that might seem overbearing and confusing at times. It is important to realize that your partner's attachment pattern was an adaptive strategy developed to survive crushing emotional pain as an infant. On your side, try to cultivate love and patience for their wounded inner child. Although this attachment pattern was not a choice, your partner is still responsible for addressing their attachment behavior as an adult. Yet your tender, steadfast love and care will aid them in healing and soothing their love wounds.

Sometimes, irrational behaviors have a very real foundation. For instance, you might have your phone on silent, only to find a string of texts and calls that become increasingly panicked and demanding. This likely has nothing to do with you – it's their attachment anxiety at play. Check in with your partner, not because they are overly clingy, but because it feels important for them to stay tethered to you. People with an anxious attachment pattern can be hypervigilant – they're always looking for signs of threat, abandonment or perceived rejection even when it's not helping. Your partner is an expert at connecting dots, even if there are no dots to be connected. So it's vital to establish very consistent and open communication, to act and be trustworthy, and to avoid any behavior that could be construed as secretive or questionable.

Your partner likely requires additional reassurance. By providing them with what they need, you're helping them develop the security they long for and likely never received as a child. Practice active listening, show them respect and stay attuned to your partner's needs. Gently encourage independence in the relationship by making it safe for them to prioritize their needs and self-care. Remember that their ability to self-nurture is underdeveloped and often a source of anxiety out of fear that they cannot be there for you if they care for themselves. Be consistent; inconsistency will trigger their attachment injury. This includes making sure that your words and actions match up. Keep your agreements and if you cannot, be proactive and reassuring when you need to cancel.

While your partner may need additional connection and support to feel safe, your partner is likely very attentive to your needs! This might feel overwhelming or invasive at times, so let your partner know it's ok to look after their needs and offer to help rather than taking their constant giving for granted, which will be viewed as a lack of appreciation.