

## Introduction to Fearful-Avoidant Attachment & How to Heal

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- What is Attachment?
- Developmental Conditions That Lead to Fearful-Avoidant Attachment
- Characteristics of Fearful-Avoidant Attachment in Adults
- Healing Fearful-Avoidant Attachment
- Loving a Fearful-Avoidant 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.

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### *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.

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### *Developmental Conditions That Lead to Fearful-Avoidant Attachment*

Perhaps the most complex attachment pattern, fearful-avoidant attachment vacillates between dismissive-avoidant and anxious attachment. It often develops when a caregiver or parent felt threatening, scary, or unsafe because of the duality of needing the parent for safety while simultaneously fearing them, causing a back-and-forth shift between avoidant and anxious – between turning off the signal cry completely and turning it on constantly.

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. When the child cries out for help, the parent does not console them, instead might shame the child for not being more careful, or worse, they may physically punish the child for their misstep. Rather than feel comforted, the child is faced with the harsh and overwhelming reality that the person expected to make them feel safe is actually a threat themselves. While physical violence is not always present in the development of fearful-avoidant attachment, it is common. This creates a no-win situation for the child since the source of safety is also dangerous and terrifying. This leaves the child feeling that relationships are extremely risky.

Many of the behaviors that lead to fearful-avoidant attachment are, as the name indicates, fear-based. Children in this pattern are left with unmet emotional needs and the hard dichotomy of having to rely on unpredictable and unreliable caregivers. Yearning to please caregivers or parents and the fear of abuse or neglect can both lead the child to become overly independent (avoidant) and also anxious during childhood. In the fearful-avoidant pattern, the attachment system that is designed to connect for safety and love is entangled with excessive fear and threat. Thus, the experience of love is intimately intertwined with terrifying fear – an excruciating dynamic to navigate, as the desire for connection is natural and necessary.

Entering adulthood with this embodied experience, and lacking a sense of relational safety, the fearful-avoidant adaptation spills into adult relationships, often making it very difficult to maintain healthy connections with intimate partners.

### *Characteristics of Fearful-Avoidant Attachment in Adults*

Adults with fearful-avoidant attachment have learned that relationships are scary and, as a result, they associate intimacy with fear while still feeling the urge to connect as an innate human need.

If you have a fearful-avoidant attachment pattern, you might identify with some or all of the following characteristics in adulthood:

- In cases where physical or sexual abuse occurred in childhood or another intimate relationship, dissociation is common, especially in the face of conflict.
- You may experience the urge to fight, flee or freeze in relationships that lack intimacy.
- You could be overly self-focused and have a strong need to be in control.
- You may feel “checked out” generally, and especially in relationships.
- You might struggle with being impulsive or controlling your urges.
- You may have emotional flashbacks or revisit traumatic experiences in your mind.
- You may experience difficulty concentrating or generating a timeline of the past.
- You may be easily startled or alarmed
- You might be on hypervigilant for danger or shifts in others’ mood.
- You might experience the world as an unsafe place.
- Relationships might pose a conflict over wanting to be close and wanting to pull away.
- You could be prone to depression and anxiety.
- You may vacillate between aggressive and affectionate behavior, exhibiting unpredictable emotional outbursts.
- You might tend to feel victimized in relationships, making other people “bad”
- You may try to “test” a partner to see if they will abandon you, proving your hypothesis right and keeping your attachment injuries fresh
- You may prefer to be alone, keeping your circle small and relationships surface level.

Navigating relationships and intimacy feels like dangerous territory to people with fearful-avoidant attachment, but progress and is possible and with long-term dedicated effort, healing can occur!

### *Healing Fearful-Avoidant 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:

- Often, fearful-avoidant attachment comes from attachment injuries passed from parent to child. Breaking this cycle begins with acknowledging its impact on you and your adult relationships.
- Understand how your fearful-avoidant attachment shows up in your inner world (your mind and body) and your outer world (relationships, communication style, perceptions of others)
- Educate your partner about your attachment pattern and your fears around intimacy. This is also good practice for vulnerability and stating your needs, and it gives your partner an opportunity to succeed in a relationship with you.
- Develop a mindfulness practice – the practice of being present and aware of one's emotions. This can be a good way to work on building up your self-awareness and understanding why you make the decisions you make.
- Work on shifting from reacting to responding in your relationships. Next time you feel a partner coming too close or moving too far away, listen to what each of you is saying and how it's said. Sometimes the words spoken in an emotional situation triggers a fight or flee response.

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- Focus on self-compassion. True healing occurs when you learn to be the loving parent that you never had to yourself. Reflect on the following: In what ways did your childhood hurt you? How can you give *yourself* the security, support, and validation you never had?
  - Identify those in your life with whom you feel safe. This could be a friend, partner, or even a beloved pet.
  - Develop an awareness of the sensations that arise in your body when you think of those safe individuals. Do you feel warm? Calm? More relaxed?
  - Identify allies who have your back and can help ground your emotions, keep the threat response in check, and give you a safe home base.
  - Find a therapist with expertise in attachment, enroll in an online attachment course, or read a book on attachment. You may also want to find a trauma support group or post-trauma support group.

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### *Loving a Fearful-Avoidant Partner*

Loving someone with a fearful-avoidant pattern requires understanding your partner's needs and learning how they are wired for love – so you're in the right place! Learning about your partner's unique childhood experiences and being able to identify their attachment patterns can help you navigate behavior that might feel like a roller coaster ride at times.

Due to the severe nature of this pattern's attachment injury, you will likely need to enlist the help of a couples' therapist with expertise in attachment trauma. Aside from professional help, as a partner, you can help your loved one on their path to healing by engaging in some personal exercises at home.

Always be clear with your communication and avoid sending mixed messages, which can be confusing for a partner who is already deeply confused due to their fearful-avoidant attachment. Speak to your loved one in a calm and consistent tone of voice. Raising your voice, using an angry tone, or shouting can cause your partner to retreat or dissociate, rendering them useless until they are able to ground themselves once more (something that they also need to learn). Take your time, go slowly, and allow your partner the space to be able to regulate their emotions.

It is important always, but especially with people who have abuse histories to practice safe touch when your partner feels able to receive. When being physically intimate, check in with your partner and ask, "Does this feel ok and comfortable to you?" It's imperative that you teach your partner that you are their safe home base with affectionate and safe touch.

Finally, look at your partner with a loving eye gaze. This is referred to as the "Kind Eyes" exercise. Practicing this essential contact can help your partner to connect and be present, especially when having difficult or emotionally charged conversations.