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## Introduction to Secure Attachment

Topics covered:

- What is Attachment?
- Developmental Conditions That Lead to Secure Attachment
- Characteristics of Secure Attachment in Adults

### *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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### *Developmental Conditions That Lead to Secure 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.

### *Characteristics of Secure Attachment in Adults*

In adults, secure attachment with an intimate partner can look like a grown-up version of children and parents at the park. When conflict occurs within the relationship, they are able to soothe themselves as well as their partner. The securely attached adult is confident that their partner still loves them, and that the disagreement does not necessarily lead to disconnection or the end of the relationship. The shared connection is based on a level of trust and attunement that is stronger than the day-to-day pitfalls that relationships often endure.

Indicators of a securely attached individual:

- Self-assured and does not usually become jealous
- Comfortable opening up to others, shares feelings with partner and friends
- Levelheaded and respectful in heated discussions; knows how to compromise
- Empathetic toward others; compassionate toward self and others
- Seeks out social support and asks for help when needed
- Have a strong sense of self-esteem and respects others.
- Healthy self-esteem
- Able to self-regulate emotions
- Sets and respects boundaries
- Prefers commitment

Securely attached couples seek to have their needs and those of their partner's met, they also seek to repair and comfort, and to understand and be understood. They enjoy healthy intimacy – both physically and emotionally – with their partners.

More indications of a securely attached couple:

- Long-term, trusting relationship emphasizing protection, safety, and empowerment.
- Know when to give each other space and when it's time to reconnect.
- Honor both their own needs and the needs of their partner.
- Engage in healthy social connections that maintain relationship boundaries.
- Seek to initiate repair and accepts repair attempts.
- Enjoy playing and laughing together.
- Considers their partner in a positive light most of the time.
- Knows they, too, deserve respect and will not "settle."