

The 4 Adult Attachment Styles

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Attachment wounds can come early in life when a child's emotional and/or physical needs are consistently unmet. A child whose needs are unmet (physically or emotionally) will find strategies to attempt to meet those needs. These strategies, however unsuccessful, may continue to be utilized late into life, sometimes over the course of a lifetime. This is basis of attachment theory.

In adults, these attachment style are not fixed, and can vary from relationship to relationship, but is often influenced by whatever strategy was utilized as a child. Fortunately, healing attachment wounds is possible.

Understanding the basic styles of attachment can help you to understand your own attachment style and how it might be affecting your relationships. It is also the first step to healing any attachment wounds you may have.

The following scenarios (not based on any specific person or situation) describe the 4 attachment styles found in adults and how they play out in relationships:

1. Anxious Pre-occupied Attachment Style

Arlo pressed 'send' on the 7th text to his girlfriend that morning. He was furious. She had cancelled on him last minute, the night before, and instead went to visit her sister who'd said she'd been in an accident. "It was a fender bender, nothing serious. She's a terrible driver, it serves her right," he thought. Bree had no need to go running to her incompetent sister when she and Arlo had already made plans. Arlo had told Bree through the course of his texts that she needed to get her priorities straight. That he had made the reservations for them and had had to cancel them and spent the evening alone.

When Bree had called around 11pm, Arlo had been drunk. She was angry with him as he had work the next day. Arlo told her that he wouldn't have been drinking if she had kept her promise to be there for him. Arlo was embarrassed to be caught drunk but felt better blaming it on Bree. Bree had gone on and on about "needing to be there for her sister" and about Arlo's "neediness." This enraged Arlo and he set about texting her about all the times that he had done things for her, when she was needy, picking up her dog from the vet, bringing her food when she was sick, etc. Noting that if was so self sufficient, than maybe she should be single.

Somewhere in the back of his mind Arlo knew that things were not going well, that his texts were not helping, but he felt out of control and just wanted to get all the emotions out there because they were too much for him. He'd felt abandoned and betrayed. He felt like second choice and that his needs didn't matter and told himself that his girlfriend always put others ahead of him. This made him feel worse. All these thoughts only confirmed his fears that you cannot trust people, that they will always let you down.

Often people with the anxious, pre-occupied attachment style responded to early experiences of unreliable caregivers, who were neglectful or abusive, by keeping the volume and intensity of their needs consistently high in order to get the very minimum of their needs met. They are pre-occupied with their unmet needs. They are often ashamed of being unable to manage their own emotional needs and so may project this onto others, blaming others, gas lighting, etc. but afraid that if their needs are not loud and obvious, they won't get any connection with others. In David Wallin's book, Attachment in Psychotherapy, he refers to people with a highly anxious, pre-occupied attachment style as people who can feel but struggle to deal.

Sometimes, this style emerges in response to an adult attachment injury, or numerous injuries, such as being the victim of infidelity or abuse, physical or non physical.

2. Dismissive Avoidant Attachment Style

Faye felt her irritation rise as her fourteen year old daughter came to her with her eyes full of tears. "Mom, Selena invited all of the girls except for me to her party. She said that she couldn't invite everyone, but I've been her closest friend since the start of this year." Faye replied, "It doesn't matter, you need to study anyways, your grades on the last report card were not up to snuff."

Faye turned away and went back to her computer. There was an email from her sister asking if Faye could co-sign a loan for renovations for the 'granny suite' she was building onto her house for their mother. Faye had already contributed to a downpayment and wondered why her mother had not planned better for herself instead of expecting her children to take care of her.

A memory of her mother's face, silent and accusatory, came to Faye's mind, unbidden. She was 14 year old and had just been slapped by her father, when she told him about the boy that took advantage of her. "You should have known better than to go out with him, you just led him on." Faye remembers thinking, "I will never make a mistake again and if I do, I will not ask anyone else to clean it up for me."

Faye had been successful in academics and then in business. She considered herself a strong independent person who 'did not suffer fools' and knew better than to rely on others. She wished she was closer to her daughter but couldn't shake the irritation she felt when she saw how vulnerable and weak her daughter was. Faye told herself that her daughter needed to be more independent and that coddling her would not prepare her for the real world.

When a child's emotional and/or physical needs go unmet, or when bids to meet a need is punished, some children choose to ignore those needs in the hopes that they will go away. A child who has experienced a major loss or trauma may choose this strategy as a result of feeling overwhelmed by their emotions in order to keep them manageable.

As adults, this can create difficulties in connecting to others and cause us to push away any signs of needs in others as these are things we've chosen to reject in ourselves. Wallin refers to people with extremely dismissive, avoidant attachment styles as people who can deal but not feel.

3. Fearful Avoidant Attachment (disorganized)

Tyson had just returned from a three week shift on the rigs. He heard the frustration and hurt in his wife's voice when he told her he had planned a weekend away with his buddies to go hunting. It was hunting season, it didn't last forever and he wanted to get out their the first weekend in case they didn't get anything so they could plan for the next weekend. She'd said something about the kids waiting for him, etc., etc. He'd hang out with them when he got back. He didn't know what the big deal was.

The night he came back he was looking forward to making love to his wife. She seemed a bit standoffish when he got home. After the kids were down she told him that she had just found out that her project was due a week earlier than she had thought and that she was going to need to stay up late to work on it. She asked if Tyson could get the kids ready in the morning so that she could get to the office earlier. Tyson was felt heat rising in his chest. "I'm finally here, after you go on and on about me being away and now you're going to ignore me? What do you want from me?!" The argument continued until late into the night, even after his wife asked repeatedly for him to let it go, told him that she was done discussing it. It ended when she left the house "to get some space" around 2am.

At this point, Tyson went online and typed in his ex's name. Her status showed "in a relationship." Tyson thought of how he had begged her to let him stay after she told him that she'd been cheating on him for months, that he'd been a rebound relationship and that she didn't want him around. He'd never really been happy in that relationship, and had, himself, treated it pretty casually, but something changed when she tried to break it off. That was 9 years ago. He still checked her status on occasion. He didn't know why.

Children whose needs have been met intermittently, or not at all, may have difficulty discerning ways to connect with others. In children, this can become what is known as a "disorganized attachment." As adults this may look like missing opportunities for connection and seeking connection in ways, and at times, that are misaligned with others availability or ability to provide them. This results in the person having their connection needs unmet and opens them up to further attachment injuries. For some people, seeking connection with inappropriate others may also lead to further trauma and abuse.

4. Secure Attachment Style

Ricky leaned on Dakota's shoulder. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to come across so harshly. I think I'm still processing the situation with my boss."

Dakota continued to stare ahead without looking at Ricky. "When you talk to me like that I feel like I'm a kid again. I just freeze and then everything goes kind of blurry, like, not literally, but I just can't think straight."

Ricky sat up. "Okay." She waited.

Dakota was tearing up. "I know I shouldn't be so sensitive..."

"No, it's okay, I get it."

"Sometimes I'm afraid you're going to get tired of me, find someone else. When you talk to me like that I'm worried that my fears are coming true."

"I'm not leaving, baby, and I am for sure not tired of you."

Dakota started really crying. "I know, and I believe you, it's just so hard to imagine, I keep waiting for something bad to happen, like this is all too good to be true, like I don't deserve you or something."

"It's not about deserving. I love you, I love being with you, I know that's hard for you to believe sometimes, but I'm obviously far from perfect, you know. Hell, I just bit my girlfriends' head off for forgetting the eggs after she went and did all the grocery shopping for us, and you're still here." Dakota let out a tearful chuckle. Ricky went on, "It's not fair that I took out my frustration on you and I am sorry for that."

"It's ok."

Dakota took Ricky's hand. "Ricky?"

Yeah?"

"Let's go make supper."

Secure attachment does not mean that you will never hurt anyone, or be hurt by anyone, but that you can work to repair hurts without being overwhelmed by fears of abandonment or with anger which is often related to shame. Secure attachment can be fostered in relationships where people learn to be attuned to the needs of others and respond appropriately both with generosity and with good, appropriate boundaries. It is not an easy road, particularly for those who have experienced significant attachment injuries, but with healthy emotional risk-taking, with safe, securely attached people, it can be developed.