

# Attachment Theory

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Attachment theory is an area of psychology that describes the nature of emotional attachment between humans. It begins as children with our attachment to our parents. The nature of this attachment, and how well it's fostered and cared for, will then determine the nature of our attachment to romantic partners later in our life.

Attachment theory began in the 1950s and has since amassed a small mountain of research behind it. Two researchers named Bowlby and Ainsworth independently found that the nature in which infants get their needs met by their parents will determine their "attachment strategy" throughout their lives.<sup>1</sup> Your attachment strategy probably explains a great deal of why your relationships have succeeded/failed in the manner they did, why you're attracted to the people you are attracted to, and the nature of the relationship problems that come up again and again for you.

## ATTACHMENT TYPES

According to psychologists, there are four attachment strategies people adopt: secure, anxious, avoidant, and anxious-avoidant.<sup>2</sup>

**Secure:** People with secure attachment strategies are comfortable displaying interest and affection. They are also comfortable being alone and independent. They're able to correctly prioritize their relationships within their life and tend to draw clear boundaries and stick to them. Secure attachment types obviously make the best romantic partners, family members, and even friends. They're capable of accepting rejection and moving on despite the pain, but are also capable of being loyal and sacrificing when necessary. They have little issue trusting people they're close to and are trustworthy themselves. According to research, over 50% of the population are secure attachment types.<sup>3</sup> Secure attachment is developed in childhood by infants who regularly get their needs met, as well as receive ample quantities of love and affection.

**Anxious:** Anxious attachment types are often nervous and stressed about their relationships. They need constant reassurance and affection from their partner. They have trouble being alone or single. They'll often succumb to unhealthy or abusive relationships. They have trouble trusting people, even if they're close to them. Their behavior can be irrational, sporadic, and overly-emotional and complain that everyone of the opposite sex are cold and heartless. This is the girl who calls you 36 times in one night wondering why you didn't call her back. Or the guy who follows his girlfriend to work to make sure she's not flirting with any other men. Women are more likely to be anxious types than men. Anxious attachment strategies are developed in childhood by infants who receive love and care with unpredictable sufficiency.

**Avoidant:** Avoidant attachment types are extremely independent, self-directed, and often uncomfortable with intimacy. They're commitment-phobes and experts at rationalizing their way out of any intimate situation. They regularly complain about feeling "crowded" or "suffocated" when people try to get close to them. In every relationship, they always have an exit strategy. Always. And they often construct their lifestyle in such a way to avoid commitment or too much intimate contact. This is the guy who works 80 hours a week and gets annoyed when women he dates want to see him more than once on the weekend. Or the girl who dates dozens of guys over the course of years but tells them all she doesn't want "anything serious" and inevitably ends up ditching them when she gets tired of them. Men are more likely than women to be avoidant types. Avoidant attachment strategy is developed in

childhood by infants who only get some of their needs met while the rest are neglected (for instance, he/she gets fed regularly, but is not held enough).

**Anxious-Avoidant:** Anxious-avoidant attachment types (also known as the “fearful type”) bring together the worst of both worlds. Anxious-avoidants are not only afraid of intimacy and commitment, but they distrust and lash out emotionally at anyone who tries to get close to them. Anxious-avoidants often spend much of their time alone and miserable, or in abusive or dysfunctional relationships. According to studies, only a small percentage of the population qualifies as anxious-avoidant types, and they typically have a multitude of other emotional problems in other areas of their life (i.e., substance abuse, depression, etc.<sup>4</sup>). Anxious-avoidant types develop from abusive or terribly negligent childhoods.

As with most psychological profiling, these types aren’t monolithic qualities, but scalar in nature and somewhat independent. For instance, according to the book *Attached* by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller, I scored about 75% on the secure scale, 90% on the avoidant scale, and 10% on the anxious scale. And my guess is that 3-5 years ago, the secure would have been lower and the anxious would have been higher, although my avoidant has always been solidly maxed out (as any of my ex-girlfriends will tell you).

The point is, you can exhibit tendencies of more than one strategy depending on the situation and at different frequencies. Although, everyone has one dominant strategy. So “secure” types will still exhibit some avoidant or anxious behaviors, “anxious” types will sometimes exhibit secure behaviors, etc. It’s not all or nothing. Both anxious types and avoidant types will still score a certain amount on the secure scale. But anxious-avoidants will score high on both anxious and avoidant types and low on the secure scale.

## RELATIONSHIP CONFIGURATIONS

Different attachment types tend to configure themselves into relationships in predictable ways. Secure types are capable of dating (or handling, depending on your perspective) both anxious and avoidant types. They’re comfortable enough with themselves to give anxious types all of the reassurance they need and to give avoidant types the space they need without feeling threatened themselves.

Anxious and avoidants frequently end up in relationships with one another more often than they end up in relationships with their own types.<sup>5</sup> That may seem counter-intuitive, but there’s order behind the madness. Avoidant types are so good at putting others off that oftentimes it’s only the anxious types who are willing to stick around and put in the extra effort to get them to open up. For instance, a man who is avoidant may be able to successfully shirk a secure woman’s pushes for increased intimacy. After which, the secure woman will accept the rejection and move on. But an anxious woman will only become more determined by a man who pushes her away. She’ll resort to calling him for weeks or months on end until he finally caves and commits to her. This gives the avoidant man the reassurance he needs that he can behave independently and the anxious woman will wait around for him. Often these relationships produce some magnitude of dysfunctional equilibrium as they fall into a pattern of chaser-chasee, which are both roles the anxious and avoidant types need in order to feel comfortable with intimacy.

Anxious-avoidants only date each other or the least secure of the anxious types or avoidant types. These relationships are very messy, if not downright abusive or negligent.

What all of this adds up to, which is the same conclusion I propose in my book, is that in relationships, insecurity finds insecurity and security finds security, even if those insecurities don’t always look the same. To put it bluntly, to everyone who has emailed me over the years

complaining that all of the people they meet are insecure, or have trust issues, or are needy and manipulative... well, let's just say I have some bad news for you.

## KNOWING AND CHANGING YOUR ATTACHMENT TYPE

If you don't have an idea of what your attachment style is yet and want to take a test, you can take this one [<http://www.yourpersonality.net/attachment/>]. Please note that my score differed slightly on the online version from the one I took in the book mentioned above. On the online version, I came out solidly secure with only mild avoidance. The one I took in the book told me I was solidly avoidant and mildly secure.

If you don't want to take the test (takes 5-10 minutes), the gist of it is this: if you're consistently avoiding commitment, avoiding your romantic partners, shutting them out, or not sharing things with them, then you're probably pretty avoidant. If you're constantly worrying about your partners, feel like they don't like you as much as you like them, want to see them 24/7, need constant reassurance from them, then you're probably anxious. If you're comfortable dating people, being intimate with them and are able to draw clear boundaries in your relationships, but also don't mind being alone, then you're probably secure.

The good news is that your attachment style can change over time — although it's slow and difficult.

Research shows that an anxious or avoidant who enters a long-term relationship with a secure can be "raised up" to the level of the secure over an extended period of time. Unfortunately, an anxious or avoidant is also capable of "bringing down" a secure to their level of insecurity if they're not careful. Also, extreme negative life events, such a divorce, death of child, serious accident, etc., can cause a secure attachment type to fall into a more insecure attachment type.<sup>6</sup>

For instance, a man may be more or less secure, get married to an anxious type, bring her up to a more secure level, but when they run into money trouble she falls back to her anxious level, cheats on him and then divorces him for all of his money, sending him into a tailspin of avoidance. He goes on to ignore intimacy and pump-and-dump women for the next 10 years, afraid to become intimate with any of them.

If you're beginning to think that anxious and/or avoidant behavior corresponds to the fake alpha syndrome and other insecure behavior I describe in men in my book [*models*], then you're correct. Our attachment styles are intimately connected with our confidence in ourselves and others.

Psychologists Bartholomew and Horowitz have hypothesized a model showing that one's attachment strategy corresponds to the degree of positive/negative self-image, and the positive/negative image of others.<sup>7</sup>

*Secures* exhibit both positive self-images and positive perceptions of others. *Anxious* types exhibit negative self-images, but positive perceptions of others (hence their needy behavior). *Avoidants* exhibit positive self-images and negative perceptions of others (hence their arrogance and fear of commitment), and *anxious-avoidants* exhibit negative perceptions of just about everything and everyone (hence their inability to function in relationships).

Using this model as a roadmap, one can begin to navigate oneself to a more secure attachment type. Anxious types can work on developing themselves, creating healthy boundaries and fostering a healthy self-image. One of my most common pieces of dating advice is for men to find something they're passionate about and good at and make that a focal point of their life rather than women. Avoidant types can work on opening themselves up

to others, and enrich their relationships through sharing themselves more. Another one of my most common pieces of advice to men is that it's your responsibility to find something great in everyone you meet. It's not their responsibility to show you. Become curious. Stop being judgmental.

And of course, some of you may be reading this and thinking, "I like being alone and being able to sleep with whoever I want. I wouldn't change a thing." And it's true — many people lead happy, successful lives as avoidant or anxious types. Some even have successful long-term relationships as an anxious or avoidant. But research shows secure are consistently more happy and feel more supported,<sup>8</sup> are less likely to become depressed,<sup>9</sup> are healthier,<sup>10</sup> retain more stable relationships, and become more successful<sup>11</sup> than the other types. And I can tell you from my personal experience, I've felt myself drift out of a strong avoidant (and slightly anxious) attachment type to a more secure attachment type over the past six years of working on myself in this area. And I can unequivocally say that I'm happier and more fulfilled in my relationships and with the women I date now than I ever was back then. I wouldn't trade it back for anything.

## Footnotes

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