

Different Attachment Styles

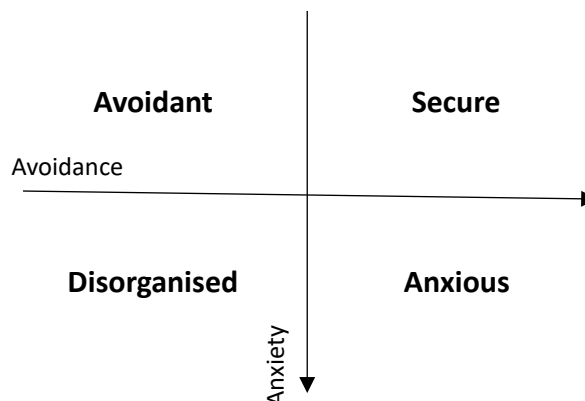
Because parents behave in different ways towards their babies, children will respond by developing different types of 'attachment style'.

Attachment styles remain with us throughout our lives, and influence the way we relate to other people and with ourselves, as well as how we express our feelings.

Each style is related to a particular manner of parenting and quality of early relationships in infancy. There are four main attachment styles:

- Secure
- Anxious
- Avoidant
- Disorganised

People rarely exist in a state of being exactly one or another different style of attachment. Instead, imagine that attachment style exists on a spectrum, with people experiencing a mixture or different intensities of attachment style.



Let's look at each of these styles in more detail.

Secure Attachment



People who possess a secure attachment style enjoy connecting with other people in an open and self-assured way. They can express a need for love and affection, and have relationships in which they feel valued and supported. People with a secure attachment trust that people will not abandon or mistreat them; they consider themselves worthy of loving relationships and will not long suffer relationships which lack mutual respect. They are comfortable in offering care and support to others.

People who experience a secure attachment style had a close bond with a primary caregiver in early life. As a baby, they had at least one adult who was paying attention and responding to their emotional and physical needs. This could include feeding the baby when it is hungry, smiling at each other whilst playing, or offering loving physical comfort when upset. Whilst securely attached babies display distress when separated from their attachment figure, they are quickly able to calm down and relax once reunited with them. They can confidently enjoy exploring their surroundings, without feeling anxious that their loved ones will abandon them. They are cautious of strangers, but will relax if the new person shows warmth and signs that they can be trusted.

Anxious Attachment



People who have an anxious attachment style fear other people will abandon them and that their needs for emotional and social connection won't be met.

They often feel anxious in romantic relationships, and may feel frequently overwhelmed by difficult feelings, as they struggle to regulate their emotions in stressful situations.

People with an anxious attachment style may interpret ambiguous situations as negative, due to early experiences of people being unreliable. For example, an anxiously attached person may believe that because their friend took longer than usual to reply to their text message, their friend must be purposefully ignoring them and be about to end their friendship. The anxiously attached person will become severely emotionally distressed and may display 'protest behaviours' such as shouting, throwing things, or giving the friend the 'silent treatment'. In reality, the friend just had a very busy day at work.

As infants, people with an anxious attachment style had caregivers who were not able to consistently and reliably give them attention and meet their emotional and physical needs. It may be that parents were struggling with mental health or relationship difficulties of their own, and were subsequently unable to be fully present to provide consistent loving care to their baby. These infants therefore grow to doubt whether other people will be able to look after them and stay with them. They often believe that they are to blame for not being reliably cared for as an infant, and view themselves as unlovable, even though this is untrue.

Avoidant Attachment



People with an avoidant attachment style often struggle to display vulnerability and establish close social connections. They often detach from their emotional experience and prefer to keep people 'at arm's length' rather than seek out meaningful relationships.

They may appear aloof and unfeeling to other people. However, deep down they have an unmet need for love and closeness, but they do not believe that other people are capable of satisfying this need, so they prefer to remain distant from others to avoid the pain of expected disappointment or rejection.

During infancy, people with an avoidant attachment style typically had parents who were consistently unable to meet their needs for attention and care. Their parents may have felt too overwhelmed by their own difficulties and ignored their baby's cries for attention. Over time, these babies grow to believe that they are unlovable and that people will always let them down, so it is best not to depend upon others for closeness, affection or care.

To cope with the pain of having consistently unmet needs as babies, people with an avoidant attachment style have learned to disconnect from their inner world, and thus have a harder time knowing and expressing their thoughts and feelings.

Disorganised Attachment



People with a disorganised attachment style experience a mixture of anxious and avoidant attachment style tendencies. People with disorganised attachment may appear confusing to other people, as their behaviour seemingly randomly changes from anxious and emotionally explosive, to withdrawn and emotionally shutdown.

This attachment style is least common and typically a result of childhood abuse and neglect.

As babies, people with a disorganised attachment style had parents who were frightening and unreliable carers. Disorganised attached infants are forced to depend upon an adult who is also a cause of fear and harm.

To cope with this, they display both avoidant ways of managing distress, as well as anxious strategies to gain attention and affection. They also experience dissociative symptoms like physically freezing or psychologically detaching from reality in response to stress. These reactions enabled the person to survive their abusive or neglectful childhoods. However, as adults, this attachment style keeps them from feeling safe and calm in relationships and may also prompt them to seek out social connections which are exploitative or otherwise harmful, as this feels familiar to them.

Neurobiological Impact of Attachment

Scientists used to believe that the human brain grows only according to the genetic material we inherited from our parents. No matter how we were treated and what we witnessed as children, our brains would only be influenced by genetics.

Modern science has revealed, however, that brain growth is shaped not only by genetics, but also by the environment.

Human beings possess a highly adaptable mind, which enables us to grow into a person that is most likely to survive in their specific environment and culture. Babies grow millions of new brain cells every day; our brains double in size by the time we are one-year-old. The environment we are born into, and the experience we have with our caregivers, shapes the way our brains grow. As babies, our brains are most adaptive that at any other point in our life. In psychology, we call this 'neuroplasticity'.



In normal circumstances, a human baby will adapt to a healthy and loving environment created by their caregivers and grow into a child with millions of brain cells (which are called 'neurons') that can communicate rapidly with the areas of the brain which shape our personality, our decision-making, and how we experience the world.

A positive and caring environment in early life means a baby's brain will grow into an adult brain that primed to be productive, self-assured, thoughtful, motivated, connected to others, and live a meaningful life.



If we experience an unhappy or damaging environment as a baby – for example, if our parents are not able to offer consistent love and care – then our brains will adapt to a world which is scary, isolating, and ignores our emotional needs. Our brains will grow into organs that are primed for physical, emotional, and social survival in a world which is dangerous and uncaring. This kind of brain development increases the risk of this baby experiencing struggles with their relationships and possibly mental health difficulties in adolescence and adulthood.

As babies, we are born with an abundance of brain cells – in fact, between the ages of two and ten, half the number of connections between brain cells (which we call ‘synapses’) will die. This is a normal and healthy part of development. Unused brain cells will die, whilst used ones grow and survive.

In psychology, we call this ‘synaptic pruning’.

This means that if a baby feels loved and cared for by its parents, the associated brain cells and brain regions for love, social connection and emotional regulation will grow, and we will have an easier time managing our feelings and giving and receiving love as adults.

However, if a baby feels afraid and unloved, the brain cells and areas in the brain associated with love and connection won’t grow. They will therefore find regulating their emotions and connecting socially much harder as adults. Conversely, the brain cells for babies who are neglected and abused are heavily stimulated, meaning that as grown-ups, they will have much larger ‘fear centres’ in the brain (the part called the ‘amygdala’, which is where the brain processes feelings) and will become more easily afraid. They will find it more challenging to feel relaxed on a day-to-day basis than other people.

It is important to emphasise that it is not a person’s fault if their brain has developed a certain way in response to their experiences as a baby. In fact, this is something human beings – and many other animal species – have been doing across the course of evolutionary history. This process is your brain trying to grow into an organ that will equip the rest of your body with the best chance of surviving in your specific environment.



A baby’s brain that grows a large amygdala is attempting to develop a physiological system that is more aware of potential threat, as the brain has detected through experiences of parental neglect or abuse, that the world is a frightening and threatening place. If the brain had ‘ignored’ this environment, then the baby might have developed a brain which was overly trusting of all people, which would have diminished the chances of surviving in such a hostile world.