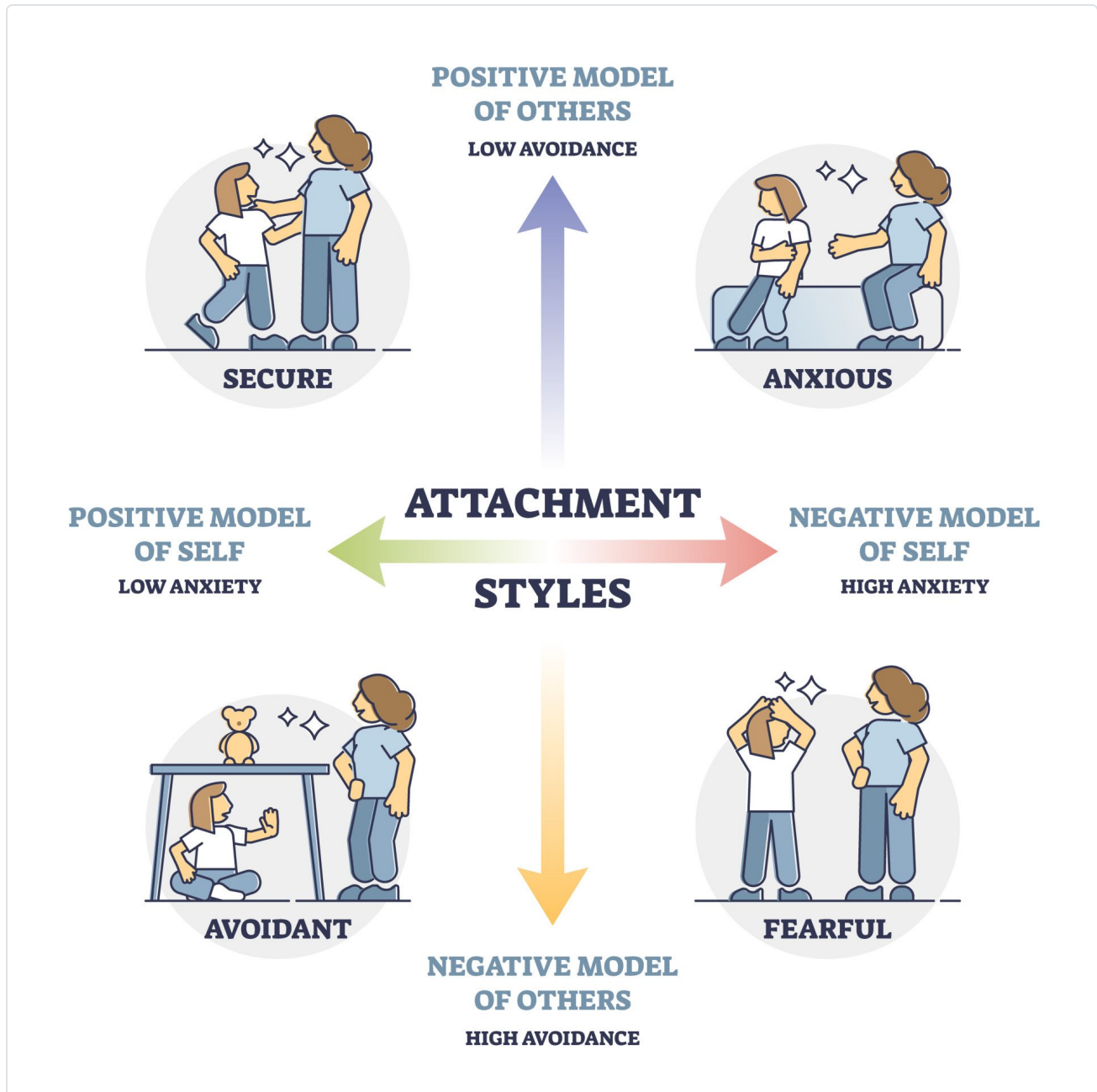


Anxious Attachment Style: Signs In Adults, How It Develops & How To Cope

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Anxious attachment style is characterized by a strong desire for closeness, fear of abandonment, and heightened emotional responses in relationships. Individuals with this style often seek constant reassurance and may become overly dependent on their partners.

If you tend to feel insecure, worried about rejection, or clingy with romantic partners, you may have an anxious attachment style.



Around 20% of people develop an anxious attachment (Hazan & Shaver, 2017), which originates in unpredictable or insensitive parenting in childhood.

The good news is that with self-awareness and effort, it is possible to feel more secure. Having an anxious attachment style doesn't mean you can't have healthy, thriving relationships.

While it presents challenges, you can absolutely learn to manage anxious attachment and heal emotional wounds with the right strategies.

Signs Of Anxious Attachment in Adults

It might not always be easy to recognize an anxious attachment style in adults. Some of the key signs include:

Clinginess

- Needing constant contact and support from others
- A constant need for reassurance that you are good enough
- Hypersensitivity to rejection and abandonment
- Using physical closeness, like hugging or holding, as a tool to gain reassurance or reduce anxiety

Fear of abandonment

- Worried your partner might leave you (even in the absence of actual signs of relationship problems)
- High emotional reactivity when someone isn't available
- Afraid or incapable of being alone
- Sudden changes in a partner's behavior or mood might be perceived as signs of dwindling love or an impending breakup
- Feeling insecure or threatened by a partner's independence or time apart

Trust issues

- Due to fears of being rejected or deemed unworthy, you might become overly dependent or clingy in relationships.
- Experience heightened jealousy or perceive threats to your relationships even when there aren't any, leading to constant reassurances.
- Even if your partner is consistently loving and supportive, you find it hard to believe that this behavior will consistently continue long-term
- Difficulty letting your guard down with your partner due to trust issues

Emotional neediness (Dependence on Others for Self-worth)

- Craving for intimacy, while simultaneously fearing emotional rejection from a partner
- Needing regular affirmation and validation that you are loved, wanted, and not going to be abandoned

- Overly dependent on your partner for emotional support
- If my partner seeks independence or alone time, I might misconstrue it as a lack of interest or love
- Having difficulty setting and respecting boundaries

Feeling unworthy

- Negative self-view or self-worth
- Feeling unworthy of love and not good enough to be in a relationship (thinking you don't deserve your partner)
- Doubt your worthiness in a relationship, leading you to question why anyone would want to be with you, and fear your partner will soon recognize their "flaws" and leave
- Due to fear of negative outcomes or triggering conflicts, you might avoid honest conversations, even about your own needs or feelings.
- Small behaviors or comments from your partner might be overanalyzed, leading you to jump to negative conclusions
- The impulse to fix things and solve other people's problems at one's own expense
- A positive view of others
- Ruminates over and overanalyzes small things
- Tendency to blame yourself or feel responsible for problems in a relationship

ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT IN ADULTS

A constant need for reassurance

Needing a lot of contact and support

Very clingy

Fear of rejection

Ruminate and overanalyze

Emotionally sensitive

Emotional highs and lows

Afraid of being alone

Negative self-view



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Anxious attachment (also known as preoccupied attachment) is one of four attachment styles that people can develop. It is characterized by a fear of abandonment, a strong need for reassurance, and discomfort with too much independence in relationships.

Triggers of Anxious Attachment

In romantic relationships, anxious attachment can be triggered by the actions or perceived actions of a partner.

When triggered, someone with an anxious attachment style may become immediately emotional, jumping to worst-case scenarios about abandonment. They may demand constant reassurance from their partner, become clingy, or act out to regain closeness.

Since they may have difficulties regulating their emotions, they can appear overly dramatic or cry as a way to communicate their needs.

Some ways in which anxious attachment can be triggered include:

- **Inconsistent behavior** – e.g., if your partner usually gives you a kiss goodnight but then they do not do it one night or when your partner comes home later than expected.
- **Perceived distance or distraction** – e.g., your partner suddenly has more work responsibilities and spends time at home answering emails.
- **Forgetfulness** – e.g., your partner forgets that it is your anniversary or forgets to pick you up an item from the shop that you requested.
- **Not paying attention** – e.g., your partner spends a lot of time on their phone when you're together, or you get a new haircut, but your partner fails to notice anything new.
- **Not receiving enough attention** – e.g., your partner spends a lot of their free time socializing with friends instead of you.
- **Getting into arguments** – e.g., you argue with your partner about how they haven't washed the dishes, and you end up reacting by shouting and crying.
- **Having trust broken** – e.g., you find out that your partner lied about where they were last night.

These triggers can result in the anxiously attached person feeling even more insecure about their relationship and being filled with more self-doubt.

What Causes Anxious Attachment?

Anxious attachment is thought to stem from childhood and can stick with a person into adulthood.

While there is not always a clear-cut answer for why someone may develop an anxious attachment, it could be a result of some of the following factors:

Emotionally distant caregivers

If a parent or caregiver is distant or neglectful of the child's needs, the child will not feel a sense of security and stability.

Children who do not get their emotional needs met, especially when distressed or anxious, are likely to experience elevated levels of these emotions.

For example, if, as a child, your parent never comforted you when you were upset and instead walked off or gave you the silent treatment, this could increase feelings of anxiety and of not feeling safe with your parent.

This can continue throughout life in terms of friendships and romantic relationships in which others do not provide the comfort that the individual expects.

Inconsistent parenting

Parenting is inconsistent when there are times of support and responsiveness to the child's needs, but at other times, they are cold, insensitive, or emotionally unavailable.

For example, one time when you were angry as a child, your parent reassured you and talked you through your difficult feelings, but the next time it happened, they dismissed you and told you to 'get over it.'

The child may become confused about their relationship with a caregiver, sending mixed signals.

This inconsistency can make it difficult for the child to understand what their parent's behavior means and what kind of response to expect, resulting in insecurity and anxiety.

Caregiver's 'emotional hunger'

This is where caregivers seek emotional or physical closeness with the child for the purpose of satisfying their own needs. Because of this, they are neglecting the child's emotional and physical needs.

These caregivers may appear intrusive and preoccupied with their child's life and can be overprotective. They may replace the actual love and affection of their child with using the child to feed their own needs.

For example, your mother insists on being involved in all your activities with your school friends, wanting to know every detail, and gets upset when you are apart. She tells you that you are her ‘best friend in the whole world.’ As a result, you choose to spend most of your free time with your mother and feel guilty for spending time with others.

The child, therefore, does not get their needs met and may put everyone else’s needs above their own as this is what they have been used to.

Anxious caregivers

Commonly, children with an anxious attachment style are likely to have parents who are also anxiously attached.

This is likely not due to genetic factors; rather, it is a continuation of behavioral patterns repeated throughout generations.

Moreover, without management, the anxiously attached child may grow up to have their own children who are anxiously attached.

For example, your father does not like to do activities alone and will become distressed if he is left by himself and tends to be clingy with others. You assume this is typical behavior, and as a result, you also do not want to do activities alone.

How to Fix

It may not always be possible to heal an anxious attachment style, but there are some ways in which it can be managed to help you feel more secure in their relationships.

Practice awareness (identify triggers)

If you have an anxious attachment, you may be more likely to have automatic responses to negativity. However, gaining an awareness of these automatic responses can help you think of a healthier way to respond.

Take time to think about how you feel in a moment and what thoughts come up. Be aware of these thoughts and the meaning that is given to these thoughts. Then, you can consider the best way to respond.

If you feel that you find this difficult, you could even remove yourself from the situation before responding. Go for a walk to gather your thoughts before returning to the situation.

It's especially helpful to practice being aware of how you interact in relationships to avoid hurting someone's feelings.

Let's say your partner is late coming home from work one evening without calling or texting you. You immediately have the thought, "They don't care about me or respect my time." This makes you feel angry and hurt.

Instead of reacting right away, pause and try to identify the trigger. Recognize that your anxiety about their lack of communication is triggering an automatic negative assumption.

Dr. Nadine Macaluso has several worksheets on attachment styles and how to heal for better relationships [on her website](#).

Regulate your nervous system

Triggered anxious attachment can put you into fight, flight, or freeze mode. In this state, you cannot think clearly and are more likely to act on impulses. The best method of tackling this is to change your physiology.

Take some time to pause and breathe. You could even place your hands on your belly to connect with the breath. This will send a signal to the brain that you are safe.

When feeling anxious, it can also help to do something grounding so you feel less stuck in your thoughts. Doing exercise, yoga, getting a massage, or going for a walk in nature can help you to feel grounded.

"The first step is learning how to begin to identify your own needs well: what do I want in this situation, what would feel right for me, how do I feel in my body about this decision, does this feel like a good regulated decision or am I just sort of like a ping pong ball reacting?"

Dr Kim Sage, Clinical Psychologist

Reparent your inner child

Often, it can be beneficial to heal your inner child who first experienced an anxious attachment with a caregiver. This can be done by giving yourself the love, support, and kindness you did not receive as a child.

Be compassionate with yourself, forgive yourself for mistakes, check in with, and comfort yourself if this is what you need.

You can think of this as treating yourself like you would show kindness to an innocent child.

“If you could go back in time and ... bring your wisdom and your heart to yourself as a nine-year-old girl, what would you say to her?”

Dr. Diane Poole Heller, Attachment and Trauma Expert

Let's say you notice your partner seems distracted and less affectionate lately. Your inner child immediately thinks, “They don't love me anymore.”

Pause and tell yourself gently, “It's okay; I know that thought is scary, but we don't know what's going on yet. Let's talk to them before assuming the worst.” Then reassure yourself, “No matter what, I'll be okay. I'm strong and lovable.”

By reparenting with care instead of reacting from fear, you can have a constructive conversation and address the situation calmly.

There are several books to help reparent your inner child, such as the book, ['Inner Child'](#) by Tiffany Trieu, which offers journaling activities and reflective practices to help heal from difficult parenting.

Challenge your thoughts

When experiencing negative thought patterns, remind yourself that while they seem real, the thoughts are not necessarily true.

Do not believe every negative thought you have and instead try to challenge them when they come up.

Consider what solid evidence there is that your thoughts are true and whether there is a more likely explanation.

For example, if you have the thought, 'My partner is going to abandon me because I am unworthy,' try to provide evidence for and against this claim.

You may come to find that your partner has given you no reason to believe this, and if they were going to abandon you, then they would have done so a long time ago!

"It's really challenging those thoughts and also trying to find facts to back this up ... when you see something, let's say your boyfriend didn't answer or the guy you're dating didn't answer you... he could have a work meeting that day; maybe it's a different schedule."

Sabrina Zohar, Dating Coach

[You can use guidance from CBT worksheets to help guide you through challenging your thoughts.](#)

Self-care

Try to take some time every day to do something to take care of yourself. Be consistent with this to soothe your anxiety.

Self-care activities such as engaging in your hobby, taking a long bath, or watching your favorite TV show can help reduce stress and tension.

Self-care can also build internal resources necessary to handle anxiety, such as resilience and recognizing self-worth.

Externalize your feelings

Letting go of your thoughts and putting them into something meaningful can be a healthy way to manage strong emotions. This could be expressed through creating artwork, movement, or music.

Keeping a journal is a helpful method for getting out your emotions, and it may help you recognize some patterns in your thoughts and behaviors.

You could even journal from the perspective of your inner child, writing down why they are sad and what they need.

You can then write from the perspective of an empowered adult self to pass on wisdom, healing, and advice to the inner child.

The way in which you express your emotions does not have to be neat or coherent; even if you just scribble down words on a piece of paper, it can be enough to put a label on what you are feeling.

Practice mindful communication

You can prepare yourself for meaningful conversations ahead of time by exploring nonviolent communication.

This can help you to approach the conversation with honesty as well as kindness so you can make requests without coming across as needy or controlling.

Dr Marshall Rosenberg's book 'Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life' provides guidance for expressing your needs to your partner in an empathetic and healthy way.

Take responsibility in the relationship

Make an effort to give your partner space and avoid smothering them or making unfair demands. Trust is built gradually, so have patience.

Your partner is not responsible for your anxiety. Owning your feelings and coping with them in a healthy way will help create secure bonds.

Dating coach Sabrina Zohar suggests working on building healthy boundaries in relationships. She suggests looking at where you may be overgiving or sacrificing yourself and starting to pull back when this happens.

Build a supportive relationship with your partner so that you can openly discuss times when you feel triggered by your anxious attachment:

“Learn how to reach out and say, hey, I’m feeling a little anxious right now, but I’m having this thought: would you mind if I shared it with you, or what do you think about that... working on your communication skills with everyone before you kind of jump to conclusions.”

Dr Kim Sage, Clinical Psychologist

Consider therapy

If you need extra support with your anxious attachment style, you can seek help from a therapist. Through therapy, you can learn to recognize your attachment patterns, examine your feelings about yourself and learn to approach relationships with others healthily.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a therapy that focuses on identifying and replacing negative thought patterns and behaviors with healthier ones.

Interpersonal therapy (IPT) helps individuals improve their interpersonal relationships and social interactions.

Also, psychodynamic psychotherapy helps people to focus on unconscious emotional dynamics and can help to examine how attachment styles may present in the therapy relationship itself.

Self-acceptance

Having an anxious attachment style is not something to feel ashamed of or defective over.

While the anxieties and intense fears of abandonment can feel painful, this attachment style also has positive qualities.

People with anxious styles tend to be very caring, empathetic partners who desire closeness and intimacy. Their heightened sensitivity helps them tune into others' feelings and needs.

Rather than judging yourself, accept that your attachment style developed as an adaptation to your life experiences.

“Honor that parts of this style are really beautiful; they’re about being loving and being a good caretaker and being mindful of other people... you’re probably overly sensitive to the world and to others, but there is a beauty in that.”

Dr Kim Sage, Clinical Psychologist

With self-awareness and commitment, you can modify unhealthy relational patterns and develop a more secure attachment over time. The key is being patient with yourself and believing you are worthy of love.

Relationships with Anxiously Attached Adults

Anxious attachment style in romantic relationships can lead to intense stress for both the anxious person and their partner, often resulting in a cycle where anxious individuals may form relationships with avoidant partners.

Anxious attachment impacts relationships in the following ways:

- **Clinginess:** Anxious individuals tend to become fixated and desire fast commitment, struggling with long-distance relationships.
- **Excessive preoccupation:** Anxious individuals may obsess over their partner, projecting idealized expectations and elevating anxiety levels.
- **Fear of rejection:** Anxious individuals constantly worry about losing their partner and blame themselves for any perceived rejection.
- **Constant reassurance-seeking:** Anxious individuals have a strong need for reassurance, which can strain the relationship.
- **Emotional instability:** Anxious individuals experience emotional ups and downs, making the relationship feel unpredictable and stressful.
- **Feeling underappreciated:** Anxious individuals often feel unappreciated and may accuse their partner of being untrustworthy if their emotional needs are not consistently met.

Two people with anxious attachment styles can date, but this may present unique challenges that require extra effort and understanding from both partners.

Can Attachment Styles be Changed?

Sometimes change can happen when someone who is anxiously attached is in a relationship with someone who is securely attached.

Having a partner who has a secure attachment style can facilitate emotional closeness and a sense of calmness and stability for the anxiously attached. This could help to shift their perception and develop new patterns of thinking and behavior.

Being aware of and making a conscious effort to change negative behavioral patterns can make someone more mindful of how they act in relationships with others. It is important to recognize that the past does not have to predict the present and future experiences.

Although it may not always be possible to change an attachment type that has been present since childhood, anxiously attached individuals can work to feel more secure in themselves and their relationships.

It is not an easy and passive process and will require much conscious effort and self-awareness.

Further Information

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