

## SELF HELP

# Insecure attachments: Explanation for relationship problems

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In this month's article I will continue discussing attachment styles. This time the focus will be on insecure attachment styles in children and adults.



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Attachment styles describe the characteristic manner in which people relate to others close to them, i.e., their "attachment figures."

Children develop different styles of attachment based on experiences and interactions with their primary caregivers.

Secure attachments are the healthiest forms of attachment because children know that they can turn to attachment figures as needed and will consistently have their physical and emotional needs met, promoting an internal sense of safety, security, and the understanding of give and take in adulthood.

Securely attached children and adults who were securely attached as children are more able to try new things, recover from failure, and regulate their emotions than individuals with insecure attachments.

Insecure attachments include avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized attachment styles.

In children, an avoidant attachment is noted by little to no indication of distress at the departure of the caregiver, a willingness to explore the environment, and little to no visible response to the caregiver's return.

Caregivers who promote an avoidant attachment, whether knowingly or not, show little response to the child when distressed, and in fact, discourage the child from crying and encourage independence and exploration.

Adults who had avoidant attachment relationships with their childhood care-

they are less interested in a give-and-take relationship than in having the freedom to pursue their own lives.

They typically run from disagreements and emotional material and prefer to live in their heads.

Ambivalent attachments are intermittently and unpredictably responsive to, or neglectful of, the child's needs.

An analogy is to a slot machine that oftentimes eats your money and occasionally rewards you with a payout.

Intermittent reinforcement is the strongest form of reinforcement of a behavior, so the child raised in an ambivalent relationship becomes preoccupied with the caregiver's availability and cannot feel secure enough to explore the environment.

The ambivalently attached child is vulnerable to difficulty in coping with life stresses, both as a child and as an adult, and may display role reversal with the caregiver, i.e., become a parentified child.

Parentified children take on adult responsibilities, such as preparing meals for the family, washing the family's clothes, making lunches for their siblings to take to school, trying to sober up a drunken parent, etc.

The preoccupation with these responsibilities and the lack of competence they feel in performing them sets parentified children up for the likelihood of a life of low self-esteem, high levels of anxiety, and over-responsibility in adult relationships.

When there is abuse in a household, even when it doesn't involve the children, children are likely to feel fear and apprehension whenever the caregiver enters the room.

Disorganized attachment is often associated with frightened, disorganized behavior on the part of the child, such as freezing for several seconds, running away and hiding, or rocking.

Caregiver intrusiveness (e.g., choosing the child's clothing and the child's friends, eavesdropping on the child's

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(e.g., the caregiver acting as a peer with the child and her friends, living vicariously through the child's successes in sports or the arts and not letting the child pursue other interests) are other reasons for the formation of a disorganized attachment style.

Adults with disorganized attachment styles are likely to go through a succession of unstable relationships, experience high levels of anxiety, and may be more susceptible to use of mood-altering substances to help manage their emotions than the average person.

Attachment styles are not set in stone, but do become harder to change over

time.

Early intervention with unhealthy family dynamics can help prevent a world of heartache, relationship problems, underachievement at school and at work, and substance abuse problems in adolescents and adults.

Adults with relationship problems may look at the attachment styles they had as children and see parallels in their current relationships.

Adult attachment problems may also be amenable to change. Your local mental health professional can help.

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