



ABOUT AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

If you ask a relationship therapist to list some of the most important factors in a relationship, it is likely that each partner's attachment style will show up as key factors. One's attachment style is determined by our early relationship experiences, and a huge body of research exists to demonstrate that our earliest relationships with parents and caregivers affect our entire lives - including marriage relationships, relationships with our children, our friendships . . . as well as our mental and physical health.

There are four attachment styles, according to theory, and these are: Secure, Anxious, Avoidant and Disorganized. Securely attached people are more likely to have stable and harmonious relationships. You might think of them as Labradors - friendly and relaxed. Those with anxious attachment will be more likely to feel worried and preoccupied about their relationships. You might think of these people more like cockatoos - easily startled and a bit high-strung . . . worried about rejection and abandonment.

Avoidant attachment types are likely to need a lot of emotional space and independence and might be uncomfortable with strong displays of emotion or conflict. This would be more like cats - a bit standoffish and aloof. People with Disorganized attachment are a mixture of the Anxious and Avoidant types, in that they are quite insecure and uncertain in their relationships but can also switch off quickly and need distance and autonomy if they feel threatened or unsure. These people are more like rabbits . . . they are easily startled and find it difficult to trust others.

A really useful way to think of these four styles is by looking at a graph that represents Anxiety and Avoidance. Secure (Labrador) is low anxiety, low avoidance; Anxious (Cockatoo) attachment is high anxiety, low avoidance; Avoidant (Cat) is low anxiety, high avoidance; and Fearful (Rabbit) is high anxiety, high avoidance.

This article will focus on Avoidant attachment. The person with this attachment style has the tendency to turn away from intimacy or emotional intensity and may feel somewhat uncomfortable in the presence of another's emotional needs or expectations of intimacy and closeness. This is primarily due to the fact that their own emotional needs have been repressed due to family and/or social conditions that did not model or encourage emotional intimacy.

What are some signs of avoidant attachment?

If you're in a relationship with someone you believe to be Avoidantly attached, or if you feel you might have this attachment style, you might be experiencing some of the following:

- Challenges with approaching and resolving conflict (preferring to keep quiet and let things resolve themselves).
- Challenges with talking about how you are feeling or expressing vulnerability with partners or close friends (preferring to deal with things privately).
- Feeling like you aren't sure how to respond when your partner is displaying strong emotions or seems distressed.
- Sometimes appearing aloof or uninterested in friendship or a relationship - or giving people the impression that you aren't interested.
- In a relationship, needing personal space and time alone - and feeling suffocated if you need to spend all your time with your partner.

It can be helpful to think of this type of attachment as 'at arms-length.' While some people might be comfortable being vulnerable and talking a lot about how they feel, to other people this can feel strange and foreign. They might feel exposed, silly, or vulnerable sharing personal things about themselves, or they may not know exactly what they are feeling! They may be at arm's-length from themselves too - and will feel much safer keeping things to themselves and not showing strong emotions.

How does someone develop Avoidant attachment?

For most people with this attachment style, their families of origin are quite influential. Growing up in a family that is emotionally unexpressive, where things might not have been talked about, or in a family where there was not a lot of warmth or openness, might result in Avoidant attachment. The individual might have seen their parents interacting with little or no emotional closeness . . . or they might not have been attended to as children when they had emotional needs - so in some ways, they may have just 'shut down' their emotional systems.

We know that children don't have filters, and often growing up in a family that is Avoidantly attached, children learn over time that the best way to receive approval from their parents is to keep calm and not talk about difficult topics. Often a family will avoid strong emotions or discussing difficult things from a fear of conflict or escalation

- but unfortunately, as we know, in every person's life there will be situations that do need to be discussed, and conflicts that do need to be managed.

In adult relationships, many people with Avoidant attachments will struggle when they need to talk about things like money, sex, communication, parenting or emotions - because they may have never done this before. These skills can be learned, but it can be important to remember that someone with this attachment style has had a lifetime of avoiding difficult conversations.

What is the best way to manage Avoidant attachment?

If you or your partner have Avoidant attachment, the good news is that there are many things that can help. These include:

- **Raising awareness:** For many people with this kind of attachment, there is little awareness of how this is impacting them. Being able to understand that their preference for not talking about things or dealing with strong emotions is simply that - a preference - can help them to then understand that their partner might need some validation or acknowledgement for their own emotional experience - even if this is hard to understand. Remember, Avoidantly attached people likely grew up with the impression that emotions aren't that important, so it can take a bit of time for them to start to pay attention to emotions and begin to see the importance of validating and supporting someone they love.
- **Open Communication:** At the core of Avoidant attachment is a fear of strong emotions or of being out of control - and being able to develop skills in talking things through and managing emotions safely is fundamental. Within the relationship, both people should strive for receptivity and honest (vulnerable) communication. The relationship needs to be cultivated over time to be seen and experienced as a safe place to raise issues and concerns, a place where needs will be validated; which is not to say that all needs will be met by the partner, but all needs will be heard and understood. Over time, an Avoidant individual will learn that it is actually easier to raise a concern straight away (rather than sitting on it or hoping it will go away) and they will begin to be more proactive about speaking up.
- **Personal Space:** One thing that probably won't change for an Avoidantly attached person, is the desire for personal space - and that is totally fine. If you are in a relationship with someone with this attachment style, it is good to remember that they will need space and independence at times - especially when things are stressful or difficult. Many anxiously attached people crave social contact and emotional closeness, but Avoidantly attached people can be the opposite - and high energy, relational events can be draining at times. Part of this attachment can involve a fear of being trapped or suffocated by others' needs, while not being able to speak up

for their own - so sometimes being able to recognize this and offer an 'out' from big social commitments or social obligations (such as: a family gathering or a group outing or a social event) can be a powerful show of support and understanding.

- **Relationship training:** Most relationships have one or two arguments that happen again and again. Having the support of a professional to unpack these conversations and encourage both people to see both sides of the situation (and develop empathy for each other) allows for progress to be made. For those with Avoidant attachment, it can be especially valuable to have a compassionate and empathic person help them to understand themselves better, and also understand the impact that their avoidance has on their partner. This can build up their motivation to solve issues more proactively, as well as show empathy and concern when needed.

Can Avoidant attachment be cured or changed?

Within relationship therapy and counseling, the idea is that - over time, and with the development of skills, self-awareness and strong relationships - we can move from Anxious or Avoidant attachment, towards Secure attachment.

This is what we might call 'learned' Secure attachment - it is different from regular Secure attachment, which develops as a result of stable experiences in relationships from childhood. The 'learned' Secure attachment is more about having developed insight and awareness into your own attachment style and developing the willingness and the skills you need to have stable and harmonious relationships.

This type of change is an interesting one, as it is likely that someone with Avoidant attachment may always be 'somewhat' Avoidantly attached - they may never get completely comfortable with talking about their feelings or with relying entirely on someone else.

The change is more in how they respond to things in their relationship, and how well they manage things like communication and conflict. An Avoidant person can manage these things very well if they are able to notice both their own responses (avoidance, shutting down, switching off), and still do what needs to be done (take a moment, ask to talk about something, speak honestly, discover that they can choose to open their hearts to themselves and others and still take care of themselves).

Avoidant attachment can certainly be managed, and generally therapy is useful for this type. Self-help resources such as books are useful but having a compassionate and trusted person like a therapist or coach who models healthy relating is ideal.

Avoidant types are often interested in technology and app-based Relationship Coaching. People can learn about relationships (and issues such as communication,

conflict management and intimacy) in a way that can feel safe and confidential. For some people with Avoidant attachment, reading lessons and looking at their partner's responses to online quizzes and other lessons can feel more comfortable at the start than diving deeply into relationship therapy.

Whatever the medium, I can say with confidence that any attachment issue, Avoidant in particular . . . can be changed and improved - the key things needed are insight and a willingness to change behaviors and responses to the triggering aspects of relationships. Research tells us that the very best way to resolve attachment issues is through a trusting, stable and honest relationship with another person - whether this is through therapy or other processes, relationship wounding only heals in relationship. Transformation can only be achieved by both people working on self-awareness, inner-witnessing, personal responsibility, good communication and honesty, first with themselves, and then with each other.

If you or your partner are Avoidantly attached, it is useful to be aware of some of these characteristics, as well as how other attachment styles interact with Avoidant attachment. Exploring and developing skill and capacity in showing support and empathy for partners, opening up and being vulnerable first to yourself and then to others as well, cultivating ways to talk about conflict, will all be helpful in filling gaps that might exist in your relationship.