



ABOUT ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT

Attachment theory originated as a way to explain how infants would react when separated from and then reunited with their primary care takers. Over time, this theory has been expanded to also explain how adults in romantic relationships attach to one another. According to attachment theory, there are four different types of attachment: secure, avoidant, anxious and disorganized.

Adults with **secure attachment styles** are autonomous when they are in relationships. They are able to connect with their partner on a deeply emotional level but are not too reliant on their partner or their relationship for feelings of self worth and importance. This is the healthiest attachment style; the other three attachment styles (avoidant, anxious and disorganized) are known as insecure attachment styles.

Avoidant attachment is characterized by prioritizing independence and freedom over deep emotional connections. People with this attachment style often avoid getting too close to other people and feel uncomfortable with the idea of having to rely on a partner. Avoidant attachment is the opposite of anxious attachment, a different type of insecure attachment style.

Anxious attachment is characterized by a lack of emotional independence, lots of insecurities and a deep desire to be close to a partner. People with an anxious attachment often worry about rejection and abandonment.

The the third insecure attachment style is **disorganized attachment** which is also known as fearful-avoidant attachment. This attachment style is sort of a combination of both anxious attachment and avoidant attachment. People with this attachment style crave emotional closeness with others, partially as a need for validation, but are also deeply fearful of abandonment. These clashing needs often result in erratic, disorganized behavior.

In this article, the focus is on the **anxious attachment style** and how to identify it in yourself or your partner, as well as how to navigate it as a couple.

Identifying anxious attachment in yourself

If you have an insecure attachment style, it's important to be aware of it. Insecure attachment styles often put an undue burden on the partner. If you are unable to recognize and respond to your attachment challenges, you will repeatedly project your unmet need onto your partner and expect them to validate you by expressing

their feelings about you and about the relationship. If left unaddressed, insecure attachment styles can be the ultimate reason why a relationship does not work out.

So, what does it look like if you have an anxious attachment style? You might feel insecure about the status of your relationship, constantly questioning if your partner likes you, and wondering if they are looking for reasons to break up with you. You may also read too much into your partner's emotions, or lack of expression and take their behavior personally. This can look like obsessing about being left or rejected, or overanalyzing off-handed comments made by your partner.

You may also find yourself being controlling towards your partner, requiring them to do things to make you feel secure in the relationship that are out of character for them, such as making them send you good morning and good night texts. Anxious attachment can often manifest in jealousy, not always of other people, but of how the partner spends their time or focuses their attention.

A hallmark of anxious attachment is generally acting overly emotional. This heightened emotion can also lead you to look for reasons to fight. If this is your default attachment style, you may also find yourself *expecting* your partner to leave you because you are unable to see your self-worth in the relationship. It can be exhausting to constantly feel insecure and anxious in your relationship, which is why it is so important to address your anxious attachment style.

Addressing anxious attachment in yourself

Most of the behaviors associated with anxious attachment stem from insecurity and fears of rejection or abandonment. These things can be rooted in past relationship trauma, usually in infancy and early childhood relationships with a parent or caretaker. While there is usually trauma associated with insecure attachment, it can sometimes just be an attachment preference. And it *is* possible to address these things and develop a more secure attachment style.

If you recognize anxious attachment behaviors in yourself, it's important to do some introspection and try to identify where these feelings originate. Did a parent reject or abandon you? Are you still recovering from a time in early childhood when someone broke your trust in a serious way? Are your feelings of insecurity affecting your relationship?

Identifying the root cause of these problems can help you make a plan to move forward. A great way to find some resolution to past problems is through journaling. Putting all your ideas on paper can help you sort them out in a productive way, versus trying to work out every element of your disappointment through endless dialogue with your partner.

In addition to journaling about the past, it can be a good idea to keep a running journal about things that are making you anxious in the present. Writing things down

can help you observe and witness your experience more objectively, and can help you reduce your anxiety about casual occurrences or your partners everyday minor unconscious actions. Even if journaling doesn't help reduce your anxiety, it can at least show you a pattern of the types of things that make you anxious.

Developing the inner witness is the key here. Becoming self-reflective and self-aware you develop a capacity to contain your emotions and moderate the strong emotions that sometimes flood your system. As you become better able to parent yourself, the need to be parented by your partner is greatly reduced.

If you are able to find a pattern in your anxiety sources, you can better communicate with your partner about how they can be more aware of who you are and how you feel. Your partner may discover that they have creative ideas about ways they can act or behave that might meet your relationship-related anxiety. They may also be able to give you more clarity about what they can and can't do, when they better understand that you are self-observing and willing to be responsible for your experience; that they are your supporter, your partner, not your parent.

COMMUNICATION! Is a very important way to cope with anxious attachment: While it is important for you to deal with the root of your attachment issues on your own, it's also important for you to communicate about the low grade anxiety that never leaves you and is not about them. Open communication about the causes of your anxiety and your anxiety about your anxiety might help explain some of your controlling or combative behavior to your partner. It can also help them support you in a more empathetic and intentional manner.

While there are a lot of different things you can do to address your anxious attachment style, both individual therapists and relationship therapists are well equipped to help you address your anxious attachment style. DBT is a form of therapy particularly suited to a deeply entrenched anxious attachment style. Mindfulness techniques, breath awareness and body awareness support the development of the inner witness and observer, and help to increase your capacity for containment when emotions are strong.

Identifying anxious attachment in your partner

Because you don't know everything that is going through your partner's head, identifying an anxious attachment style in them might be a little different than trying to identify it within yourself. Anxious attachment style is also known as preoccupied attachment, meaning that your partner may become preoccupied with how they are perceived by you and are preoccupied overanalyzing the relationship rather than actively participating.

If your partner has an anxious attachment style, they may be too clingy and require constant reassurance about your feelings for them and your commitment to the relationship. They might start to adopt a lot of your habits and interests in an attempt

to spend more/all of your time together. They may also seem to always agree with you in a form of people-pleasing that is rooted in a fear of disagreements leading to disinterest or abandonment.

Alternatively, they may also be combative, often lashing out if they feel threatened. Even if they are not aggressive, they may be overly emotional, which can result in conflict. And while they act emotionally, they are often unable to articulate their emotions because they are out-of-touch with how they are feeling. This out-of-touchness can result in an inability to identify or accept responsibility for their flaws in the relationship. If your partner has an anxious attachment style, they may not necessarily display *all* of these character traits. In some instances, some of these things plague relationships with people who have secure attachment styles! But, if you sense that some or many of the problems in your relationship are related to your partner's relationship-related anxiety, then it is possible that they have an insecure, anxious attachment style.

Addressing anxious attachment in your partner

After identifying anxious attachment issues in your partner, it can be difficult to bring this fact to their attention because of their unwillingness to accept fault in the relationship and because of their hypersensitivity. But, it's important to address this attachment issue in your partner so that the relationship can thrive! A great way to bring up anxious attachment is to suggest taking an attachment style quiz.

If they are not open to this idea, or are not able to answer the questions honestly, you may have to bring it to their attention. While this can be a difficult task, there are ways to do it kindly and gently. If you have attachment issues, you can use this as a segue to talk about the attachment issues you perceive in them. Or you can frame it as a way to solve the inevitable relationship problems that are stemming from their attachment issues.

Helping your partner identify these issues will hopefully inspire them to address their insecurities and their anxiety related to the relationship. While a lot of the work of addressing attachment issues is done on a personal level (through journaling, communication exercises and even therapy) there are things you can do as their partner to help alleviate some of the burden it puts on the relationship.

Engaging in an open dialogue about the types of things that cause your partner anxiety is a great way to understand what triggers some of their possessive or emotional actions. Additionally, it's important to create clear boundaries about what kind of behaviors are acceptable in the relationship. Creating boundaries will give you some space from having to constantly reassure your partner. It can also help your partner feel comfortable and less anxious about normal things, like having different hobbies or spending time apart. Creating boundaries will help you both navigate the relationship with less anxiety.

Above all else, it's important to show an anxious partner affection and love. Showing your dedication to your partner will help reduce their fears of rejection and abandonment. This will look different for different partnerships, but simple things like a cute "I miss you" text, telling your partner about something that reminded you of them, scheduling a date night or intimate time together or giving frequent compliments will show your partner that you care about them, and will help put some of their anxieties to rest.

While these are all potential actions you can take, none of them are solutions. You can't take on the burden of resolving all your partner's unmet childhood needs. Again, partner, not parent. It may be necessary to request or insist that your partner see a therapist, or that you see a therapist as a couple.

Attachment pairings

It's important to note that some attachment styles pair better than others. For example, people with secure attachment styles can pair in a relatively healthy way with any other attachment style, often serving as the stable rock on the relationship. But if you have insecure attachment styles, attaching with a different insecurely-attached person can create a lot of problems - even toxicity in the relationship. It is possible for two anxiously attached people to have a good relationship as long as they are able to communicate their emotions.

As we mentioned, anxiously attached people are drawn to intimacy, so two anxious partners could fulfill the other's need for intimacy and closeness while fulfilling their own needs, without fear of scaring anyone off. But these relationships can also be very difficult and result in extreme jealousy and volatile fights. While two anxiously attached people have the potential to make a relationship work, the same is not true for an anxiously attached person and an avoidantly attached person. These people tend to have opposite needs in the relationship, which can lead an anxious person to feeling undervalued, worsening their self-esteem, while leading an avoidant person to feel as if their independence is totally compromised.

While this is a textbook bad pairing, it's not impossible to make it work, so long as both people are on the same page! Ultimately, understanding your attachment style and your partner's attachment style is key to making any relationship work. While we have preferred attachment styles, it is possible to learn new, healthier ways to attach to emotional partners.