



ABOUT DISORGANIZED ATTACHMENT

Attachment styles – the way we connect with other people—are generally developed as infants, and further refined as children, adolescents, and adults.

Along with anxious and avoidant attachment, there also exists what is known as *disorganized attachment*; another variation of the insecure attachment styles. Disorganized attachment is hypothesized to be an outcome of abuse and trauma in childhood . . . and while this can be true of all the insecure attachment styles, disorganized attachment has its own particular structure. Disorganized attachment can stem from those early developmental experiences of an attachment figure—a parent or anyone who may have had a close hand in helping raise the child—offering inconsistent emotional support and/or abuse. Inconsistency is a key element; an on-again – off-again sense of never knowing how, if or when the parent will be available. This insecure type may also have experienced verbal, physical or sexual abuse and/or witnessed an attachment figure commit traumatizing acts, such as a father verbally abusing or physically assaulting his spouse.

The stories can vary, but the consequences are twofold; the child perceives and understands that a betrayal of safety has occurred, and the child understands that a beloved parent or parental figure can also be a serious threat to anyone in their proximity, including the child themselves. At this point, the child learns that the attachment figure (who he or she loves and who is responsible for his or her safety) is also someone to be feared.

People who get attached in a disorganized way oscillate between two biological drives whenever the opportunity to attach comes about in life: the need to belong (to love and connect with others) and the need to survive (to protect oneself). Later, particularly in romantic relationships people with this style of attachment often feel fear and anxiety when forming intimate relationships and suffer from a negative self-image and extremely damaging self-talk. They often feel intense loneliness because of an earnest want for genuine connection, but the stress and fear response, linked to that want, causes them to act erratically, driving away potential connection.

Indeed, it has been suggested that people with Borderline Personality Disorder evidence a disorganized attachment style. They have an extreme need for closeness, fear of rejection, and contradictory mental states and behaviors.

The pain of those with a disorganized style of attachment is this: They want to love. They want, as any human does, to be understood, to feel safe, to feel connected to another person. But the process is extremely jarring, and developing feelings for

another person can be marred with more negative emotion than positive, including anxiety, confusion, self-hatred and doubt.

Although people with a disorganized style of attaching want to connect, they pull away, see signs of rejection where none exists, and develop a self-fulfilling prophecy: They act in ways that protect themselves from rejection and pain. For example, they may fear how they're being seen, stop replying to a potential partner because they believe they'll be rejected, even abandon the relationship entirely to avoid further self-viewed embarrassment, intense shame, or negative emotion, ultimately ending the relationship.

Even if the potential partner may be expressing genuine interest, the responding and often erratic behavior by those with disorganized attachment—like being overly trusting then suddenly suspicious or being happily responsive then withdrawing at a moment's notice—may cause the potential partner to lose interest, which further reinforces the internal negative beliefs; that he or she is unwanted and unlovable.

In the case of disorganized attachment, forming intimate attachments to others can seem like an insurmountable task because any new intimate relationship formed takes a tremendous and continuous act of trust in the potential partner, and requires consistency and reassurance near-constantly.

Imagine, for instance, a kitten, who has been badly mistreated but is fully reliant on its owner for food and shelter, not dissimilar to a helpless child. If displaced and put in the safest environment, it would similarly hesitate to approach its new owner, consistently on high alert, feeling threatened and on edge, feeling both satisfied and warm, and absolutely terrified with every pat on the head, acting erratically not knowing which pat will be a blow—not dissimilar to a disorganized, insecure child, who is now grown, attempting to attach to a new intimate primary figure; a romantic partner.

When it comes to the ways in which we attach to others, our attachment styles served us well in early life, allowing us to react and adapt to the situations at hand, ensuring, at the very least, our survival into adulthood. However, a disorganized way of attaching may likely no longer serve us or be helpful in meeting the goals of our adult lives.

Fortunately, while the literature on overcoming a disorganized style is scarce, there is hope.

As in any area of life, as adults, ultimately the responsibility to change falls within: What it takes to unlearn old habits of belief and perception in attachment is time, skills, and reassurance, support, and ongoing safe, positive and trusting relationships. This combination of support and resources truly do help heal trauma. Despite understanding this intellectually, it also takes time for emotions and actions to catch up.

This is where therapy can help. In therapy, a safe and trusting environment and relationship are established. Skills like identifying, verbalizing and communicating thoughts and feelings can be learned. Therapy can also help someone with disorganized attachment test the waters in future relationships by learning how to feel safe while communicating, including sharing how one feels, instead of making premature assumptions leading to acting out the unhealthy attachment style.

Because the mind can sabotage new relationships in an attempt to self-protect, one useful skill can be the questioning of internal negative self-talk and the identification of contradictory or contrary examples. For instance, those with a disorganized style of attachment usually respond without distortion or reactivity to friends and strangers. The insecure attachment strategies only appear with intimate partners. Therefore, if one believes he or she is unlovable relative to their partner or spouse, reflecting on the ways one is valued and appreciated by friends or coworkers is a good way to counter the negative thought.

Of course, choosing a consistently kind, reliable, and trusting partner is also part of learning about good relationship habits. Learning to recognize and accept healthy attachment as a way of being in life is a process that takes time. The safer one feels within a relationship, the more securely attached he or she can become. Letting go of the belief that relationships are unsafe takes time. Transforming the identification with being a victim who is at the whim of another person's erratic and unreliable behavior, takes time.

Neurofeedback, biofeedback, ketamine protocols and plant medicines are additional, alternative therapeutic avenues to consider when seeking to interrupt old patterns of belief and behavior associated with all insecure attachment styles. Vipassana style meditation and other mindfulness techniques are proven to provide the stable foundation from which real change can be experienced. Combined with an ongoing supportive therapeutic relationship the nervous system can and does learn to register safety in intimacy. It can be a transformative journey when one is ready and willing to invest the time and focus.