



Attachment Theory: How Our Earliest Relationships Shape the Ones That Follow

Have you ever wondered why two people can experience the same relationship very differently?

Why one person easily trusts while another constantly fears being abandoned?

Why some people avoid closeness altogether while others feel they lose themselves in relationships?

Why leaving an unhealthy relationship can feel almost impossible, even when you know it isn't good for you?

Attachment Theory offers one way of understanding these questions.

It doesn't tell us who we are.

It helps us understand how we learned to relate to other people.

And perhaps more importantly...

How we can continue growing throughout our lives.

What Is Attachment Theory?

Attachment Theory began with the work of psychiatrist John Bowlby and was later expanded by developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth.

Their work explored how early relationships with caregivers influence a child's sense of safety, connection, and security.

As infants, we don't simply need food and shelter.

We also need someone who notices us.

Comforts us.

Responds to us.

Helps us regulate overwhelming emotions.

Through thousands of these everyday interactions, children begin forming expectations about relationships.

Questions like:

Can I depend on people?

Do my needs matter?

Is it safe to be vulnerable?

Will someone come when I need them?

These expectations often continue influencing adult relationships long after childhood has ended.

Attachment Is About Expectations

One of the biggest misconceptions about Attachment Theory is that it labels people.

“I’m anxious.”

“I’m avoidant.”

“I’m secure.”

In reality, attachment describes patterns of relating—not permanent identities.

It asks:

What have my relationships taught me to expect?

Those expectations can change.

That’s one of the most hopeful parts of attachment research.

Four Common Attachment Patterns

Secure Attachment

People with more secure attachment generally believe:

“I matter.”

“You matter.”

“We can repair conflict.”

This doesn’t mean relationships are perfect.

It means conflict doesn’t automatically threaten the relationship itself.

Anxious Attachment

People with anxious attachment often learned that connection felt inconsistent.

Sometimes caregivers were emotionally available.

Sometimes they weren't.

As adults they may:

- seek reassurance frequently
- fear abandonment
- overanalyze communication
- struggle with uncertainty
- confuse distance with rejection

At its core, anxious attachment often asks:

“Will you still choose me?”

Avoidant Attachment

People with avoidant attachment often learned that emotional needs were discouraged or ignored.

As adults they may:

- value independence
- minimize vulnerability
- withdraw during conflict
- feel overwhelmed by emotional closeness
- struggle asking for help

Their nervous system may have learned:

“It’s safer if I handle everything myself.”

Fearful (Disorganized) Attachment

Some people experience both a desire for closeness and a fear of it.

Relationships can feel confusing because connection itself has become associated with unpredictability or fear.

They may think:

“I want you close.”

“I don’t trust you.”

Both can be true at the same time.

Attachment Is Not Destiny

One of the most encouraging discoveries in attachment research is that attachment patterns can change.

Healthy relationships.

Therapy.

Friendships.

Self-awareness.

Consistent experiences of safety.

All of these can gradually reshape how we relate to others.

Healing doesn't erase the past.

It expands what becomes possible.

Attachment and Manipulation

Understanding attachment becomes especially important in unhealthy relationships.

Manipulative dynamics often interact with our existing attachment patterns.

Someone with anxious attachment may become especially vulnerable to intermittent reinforcement.

Someone with avoidant attachment may convince themselves they don't need anyone while quietly carrying loneliness.

Someone with fearful attachment may feel caught between wanting connection and fearing it.

Attachment doesn't cause manipulation.

But it can influence how we experience it.

Understanding this isn't about blame.

It's about compassion.

Attachment and Internal Family Systems

Attachment patterns don't exist only in our relationships.

They often live inside us.

Imagine someone doesn't return your text.

One part immediately says:

“They’re leaving.”

Another says:

“I don’t need anyone anyway.”

IFS invites us to become curious about those parts.

Attachment Theory helps explain why they may have developed.

Together they offer a deeper understanding.

Attachment and Nonviolent Communication

NVC helps us identify what we feel and what we need.

Attachment Theory helps explain why certain needs feel especially important.

Someone with anxious attachment may strongly value reassurance and connection.

Someone with avoidant attachment may deeply value autonomy and space.

Neither is wrong.

Understanding our attachment patterns can help us recognize these needs without shame.

Attachment and the Nervous System

Attachment is not only psychological.

It is biological.

Our earliest relationships influence how our nervous system experiences safety.

When connection feels secure, the body often settles more easily.

When relationships have been unpredictable, the nervous system may become quicker to detect possible danger.

This can show up as:

- hypervigilance
- difficulty relaxing
- digestive changes during conflict
- sleep disruption
- muscle tension
- emotional overwhelm
- withdrawal
- people pleasing

Our relationships don’t just shape our thoughts.

They shape our physiology.

Attachment and Whole-Person Health

This is where everything begins to connect.

The quality of our relationships can influence:

- stress levels
- sleep quality
- health behaviors
- emotional regulation
- immune function
- digestion
- recovery from illness

This doesn't mean difficult relationships automatically cause disease.

Nor does it mean secure attachment guarantees perfect health.

It simply reminds us that humans are deeply relational beings.

The body pays attention to the quality of connection.

A Gentle Reflection

The next time you notice yourself reacting strongly in a relationship...

Pause.

Instead of asking:

"What's wrong with me?"

Try asking:

"What expectation about relationships is showing up right now?"

Then ask:

"Where might I have learned that?"

Not to blame.

Not to judge.

Simply to understand.

Healing Attachment Is Learning That Relationships Can Feel Different

One of the greatest gifts of healing is discovering that not every relationship has to follow the same script.

You can learn that conflict doesn't always mean abandonment.

That boundaries don't always mean rejection.

That vulnerability doesn't always lead to shame.

That your needs don't make you "too much."

Attachment Theory reminds us that our earliest relationships may write the first chapters of our story.

They do not have to write the ending.

Every safe relationship...

Every repaired conflict...

Every moment of self-compassion...

Every time you listen to your own feelings and needs...

You are teaching your nervous system something new.

Perhaps that is what healing really is.

Not becoming someone different.

But gradually giving yourself enough experiences of safety that you begin expecting something different from the people—and the life—you choose moving forward.