

ATTACHMENT

WHAT IT IS AND WHY IT MATTERS



Neuroscientist Curt Thompson is fond of saying that when each one of us comes into this world, we enter it looking for someone looking for us. Our deepest desire and highest hope is that there will be someone looking for us, and that this person will always be there for us and will pursue our hearts with a genuine desire to truly know us. Our greatest need as human beings is to be known, and to know that the person who knows us will be there for us.

Human beings are created in the image of a triune God—a “we,” not an “I.” Each member of the godhead intimately knows the other two. God’s intention for humanity is not that we would merely live our lives next to each other, but that we would be increasingly known by one another. Attachment is the emotional bond that you develop with a person who will be there for you, and who truly knows you.

We are biologically driven to attach to others in order to survive. When we perceive threat or danger, we are hard-wired to seek protection from—and maintain proximity to—someone who will be there for us, and who truly knows us.

As a child, your most important attachment was your connection with your primary caregiver. This one relationship shaped your brain more than anything else. Specifically, your relationship with your primary caregiver shaped your:

- ability to regulate your emotions (calm yourself)
- ability to be aware of your emotions
- ability to rebound from distress, harm, or tragedy
- style of relating to others throughout your life

The Big Six

As a child, you needed the following six things from your parents...

1 Attunement

Were your parents so attuned to you that they knew what you were feeling? A parent that is distracted by their own needs, wants, emotions, and personal pain cannot be attuned to the child's needs.

In other words, she was able to soothe you when you were anxious or scared, and stimulate you when you were shutting down.

2 Responsiveness

When you were distressed (mad, sad, afraid), did your parents respond to you? Did they offer comfort, care, and kindness?

As an infant you had absolutely no ability to regulate your own arousal. However, if your mother was able to regulate your arousal, then she enabled you to learn how to regulate your own arousal—to calm your own anxiety and spring to life again when you were going numb. A child cannot regulate his or her own arousal—the child is utterly dependent on their mother's ability to regulate it for them.

3 Engagement

Did your parents have an internal intention and genuine desire to truly know you—to know your heart? Were they willing and able to engage with you on a heart level? Were you pursued by your parents?

5 Strong Enough to Handle Your Negative Emotions

Did your parents welcome your anger, sadness, and fear? As a child, you needed to be free to express negative emotions—to cry, rage, or fall silent—knowing that you would be responded to in a loving, meaningful way. You needed to know deep down that your emotions were accepted and allowed.

4 Ability to Regulate Your Arousal

Arousal refers to the bodily sensations you feel inside of you during moments of distress. If your mother was attuned enough to you and willing to respond to you and engage with you, then she was able to effectively regulate your arousal.

Did your parents communicate (verbally or nonverbally) that these emotions were somehow “bad”? You needed to feel the freedom to say, “I hate you” or “you don't love me” knowing that you would not be met with “Go to your room!” or “How can you say that?” or “Don't you know that hurts mommy's feelings?”

6 Willingness to Repair

When your parents hurt you, did they own and rectify the harm done? A healthy, trusting attachment is not built on the absence of failure but on the willingness of the parent to own and rectify failures when they do occur.

No parent gets it right 100% of the time. Parents get tired, distracted, and frustrated. They get stressed out trying to do a hundred things at once. There are times when even the best parents are not attuned or responsive. The parent-child connection ruptures frequently. But the mark of a 'good enough' caregiver is that these ruptures are repaired through a process of reattunement and re-engagement with the child.

What mattered to you as a child was not that your parents got it right each time, but that they recognized when they missed you or hurt you and responded in a way that brought comfort and reconnection. If your parents were attuned to you, responsive to your needs, engaged with your heart, able to regulate your arousal, strong enough to handle your negative emotions, and willing to repair failures, then the result was a secure attachment. If your relationship with your parents was not marked by these things, then you likely developed an insecure attachment—which means that you have experienced some measure of abandonment, betrayal, and powerlessness.

There are two main types of insecure attachment: avoidant attachment and ambivalent attachment.

Avoidant Attachment

"We can grow up in homes in which the food finds the table, the money finds the college funds, and the family even finds the church each Sunday; but somehow our hearts remain undiscovered by the two people we most need to know us—our parents." Curt Thompson

When the child's caregiver is often unavailable, dismissive, or rejecting, the child will develop an avoidant attachment –i.e, the child will become avoidant of attachment. Remember, attachment is about feeling like your caregiver is there for you and responsive to you when you feel distressed (afraid, sad, mad, etc).

In the case of avoidant attachment, when the child becomes distressed, his caregiver does not provide sufficient comfort, care and connection. When the child tries to communicate his distress, his attempts have little to no effect on the parent. So the child is forced to try to calm himself and regulate his own emotions.

On Your Own

An avoidantly attached child reasons that it is easier to try to regulate his own anxiety than to seek comfort from his unavailable or unresponsive caregiver. The reasoning goes like this: "Mom is either not going to understand me—or worse, dismiss me. So I guess I'm on my own."

The child's decision to "go it alone" is his desperate attempt to avoid further evidence that no one is there for him. The thinking is, "If I don't ask for help, then they can't dismiss me." Remember, from an attachment perspective, nothing is more frightening than realizing that your parent is not attuned and responsive to you.

I'll Just Avoid Depending On Anyone

Eventually, the child learns that it is fruitless to rely upon others to meet his needs. Since his needs and wants rarely seem to matter to his caregiver, he soon stops even trying to express what he needs and wants.

His core narrative becomes "I am alone and on my own. I don't need you to be there for me. I'm fine whatever you do."

He becomes self-reliant and develops a view of himself as independent and strong because, after all, he does not really need anyone.

The child adapts to his environment by avoiding closeness and emotional connection to his caregiver. He begins to avoid attachment because it is too painful to hope that his caregiver will suddenly become available, accepting, and responsive. He tries to numb his desire for deep emotional connection. He shuts down his longing for attachment.

Disconnected From Desires and Emotions

Since what the child wants does not seem to matter to his caregiver, he becomes disconnected from his desires. He fails to develop a robust sense of his hopes, dreams, desires, and longings. It is simply too painful to hold onto these longings, so he becomes detached from them.

Finally, the child often becomes disconnected from his emotions. Mothers of avoidant children are often disconnected from their own emotions. The dilemma with this is that a child develops an inner emotional world through emotional exchanges with his mother—if Mom does not have a rich inner emotional life, the child cannot develop one either.



How To Know If You're Avoidantly Attached

As avoidantly attached children mature into adulthood, they will tend to:

- feel more comfortable with distance and separateness
- enjoy relationships at times, but never really need others
- focus on the cerebral and analytical, so that they can avoid the pain and longing of missed emotional connections with others
- recall facts about their life (such as where they lived, what school they attended, the model of their first car, etc) but have great difficulty recalling memories of family experiences where there was authentic emotional engagement
- idealize their parents (to avoid connecting with how bad it really was)
- minimize or downplay hurtful attachment experiences
- believe that family life has little to no effect on how they developed
- insist that the past has little to no influence on their present life.

Ambivalent Attachment

A child will develop an ambivalent attachment when she experiences her primary caregiver as inconsistent and, at times, intrusive.

When the child becomes distressed, her caregiver may—or may not—provide soothing and comfort. It all depends on what is going on for the caregiver at that particular moment.

In other words, at times Mom is attuned and responsive to the child's needs, but at other times she is too caught up in her own emotional needs and moods to focus on meeting the child's needs.

The child learns that she cannot depend upon Mom to be attuned and responsive to her. Never knowing what to expect, the child develops a sense of anxiety and uncertainty about whether she can depend upon her Mom or not.

Inner Franticness

This creates a sense that others cannot be relied upon to meet her needs. The child develops an inner franticness as she struggles to find relief from her anxiety and uncertainty. Mom's inconsistency and unreliability may not seem like a "big deal" when you think about it as an adult, but for a child, it is absolute terror.

Mom's inconsistency and uncertainty forces the child to become hyper-focused on her mother—that is, to attune to the Mom's emotional state rather than Mom attuning to the child's emotions. The relationship becomes primarily one in which the child is responding to the parent's own emotional needs.



How To Know If You're Ambivalently Attached

As ambivalently attached children mature into adulthood, they will tend to:

- have difficulty regulating anxiety
- often experience intense emotions
- feel frantic inside as they struggle to find relief from their anxiety
- believe that unless they dramatically expresses pain, it is unlikely that another will respond
- be plagued by a deep-seated fear that they are going to be rejected or abandoned, which makes it very difficult to trust anyone. This leads to habitually seeking closeness (which their partner experiences as “clingy”) and often asking for proof that they are loved. “Are you really there for me? Are you? Show me. Now show me again.”
- always be watching for relational disruptions, and have a deep need for resolution
- feel like they are too “needy” and that they do not deserve to be loved in the way that they want
- suffer from self-criticism, insecurity, and a sense that something is wrong with them
- rely heavily on others to validate their self-worth, often seeking approval and reassurance from others
- assume the role of the “pursuer” in a relationship.

Attachment in a Nutshell

Secure attachment—Mom was *often* attuned to you and responsive to your needs/wants.

Avoidant attachment—Mom was *rarely* attuned to you and responsive to your needs/wants.

Ambivalent attachment—Mom was *sometimes* attuned to you and responsive to your needs/wants and sometimes she was preoccupied with her own anxiety, emotions, and moods.