

[**Lisa Firestone Ph.D.**](https://www.psychologytoday.com/experts/lisa-firestone-phd)

[Compassion Matters](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/compassion-matters)

**How Your Attachment Style Impacts Your Relationship**

What is your attachment style?

Posted Jul 30, 2013

Our [style of attachment](http://www.psychalive.org/category/attachment-style/) affects everything from our partner selection to how well our relationships progress to, sadly, how they end. That is why recognizing our [attachment](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/attachment) pattern can help us understand our strengths and vulnerabilities in a relationship. An attachment pattern is established in early [childhood](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/child-development) attachments and continues to function as a working model for relationships in adulthood.

This model of attachment influences how each of us reacts to our needs and how we go about getting them met. When there is a secure attachment pattern, a person is [confident](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/confidence) and self-possessed and is able to easily interact with others, meeting both their own and another’s needs.  However, when there is an anxious or avoidant attachment pattern, and a person picks a partner who fits with that maladaptive pattern, he or she will most likely be choosing someone who isn’t the ideal choice to make him or her happy.

For example, the person with a working model of anxious/preoccupied attachment feels that, in order to get close to someone and have your needs met, you need to be with your partner all the time and get reassurance. To support this perception of reality, they choose someone who is isolated and hard to connect with. The person with a working model of dismissive/avoidant attachment has the tendency to be distant, because their model is that the way to get your needs met is to [act](https://www.psychologytoday.com/therapy-types/acceptance-and-commitment-therapy) like you don’t have any. He or she then chooses someone who is more possessive or overly demanding of attention.

In a sense, we set ourselves up by finding partners that confirm our models. If we grew up with an insecure attachment pattern, we may project or seek to duplicate similar patterns of relating as adults, even when these patterns hurt us and are not in our own self-interest.

In their [research](http://www2.psych.ubc.ca/~schaller/Psyc591Readings/HazanShaver1987.pdf), Dr. Phillip Shaver and Dr. Cindy Hazan found that about 60 percent of people have a secure attachment, while 20 percent have an avoidant attachment, and 20 percent have an anxious attachment. So what does this mean? There are questions you can ask yourself to help you [determine your style of attachment](http://www.psychalive.org/2010/07/what-is-your-attachment-style/) and how it is affecting your relationships. On August 13, I will be hosting a CE Webinar with Dr. Phillip Shaver on “[Secure and Insecure Love: An Attachment Perspective](https://www1.gotomeeting.com/island/webinar/registration.tmpl?id=321591449).”You can start to identify your own attachment style by getting to know the four patterns of attachment in adults and learning how they commonly affect couples in their relating.

**1) Secure Attachment –** Securely attached adults tend to be more satisfied in their relationships. Children with a secure attachment see their parent as a secure base from which they can venture out and independently explore the world. A secure adult has a similar relationship with their romantic partner, feeling secure and connected, while allowing themselves and their partner to move freely.

Secure adults offer support when their partner feels distressed. They also go to their partner for comfort when they themselves feel troubled. Their relationship tends to be honest, open and equal, with both people feeling independent, yet loving toward each other. Securely attached couples don’t tend to engage in what my father, psychologist [Robert Firestone](http://www.psychalive.org/author/dr-robert-w-firestone/), describes as a “[Fantasy Bond](http://www.psychalive.org/category/the-fantasy-bond-relationship-advice/),” an illusion of connection that provides a false sense of safety. In a fantasy bond, a couple foregoes real acts of [love](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/relationships) for a more routine, emotionally cut-off form of relating.

**2) Anxious Preoccupied Attachment –** Unlike securely attached couples, people with an anxious attachment tend to be desperate to form a fantasy bond. Instead of feeling real love or trust toward their partner, they often feel [emotional hunger](http://www.psychalive.org/2011/11/the-difference-between-emotional-hunger-and-real-love-by-robert-firestone-ph-d/). They’re frequently looking to their partner to rescue or complete them. Although they’re seeking a sense of safety and security by clinging to their partner, they take actions that push their partner away.

Even though anxiously attached individuals act desperate or insecure, more often than not, their behavior exacerbates their own fears. When they feel unsure of their partner’s feelings and unsafe in their relationship, they often become clingy, demanding or possessive toward their partner. They may also interpret independent actions by their partner as affirmation of their fears. For example, if their partner starts socializing more with friends, they may think, “See? He doesn’t really love me. This means he is going to leave me. I was right not to trust him.”

**3) Dismissive Avoidant Attachment –** People with a dismissive avoidant attachment have the tendency to emotionally distance themselves from their partner. They may seek isolation and feel “pseudo-independent,” taking on the role of [parenting](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting) themselves. They often come off as focused on themselves and may be overly attending to their creature comforts.

Pseudo-independence is an illusion, as every human being needs connection. Nevertheless, people with a dismissive avoidant attachment tend to lead more inward lives, both denying the importance of loved ones and detaching easily from them. They are often [psychologically defended](http://www.psychalive.org/category/defenses1/) and have the ability to shut down emotionally. Even in heated or emotional situations, they are able to turn off their feelings and not react. For example, if their partner is distressed and threatens to leave them, they would respond by saying, “I don’t care.”

**4)** **[Fearful](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/fear) Avoidant Attachment –** A person with a fearful avoidant attachment lives in an ambivalent state, in which they are afraid of being both too close to or too distant from others.  They attempt to keep their feelings at bay but are unable to. They can’t just avoid their [anxiety](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anxiety) or run away from their feelings. Instead, they are overwhelmed by their reactions and often experience emotional storms. They tend to be mixed up or unpredictable in their moods. They see their relationships from the working model that you need to go toward others to get your needs met, but if you get close to others, they will hurt you. In other words, the person they want to go to for safety is the same person they are frightened to be close to. As a result, they have no organized strategy for getting their needs met by others.

As adults, these individuals tend to find themselves in rocky or dramatic relationships, with many highs and lows. They often have fears of being abandoned but also struggle with being intimate. They may cling to their partner when they feel rejected, then feel trapped when they are close. Oftentimes, the timing seems to be off between them and their partner. A person with fearful avoidant attachment may even wind up in an abusive relationship.

The attachment style you developed as a child based on your relationship with a parent or early [caretaker](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/caregiving) doesn’t have to define your ways of relating to those you love in your adult life. If you come to know your attachment style, you can uncover ways you are defending yourself from getting close and being emotionally connected and work toward forming an “earned secure attachment.”

You can challenge your [defenses](http://www.psychalive.org/category/defenses1/) by choosing a partner with a secure attachment style, and work on developing yourself in that relationship. [Therapy](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/therapy) can also be helpful for changing maladaptive attachment patterns. By becoming aware of your attachment style, both you and your partner can challenge the insecurities and fears supported by your age-old working models and develop new styles of attachment for sustaining a satisfying, loving relationship.