

Adult Attachment: Decoding Your Relationship Blueprint

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Attachment theory was extended to adult romantic relationships in the late 1980s by Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver. Four styles of attachment have been identified in adults: secure, anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant and fearful-avoidant. These roughly correspond to infant classifications: secure, insecure-ambivalent, insecure-avoidant and disorganized/disoriented.

Securely attached adults tend to have positive views of themselves, their partners and their relationships. They feel comfortable with intimacy and independence, balancing the two. Anxious-preoccupied adults seek high levels of intimacy, approval and responsiveness from partners, becoming overly dependent. They tend to be less trusting, have less positive views about themselves and their partners, and may exhibit high levels of emotional expressiveness, worry and impulsiveness in their relationships. Dismissive-avoidant adults desire a high level of independence, often appearing to avoid attachment altogether. They view themselves as self-sufficient, invulnerable to attachment feelings and not needing close relationships. They tend to suppress their feelings, dealing with rejection by distancing themselves from partners of whom they often have a poor opinion. Fearful-avoidant adults have mixed feelings about close relationships, both desiring and feeling uncomfortable with emotional closeness. They tend to mistrust their partners and view themselves as unworthy. Like dismissive-avoidant adults, fearful-avoidant adults tend to seek less intimacy, suppressing their feelings.

Attachment styles in adult romantic relationships roughly correspond to attachment styles in infants but adults can hold different internal working models for different relationships.

Two main aspects of adult attachment have been studied. The organisation and stability of the mental working models that underlie the attachment styles is explored by social psychologists interested in romantic attachment. Developmental psychologists interested in the individual's state of mind with respect to attachment generally explore how attachment functions in relationship dynamics and impacts relationship outcomes. The organisation of mental working models is more stable while the individual's state of mind with respect to attachment fluctuates more. Some authors have suggested that adults do not hold a single set of working models. Instead, on one level they have a set of rules and assumptions about attachment relationships in general. On another level they hold information about specific relationships or relationship events. Information at different levels need not be consistent. Individuals can therefore hold different internal working models for different relationships.

There are a number of different measures of adult attachment, the most common being self report questionnaires and coded interviews based on the Adult Attachment Interview. The various measures were developed primarily as research tools, for different purposes and addressing different domains, for example romantic relationships, parental relationships or peer relationships. Some classify an adult's state of mind with respect to attachment and attachment patterns by reference to childhood experiences, while others assess relationship behaviours and security regarding parents and peers.