

Understanding Attachment Styles & Mental Health

WHAT IS ATTACHMENT? Attachment derives from John Bowlby's theory regarding infant-caregiver bonds. These early relationships create "mental models" of ourselves and others that shape how we seek closeness, handle conflict, and respond to stress throughout our lives. Factors affecting these styles include caregiver responsiveness, significant life events, and cultural values.

The 4 Attachment Styles



Secure



Anxious



Avoidant



Disorganized

SAO Counselling Services



Secure

Early Experience

Received consistent, attuned care; caregiver noticed and responded to distress.

Internal Model

"My needs are important," "I can explore," and "People will come back".

Later Life Traits

Comfortable with intimacy; able to self-soothe and seek support; trusts in conflict repair.

Communication and Conflict Patterns

Direct, open communication; expresses needs and feelings clearly.



Anxious

Early Experience

Received inconsistent care; attention from caregiver was unpredictable or the caregiver was preoccupied.

Internal Model

"I must stay alert to keep connection," "I can't relax – I might lose them," and "Big feelings get responses".

Later Life Traits

Hypervigilance in relationships; intense reactions to distance; frequent reassurance seeking; fear of abandonment.

Communication and Conflict Patterns

May engage in "protest behavior"; seeks reassurance.



Avoidant

Early Experience

Emotional consolidation; dependency not allowed; withdrew when child was distressed/expressed needs; emotional expressions were discouraged.

Internal Model

"Not safe to show vulnerability," "Better to handle things on my own," and "My needs are too much/will overwhelm others".

Later Life Traits

Suppresses needs; uncomfortable with closeness; emphasizes independence; withdraws from conflicts.

Communication and Conflict Patterns

Withdraws from emotional topics.



Disorganized

Early Experience

Caregiver both source of comfort and fear; abuse, neglect, addiction, violence, or severe instability; no consistent strategy for safety.

Internal Model

"Connection/closeness brings danger," "There is no safe response".

Later Life Traits

Confusion around needs; difficulty in trusting stability; might shutdown/emotional outburst.

Communication and Conflict Patterns

Inconsistent, unpredictable communication; oscillates between seeking and fearing connection.

...Continue to the next page and learn about the tools for moving towards Security :)

!! Tools for Moving Towards Sense of Security



(1) Recognizing Triggers & Reactions

Identify "buttons" that push you toward impulsive reactions. Notice physical signs like chest tightness or racing thoughts.



(2) Emotional Regulation

- **Grounding** : Use the **Five Senses** to soothe when you feel overwhelmed. Identify 5 things you can see, 4 you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell, and 1 you can taste.
- **Physical Regulation** : Practice slow breathing with longer exhales or grounding through body movements like walking.

(3) The DESC Method for Communicating Needs

- **Describe** : State the situation (e.g., "When we made a plan and you changed it...").
- **Express** : Share your feeling (e.g., "I felt anxious").
- **Specify** : State what you need (e.g., "I need predictability to feel settled").
- **Communicate** : Ask for a specific action (e.g., "Would you notify me when possible?").



IMPORTANT



Attachment styles are not flaws;
they were formed because they once helped you survive emotionally.
Understanding them is about context, not blame.