

Attachment and Adult Relationships

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How the Attachment Bond Shapes Adult Relationships

Have you ever been in love? We all have, at least once. The attachment bond is the term for your first interactive love relationship—the one you had with your primary caregiver as an infant, usually your mother. This mother-child attachment bond shapes an infant's brain, profoundly influencing your self-esteem, your expectations of others, and your ability to attract and maintain successful adult relationships. By learning about attachment, you can build healthier, attuned relationships, and communicate more effectively.

Attachment, bonding, and relationships

You were born preprogrammed to bond with one very significant person—your primary caregiver, probably your mother. Like all infants, you were a bundle of emotions—intensely experiencing fear, anger, sadness, and joy. The emotional attachment that grew between you and your caregiver was the first interactive relationship of your life, and it depended upon nonverbal communication. The bonding you experienced determined how you would relate to other people throughout your life, because it established the foundation for all verbal and nonverbal communication in your future relationships.

Individuals who experience confusing, frightening, or broken emotional communications during their infancy often grow into adults who have difficulty understanding their own emotions and the feelings of others. This limits their ability to build or maintain successful relationships. Attachment—the relationship between infants and their primary caregivers—is responsible for:

- shaping the success or failure of future intimate relationships
- the ability to maintain emotional balance
- the ability to enjoy being ourselves and to find satisfaction in being with others
- the ability to rebound from disappointment, discouragement, and misfortune

Scientific study of the brain—and the role attachment plays in shaping it—has given us a new basis for understanding why vast numbers of people have great difficulty communicating with the most important individuals in their work and love lives. Once, we could only use guesswork to try and determine why important relationships never evolved, developed chronic problems, or fell apart. Now, thanks to new insights into brain development, we can understand what it takes to help build and nurture productive and meaningful relationships at home and at work.

What is the attachment bond?

The mother-child bond is the primary force in infant development, according to the attachment bond theory pioneered by English psychiatrist John Bowlby and American psychologist Mary

Ainsworth. The theory has gained strength through worldwide scientific studies and the use of brain imaging technology.

The attachment bond theory states that the relationship between infants and primary caretakers is responsible for:

- shaping all of our future relationships
- strengthening or damaging our abilities to focus, be conscious of our feelings, and calm ourselves
- the ability to bounce back from misfortune

Research reveals the infant/adult interactions that result in a successful, secure attachment, are those where both mother and infant can sense the other's feelings and emotions. In other words, an infant feels safe and understood when the mother responds to their cries and accurately interprets their changing needs. Unsuccessful or insecure attachment occurs when there is a failure in this communication of feelings.

Researchers found that successful adult relationships depend on the ability to:

- manage stress
- stay "tuned in" with emotions
- use communicative body language
- be playful in a mutually engaging manner
- be readily forgiving, relinquishing grudges

The same research also found that an insecure attachment may be caused by abuse, but it is just as likely to be caused by isolation or loneliness. These discoveries offer a new glimpse into successful love relationships, providing the keys to identifying and repairing a love relationship that is on the rocks.

The attachment bond shapes an infant's brain

For better or worse, the infant brain is profoundly influenced by the attachment bond—a baby's first love relationship. When the primary caretaker can manage personal stress, calm the infant, communicate through emotion, share joy, and forgive easily, the young child's nervous system becomes "securely attached." The strong foundation of a secure attachment bond enables the child to be self-confident, trusting, hopeful, and comfortable in the face of conflict. As an adult, he or she will be flexible, creative, hopeful, and optimistic.

Our secure attachment bond shapes our abilities to:

- feel safe
- develop meaningful connections with others
- explore our world
- deal with stress
- balance emotions
- experience comfort and security
- make sense of our lives
- create positive memories and expectations of relationships

Attachment bonds are as unique as we are. Primary caretakers don't have to be perfect. They do not have to always be in tune with their infants' emotions, but it helps if they are emotionally available a majority of the time.

Insecure attachment affects adult relationships

Insecurity can be a significant problem in our lives, and it takes root when an infant's attachment bond fails to provide the child with sufficient structure, recognition, understanding, safety, and mutual accord. These insecurities may lead us to:

- ***Tune out and turn off*** – If our parent is unavailable and self-absorbed, we may—as children—get lost in our own inner world, avoiding any close, emotional connections. As adults, we may become physically and emotionally distant in relationships.
- ***Remain insecure*** – If we have a parent who is inconsistent or intrusive, it's likely we will become anxious and fearful, never knowing what to expect. As adults, we may be available one moment and rejecting the next.
- ***Become disorganized, aggressive and angry*** – When our early needs for emotional closeness go unfulfilled, or when a parent's behavior is a source of disorientation or terror, problems are sure to follow. As adults, we may not love easily and may be insensitive to the needs of our partner.
- ***Develop slowly*** – Such delays manifest themselves as deficits and result in subsequent physical and mental health problems, and social and learning disabilities.

Attachment Style	Parental Style	Resulting Adult Characteristics
Secure	Aligned with the child; in tune with the child's emotions	Able to create meaningful relationships; empathetic; able to set appropriate boundaries
Avoidant	Unavailable or rejecting	Avoids closeness or emotional connection; distant; critical; rigid; intolerant
Ambivalent	Inconsistent and sometimes intrusive parent communication	Anxious and insecure; controlling; blaming; erratic; unpredictable; sometimes charming
Disorganized	Ignored or didn't see child's needs; parental behavior was frightening/traumatizing	Chaotic; insensitive; explosive; abusive; untrusting even while craving security
Reactive	Extremely unattached or malfunctioning	Cannot establish positive relationships; often misdiagnosed

Varying parental styles and types of attachment bonds are found throughout any population, culture, ethnic, or socio-economic group.

Causes of insecure attachment

Major causes of insecure attachments include:

- physical neglect – poor nutrition, insufficient exercise, and neglect of medical issues
- emotional neglect or emotional abuse – little attention paid to child, little or no effort to understand child's feelings; verbal abuse
- physical or sexual abuse – physical injury or violation
- separation from primary caregiver – due to illness, death, divorce, adoption
- inconsistency in primary caregiver – succession of nannies or staff at daycare centers
- frequent moves or placements – constantly changing environment; for example: children who spend their early years in orphanages or who move from foster home to foster home
- traumatic experiences – serious illnesses or accidents
- maternal depression – withdrawal from maternal role due to isolation, lack of social support, hormonal problems
- maternal addiction to alcohol or other drugs – maternal responsiveness reduced by mind-altering substances
- young or inexperienced mother – lacks parenting skills

The lessons of attachment help us heal adult relationships

The powerful, life-altering lessons we learn from our attachment bond—our first love relationship—continue to teach us as adults. The gut-level knowledge we gained then guides us in improving our adult relationships and making them secure.

Lesson No. 1—adult relationships depend for their success on nonverbal forms of communication. Newborn infants cannot talk, reason or plan, yet they are equipped to make sure their needs are met. Infants don't know what they need, they feel what they need, and communicate accordingly. When an infant communicates with a caretaker who understands and meets their physical and emotional needs, something wonderful occurs. Relationships in which the parties are tuned in to each other's emotions are called attuned relationships, and attuned relationships teach us that:

- nonverbal cues deeply impact our love relationships
- play helps us smooth over the rough spots in love relationships
- conflicts can build trust if we approach them without fear or a need to punish

When we can recognize knee-jerk memories, expectations, attitudes, assumptions and behaviors as problems resulting from insecure attachment bonds, we can end their influence on our adult relationships. That recognition allows us to reconstruct the healthy nonverbal communication skills that produce an attuned attachment and successful relationships.