

Get Attached

The surprising secrets to finding the right partner for a healthy relationship

By Amir Levine and Rachel S. F. Heller

A few years ago our close friend Tamara started dating someone new:

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Science of Adult
Attachment and How
It Can Help You Find—
and Keep—Love*,
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I first noticed Greg at a cocktail party at a friend's house. He was unbelievably good-looking. A few days later we went out for dinner with some other people, and I couldn't resist the glimmer of excitement in his eyes when he looked at me. But what I found most enticing were his words and an implicit promise of togetherness that he conveyed. He said things like, "You can call me any time you like." If I'd only listened carefully, I could have easily heard another message that was incongruent with this promise. Several times he'd mentioned that he'd never had a stable relationship—that for some reason he always grew tired of his girlfriends and felt the need to move on. I figured that Greg was just not ready for a rela-



relationship at the time and that he hadn't met the right person for him. I believed that if he really fell in love with me, he'd want to stick around. But then the strangest thing happened—we did fall in love, but the closer we got, the more he pushed me away. I became so preoccupied with the relationship that I stopped seeing my friends and had a hard time functioning at work. Most of the time my thoughts were directed at him. I hated it, but I also couldn't help it.

Adults show **patterns of attachment** to romantic partners. This kind of insight can have **astounding implications** for everyday life and might help many people in their romantic relationships.

We were happy at first to see Tamara meet someone new whom she was excited about, but as the relationship unfolded, we became increasingly concerned over her growing preoccupation with Greg. Her vitality gave way to anxiousness and insecurity. Most of the time she was either waiting for a call from Greg or was too worried about the relationship to enjoy spending time with us as she had done in the past. Her work was also suffering. Although she acknowledged that she would probably be happier without him, she was not able to muster the strength to leave.

As experienced mental health professionals, we had a hard time accepting that a sophisticated, intelligent woman such as Tamara had become so derailed from her usual self. Why would somebody we have known to be so adaptive with other life challenges become so powerless with this one? And why would Greg keep her at arm's length, even though it was clear to us that he did love her? We got a sur-

prisingly simple yet far-reaching insight into the situation from an unexpected source—one that we have since learned how to use as a guide for all adults in relationships.

Early Influences

At about the same time that Tamara was dating Greg, one of us (Levine) was working part-time in the Therapeutic Nursery at Columbia University. Here he used attachment-guided therapy to help mothers create a more secure bond with their children.

Attachment styles were first discovered by an American psychologist, Mary Ainsworth—who collaborated closely with British researcher John Bowlby, the founder of attachment theory. Bowlby proposed that throughout evolution, genetic selection favored people who became attached because it provided a survival advantage. In ancient times, people who were with somebody who deeply cared about them more often than not survived to pass on to their offspring the preference to form intimate bonds.

Ainsworth discovered three distinct ways in which babies and toddlers form attachments with caregivers: secure, anxious and avoidant (a fourth, less common style was later discovered). Infants with a secure attachment style are able to use their mother as a secure base from which to explore the environment, learn and thrive, and derive comfort and reassurance when they are upset or tired. Those who have an insecure attachment style (anxious or avoidant) are too preoccupied with the mother's whereabouts to be easily soothed (anxious) or too seemingly indifferent toward her to use her as a secure base for comfort in times of need (avoidant).

The powerful effect that attachment-guided treatment had on the relationship between mother

FAST FACTS

Together Forever?

1>> Researchers have long observed that children have distinct attachment styles to caregivers, which appear to predict certain behaviors.

2>> More recently, they have begun to appreciate that adults also display attachment styles in romantic settings—and these styles can predict the success of romantic relationships.

3>> The important lesson is that your love life does not have to be left to chance; understanding your attachment style, and your partner's, can help you find and build a satisfactory relationship.



and child encouraged Levine to deepen his knowledge of attachment theory. This work eventually led him to fascinating reading material: research findings published in 1987 by Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver, both then at the University of Denver, indicated that adults show patterns of attachment to their romantic partners similar to the patterns of attachment that children have with their parents. As he read more about adult attachment, Levine began to notice attachment behavior in adults all around him. He realized that this kind of insight could have astounding implications for everyday life and might help many people in their romantic relationships.

Once Levine realized the far-reaching implications of attachment theory for adult relationships, he called the other one of us (Heller), a longtime friend. He described how effectively attachment theory explained the range of behaviors in adult relationships and asked if she would collaborate with him to transform the academic studies and scientific

data he had been reading into practical guidelines and advice that people could use to actually change the course of their lives.

Theory and Practice

Attachment theory designates three main styles or manners in which individuals perceive and respond to intimacy in romantic relationships, which parallel those found in children. Basically, secure people feel comfortable with intimacy and are usually warm and loving. Anxious people crave intimacy, are often preoccupied with their relationships and tend to worry about their partner's ability to

SECURE

in their relationship together, partners can feel comfortable and contented to explore the world. Paradoxically, the more secure we are, the better we are at striking out on our own.

(The Authors)

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ANXIOUS
attachment style
craves closeness and
needs consistent
reassurance from
a partner.

love them back. Avoidant people equate intimacy with a loss of independence and constantly try to minimize closeness.

Every person, whether he or she has just started dating someone or has been married for 40 years, falls into one of these categories—or, more rarely, into a combination of anxious and avoidant. Just more than 50 percent are estimated to be secure, around 20 percent are anxious, 25 percent are avoidant, and the remaining 3 to 5 percent fall into the mixed anxious/avoidant category. During the past two decades since Hazan and Shaver's seminal paper on romantic adult attachment, hundreds of scientific studies in a wide range of countries and cultures have carefully delineated the ways in which adults behave in close romantic ties. Understanding these styles is an easy and reliable way to understand and predict people's behavior in any romantic situation.

We saw Tamara's story in an entirely new light now. Greg had an avoidant attachment style—accurate to the last detail. It predicted his distancing, his finding fault in Tamara, his initiating fights that set

back any progress in their relationship and his enormous difficulty in saying "I love you." Research findings explained that although he wanted to be close to her, he felt compelled to push her away.

Tamara was not unique either. Her behaviors, thoughts and reactions were typical for someone with an anxious attachment style. The theory foresaw her increasing clinginess in the face of his distancing: it predicted her inability to concentrate at work, her constant thoughts about the relationship and her oversensitivity about everything Greg did. It also predicted that even though she decided to break up with him, she could never muster the courage to do so.

Tamara and Greg spoke different languages and exacerbated each other's natural tendencies—hers to seek physical and emotional closeness and his to prefer independence and shy away from intimacy. The accuracy with which the theory described the pair was uncanny. Psychological approaches can be somewhat vague, leaving plenty of room for interpretation, but this theory managed to provide precise, evidence-based insights. Wouldn't it be great,

Most men and women are **only as needy** as their unmet needs. When their emotional needs are met, they usually **turn attention outward**. This result is sometimes referred to in the literature as the “dependency paradox.”

we thought, if we could help people have some kind of control over their attachments?

Dependency Paradox

Armed with our new insights about the implications of attachment styles in daily life, we started to perceive people’s actions very differently. But whereas research made it easy to better understand romantic liaisons, how could we make a difference in them? We set out to learn as much as we could about the attachment styles and the ways they intersected in ordinary situations. We interviewed people from all walks of life. We conducted observations of couples in action. We developed a technique that allows people to determine someone

else’s attachment style in everyday life. We taught people how they could use their attachment instincts not only to avoid hopeless relationships but also to uncover hidden pearls worth cultivating.

Attachment principles teach us that most men and women are only as needy as their unmet needs. When their emotional needs are met, they usually turn their attention outward. This result is sometimes referred to in the literature as the “dependency paradox”: the more effectively dependent people are on one another, the more independent and creative they become. Unfortunately, the significance of adult attachment goes unappreciated. Among adults, the prevailing notion is still that too much dependence in a relationship is a bad thing.

AVOIDANT attachment style characteristics include expressing independence from the romantic partner--favoring the company of friends, for instance, to a quiet evening at home.



Effective communication—the ability to state your feelings and needs **in a simple, nonthreatening manner**—is the quickest way to determine whether your prospective partner **will be suitable** for you.

What Is Your Style?

People have different attachment styles: anxious, avoidant or secure (or, more rarely, a combination of anxious and avoidant). The styles can help predict the long-term success of a relationship. Here are sample questions that show how the styles differ.



Anxious

- When my partner is away, I'm afraid that he or she might become interested in someone else.
- I often worry that my partner will stop loving me.



Avoidant

- My partners often want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being.
- I find it difficult to depend on romantic partners.



Secure

- I have little difficulty expressing my needs and wants to my partner.
- Sometimes people see me as boring because I create little drama in relationships.

Numerous studies show that once we become attached to someone, the two of us form one physiological unit. Our partner regulates our blood pressure, our heart rate, our breathing rate and the levels of hormones in our blood. Dependence is a fact; it is not a choice or preference. Does this mean that to be happy in a relationship we need to be joined with our partner at the hip or give up other aspects of our life such as our careers or friends? Paradoxically, the opposite is true. The ability to step into the world on our own often stems from the knowledge that there is someone beside us on whom we can rely. If we had to describe the science of adult attachment in one sentence, it would be: If you want to take the road to independence and happiness, first find the right person to depend on and then travel down it together.

What happens when the person we count on most does not fulfill his or her attachment role? In an experiment with functional MRI, James Coan of the University of Virginia and his colleagues

found that a woman holding the hand of her husband experiences less stress when faced with a mild electric shock than if she holds the hand of a stranger or nobody at all. In another study, Brian Baker of the University of Toronto found that if you have a mild form of high blood pressure, being in a satisfying marriage helps keep your blood pressure at healthier levels; if, on the other hand, you are not satisfied with your marriage, contact with your partner will raise your blood pressure whenever you are in physical proximity.

Elements of Attachment

Bowlby always claimed that attachment is an integral part of human behavior throughout the entire life span. Then, Mary Main of the University of California, Berkeley, and her colleagues discovered that adults, too, can be divided into attachment categories according to the way they recall their relationship with their caregivers, which in turn influences their parental behavior. Hazan and Shaver, independently of Main's work, found that adults have distinct attachment styles in romantic settings as well. They first discovered this by publishing a "love quiz" in the Rocky Mountain News in which they asked volunteers to mark the one statement out of three that best described their feelings and attitudes in relationships. The three statements corresponded to the three attachment styles and read as follows:

- I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me. (Measurement of secure attachment style.)
- I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others: I find it difficult to trust them completely and difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close and often romantic partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being. (Measurement of the avoidant style.)
- I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay



with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away. (Measurement of the anxious style.)

How can you improve romantic relationships? The first step is determining your own attachment style. Next, you need to learn how to identify the attachment styles of those around you. Effective communication—the ability to state your feelings and needs in a simple, nonthreatening manner beginning early on in the relationship—is the quickest, most direct way to determine whether your prospective partner will be suitable for you. Your date's response to effective communication can reveal more in five minutes than you could learn in months of dating without this kind of discourse. If the other person shows a sincere wish to understand your needs and put your well-being first, your future has promise. If he or she brushes aside your concerns as insignificant or makes you feel inadequate, foolish or self-indulgent, you can conclude that you may well be incompatible. By spelling out your needs,

you are also making it a lot easier for your partner to meet them. He or she does not need to guess whether something is bothering you—or what that something is.

The most important take-home message is that relationships should not be left to chance. Mismatched attachment styles can lead to a great deal of unhappiness in a relationship, even for people who love each other greatly. But even those with mismatched attachment styles can find more security in their relationships by tapping into the secure mind-set and finding secure role models. **M**

ANXIOUS/ AVOIDANT

When someone with an anxious style enters a relationship with someone with an avoidant style their differing needs for intimacy and closeness may result in a lot of frustration or dissatisfaction.

(Further Reading)

- ◆ **Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications.** Edited by Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver. Guilford Press, 1999.
- ◆ **An Item-Response Theory Analysis of Self-Report Measures of Adult Attachment.** R. C. Fraley, N. G. Waller and K. A. Brennan in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 78, pages 350–365; 2000.
- ◆ **Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change.** Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver. Guilford Press, 2007.
- ◆ **TK reference to online quiz.** Wording TK.
- ◆ See also the authors' Web site: www.attachedthebook.com Wording TK.