

Attachment Theory

HOW EARLY BONDS SHAPE HOW WE CONNECT

Developed by psychiatrist John Bowlby from the 1950s onward, and extended through the empirical work of Mary Ainsworth, whose "Strange Situation" studies identified distinct attachment styles in infants.

Bowlby proposed that humans have a biological drive to seek closeness with a caregiver, and that early experiences of that bond shape an internal "working model" — expectations about whether others can be relied on — that Bowlby believed could influence relationships "from the cradle to the grave."

FOUR ATTACHMENT STYLES, TWO UNDERLYING DIMENSIONS

LOW ANXIETY ABOUT ABANDONMENT

Secure

~60% IN AINSWORTH'S SAMPLE

Comfortable with closeness and independence. Trusts others are available and responsive.

Avoidant

~20% IN AINSWORTH'S SAMPLE

Uncomfortable with closeness, values self-reliance, may suppress attachment needs.

Anxious / Resistant

~20% IN AINSWORTH'S SAMPLE

Craves closeness, but worries about abandonment; can seem clingy or hard to soothe.

Disorganised

ADDED BY MAIN & SOLOMON, 1990

A mix of seeking and avoiding closeness — often linked to frightening or unpredictable caregiving.

HIGH AVOIDANCE OF CLOSNESS · HIGH ANXIETY ABOUT ABANDONMENT

Researchers now understand these four patterns as combinations of two underlying dimensions — how anxious a person feels about abandonment, and how much they avoid emotional closeness.

THE "SECURE BASE"

Bowlby's term for a caregiver a child can rely on for comfort, allowing the child to explore the world knowing safety is available if needed.

INTERNAL WORKING MODELS

Mental templates, built from early relationships, about whether others can be trusted and whether we ourselves are worthy of care.

WHAT SHAPES ATTACHMENT STYLE

Linked to how consistently sensitive and responsive a caregiver was to a child's needs, though not the only influence on how someone relates later in life.

THE STRANGE SITUATION (AINSWORTH, 1969)

Ainsworth observed 12-month-olds through a set sequence of separations and reunions with a caregiver in an unfamiliar room. **How infants responded at reunion — rather than at separation — was the key marker of attachment style:** securely attached infants were distressed by separation but easily soothed on return; avoidant infants showed little visible distress or reunion-seeking; anxious-resistant infants were hard to soothe and showed mixed approach-and-resist behaviour.

HOW IT MAY SHOW UP IN ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Comfort with both intimacy and independence (secure)

Worry about a partner's commitment (anxious)

Discomfort with emotional closeness (avoidant)

Wanting closeness while fearing it (disorganised)

Patterns can shift with new relationships and experiences

Reflection

Use the questions below to consider how this applies to you.

1 · WHICH PATTERN FEELS MOST FAMILIAR TO ME IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS?

2 · WHERE DO I THINK THIS PATTERN MAY HAVE COME FROM?

3 · WHAT WOULD A MORE SECURE RESPONSE LOOK LIKE, IN ONE SITUATION I FACE OFTEN?

SOURCES

Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). *Attachment and Loss*, Vol. 1: *Attachment*. Basic Books. · Ainsworth, M. D. S. & Wittig, B. A. (1969). Attachment and exploratory behavior of one-year-olds in a strange situation. Main, M. & Solomon, J. (1990). Procedures for identifying infants as disorganized/disoriented. In *Attachment in the Preschool Years*. University of Chicago Press.

© 2026 B&F Clinical Psychology
For educational purposes only. Not a substitute for professional advice.