

Attachment Under Stress

HOW DIFFERENT ATTACHMENT STYLES CAN RESPOND WHEN CONNECTION FEELS THREATENED

When we feel stressed, hurt or disconnected, our attachment system is activated. This can trigger automatic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving, shaped by our early experiences and past relationships. Understanding these patterns can help us respond with greater awareness and compassion — for ourselves and others.

Secure

Generally feels safe with self and others

UNDER STRESS MAY:

- Feel upset or anxious, but can usually stay regulated.
- Communicate needs clearly.
- Seek support appropriately.
- Work towards repair.
- Hold onto the belief that connection is still possible.

COMMON THOUGHTS

"This is hard, but we can talk about it."

"I can ask for what I need."

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS

- Open and honest communication.
- Willingness to listen.
- Seeks closeness and repair.
- Can acknowledge their part and try to understand the other person.

Anxious

Often fears rejection and craves closeness

UNDER STRESS MAY:

- Feel intense anxiety, worry or panic.
- Seek more reassurance and closeness.
- Fear being abandoned or not important.
- Become highly sensitive to perceived distance or changes in tone.
- Experience strong emotions that can feel overwhelming.

COMMON THOUGHTS

"Do they still care about me?"

"Am I too much?"

"What if they leave?"

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS

- Repeatedly seeks reassurance.
- May text, call or reach out more.
- Can become upset, clingy or demanding.
- May struggle to give space.
- Often prioritises the relationship over their own needs.

Avoidant

Often values independence and may feel uncomfortable with closeness

UNDER STRESS MAY:

- Feel the need to withdraw or create distance.
- Suppress or minimise emotions.
- Focus on being self-reliant and in control.
- Find it difficult to ask for support or express vulnerability.
- May become more busy, distracted or emotionally distant.

COMMON THOUGHTS

"I'm fine on my own."

"I don't need anyone."

"It's safer to keep my distance."

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS

- Withdraws or shuts down.
- Avoids difficult conversations.
- May appear calm, but can be feeling anxious underneath.
- Keeps a focus on independence and problem-solving.
- May struggle to show or respond to emotional needs.

Fearful / Disorganised

Often wants closeness but also fears getting hurt

UNDER STRESS MAY:

- Feel torn between wanting connection and fearing it.
- Experience intense and conflicting emotions.
- Become overwhelmed, confused or shut down.
- Expect rejection or feel unsafe, even with people they care about.
- May react in ways that seem inconsistent or hard to predict (e.g. pursue, then withdraw).

COMMON THOUGHTS

"I want to be close, but it's scary."

"What if they hurt me?"

"I don't know if it's safe to trust."

TYPICAL BEHAVIOURS

- Pushes for closeness, then pulls away.
- May become anxious, angry or shut down.
- Can struggle with trust, even in safe relationships.
- Often feels misunderstood.
- May have difficulty regulating emotions under stress.

WHAT CAN HELP?

- 1 Notice your pattern.** Recognise how you tend to respond under stress.
- 2 Understand the roots.** These patterns often developed as a way to cope.
- 3 Be curious, not critical.** Your reactions make sense given your experiences.
- 4 Communicate openly.** Share what you are feeling and need, when possible.
- 5 Practice new responses.** Small, consistent steps can create change over time.

REMEMBER

- Attachment patterns are not fixed. They can become more flexible with insight, support and new experiences.
- We all have aspects of different attachment styles, especially in different situations.
- Stress can activate old patterns, even in healthy relationships.
- Greater self-awareness can help us respond in ways that feel safer, kinder and more connected.

Awareness creates choice, and choice creates new possibilities for connection.

SOURCES

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