

John Bowlby

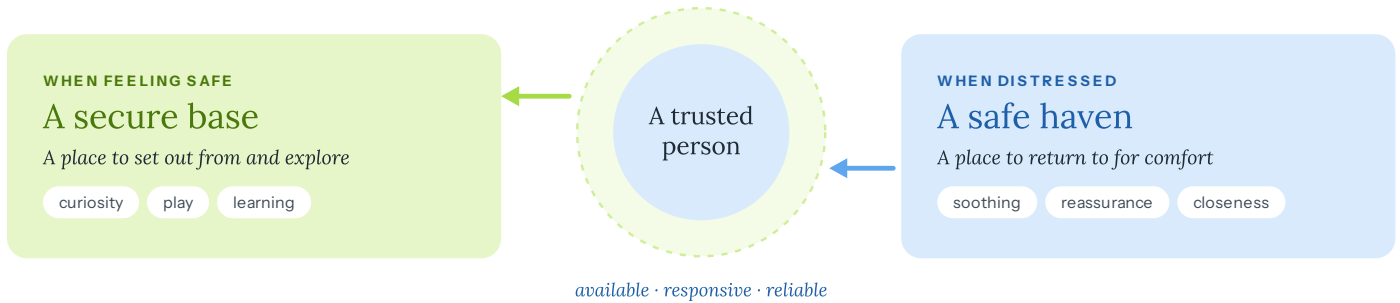
ATTACHMENT THINKERS · BONDS, SEPARATION AND LOSS

The founder of attachment theory, and the idea of a secure base

John Bowlby (1907–1990) was a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst at the Tavistock Clinic whose attachment theory, set out in his WHO report (1951) and *Attachment and Loss* trilogy (1969–1980), changed how we understand children's needs, relationships and grief. With colleagues such as Mary Ainsworth and James Robertson, he showed that early bonds matter throughout life.

01 Going out, and coming back

original illustration informed by Bowlby (1988)



02 Attachment across a life

the people we turn to change; the need continues

INFANCY Caregivers Closeness and comfort from a few familiar people.	CHILDHOOD Family and trusted adults A base for play, school and friendships.	ADOLESCENCE Friends grow in importance Exploring further, while still needing a base.	ADULTHOOD Partners and close friends Mutual support, each a base for the other.	LATER LIFE Family and community Connection remains a source of comfort.
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03 Six key ideas

in plain language

Attachment as a basic need Seeking closeness to a trusted person is a built-in system that helps keep young children safe, not simply a response to being fed.	Internal working models Early experiences shape expectations about whether others will be there, and whether we are worthy of care.	Security supports exploration Children who feel confident their caregiver is available are often freer to explore, learn and try new things.
Separation matters His work with James Robertson helped change hospital practice, so that parents could stay close to unwell children.	Grief is a natural process He described mourning as a natural, often lengthy response to losing an attachment figure.	Patterns can change Attachment patterns can persist, and can also shift through new relationships, life events and therapy.

04 Responses to separation and loss

patterns he described, which vary between people

A young child separated from a caregiver

Phases of grief, which often overlap

PROTEST Crying and searching	DESPAIR Quiet and withdrawn	DETACHMENT Seeming to cope	NUMBING Shock and disbelief	YEARNING Longing and searching	DISORGANISATION Despair, loss of direction	REORGANISATION Rebuilding life
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05 Reflecting on these ideas

optional

Who or what has been a secure base for me, past or present?	Where do I turn for comfort when things feel hard?	How might early experiences show up in my relationships now?

To bring to my next session:

A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

Attachment theory is one of the most researched ideas in psychology. In one 20-year study, attachment security was often stable from infancy to adulthood but changed more often after major life events, so patterns can persist yet stay open to revision (Waters et al., 2000). Some early claims about maternal care were later refined; attachment figures include any consistent caregiver.

SOURCES

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 Waters, E., Merrick, S., Treboux, D., Crowell, J., & Albersheim, L. (2000). Attachment security in infancy and early adulthood: A twenty-year longitudinal study. *Child Development*, 71(3), 684–689.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8624.00176>