Emotional Unavailability

RELATIONSHIPS · CLOSENESS AND DISTANCE

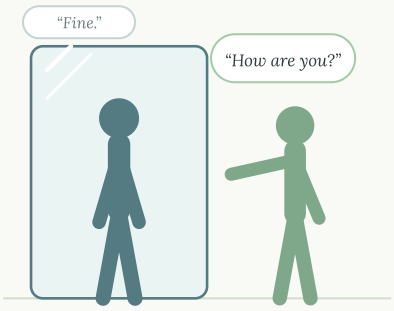
Understanding the distance we keep, in ourselves or in others

"Emotionally unavailable" is an everyday phrase for difficulty with emotional closeness: sharing feelings, being vulnerable, or letting others rely on us. You may recognise it in yourself, a partner, a parent or a friend. It usually develops for understandable reasons, and it can change.

A DESCRIPTION, NOT A DIAGNOSIS

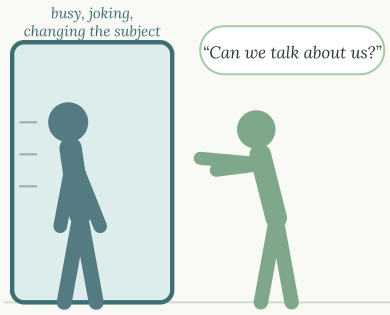
Emotional unavailability is not a clinical diagnosis. Research describes related patterns, such as attachment avoidance and emotional suppression. It can be long-standing, or temporary during stress, grief, depression or exhaustion. Use it to understand patterns, not to label a person.

1 PRESENT, BUT OUT OF REACH



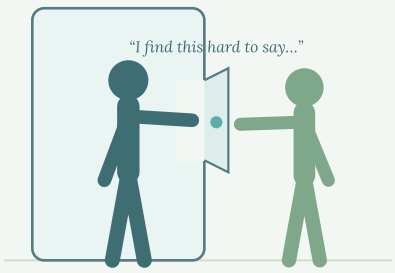
Here in body, hard to reach inside

2 WHEN CLOSENESS GROWS



The pull to step back

3 OPENING A WINDOW



Letting someone in, a little at a time

Emotional distance often protects something. *Closeness can be built a window at a time.*

01 What it can look like

tick what you recognise

IN MYSELF

- [ ] I keep conversations practical or light when feelings come up
- [ ] I feel uneasy, trapped or irritated when someone wants more closeness
- [ ] I find it hard to name what I feel, even to myself
- [ ] I prefer to handle problems alone and rarely ask for support
- [ ] I pull back after moments of closeness
- [ ] I focus on others' flaws when a relationship deepens

IN SOMEONE ELSE

- [ ] Conversations about feelings are brushed aside or joked away
- [ ] I feel lonely, even when we are together
- [ ] Plans or commitment stay vague
- [ ] They seem close one day and distant the next
- [ ] My needs are met with withdrawal or defensiveness
- [ ] I end up doing most of the emotional work

02 Why it can develop

often more than one

Learned self-reliance
When closeness felt unreliable early on, keeping feelings in can become a way to stay safe (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Past hurt
Betrayal, loss or rejection can make vulnerability feel risky.

Family or cultural norms
Some of us learned that feelings are private, or a sign of weakness.

Overwhelm
Stress, grief, depression or burnout can leave little emotional capacity.

Habit of holding back
Routinely hiding feelings is linked with less closeness to others (Gross & John, 2003).

03 What distance protects, and what it costs

both can be true

WHAT IT MAY PROTECT

A sense of control and independence; protection from rejection, criticism or being overwhelmed; space to cope in a familiar way.

WHAT IT CAN COST

Loneliness on both sides, partners feeling shut out, conflict that never resolves, and missing out on comfort and support when it is needed.

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04 My closeness comfort

how comfortable I feel with each, 0–10

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sharing my feelings	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Hearing someone else's feelings	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Asking for support	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Being depended on	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Physical affection	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Talking about the future together	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Saying "I miss you" or "I need you"	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
Staying in a difficult conversation	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	very uncomfortable										*very comfortable*

05 Moments of distance

mine, or someone else's

THE MOMENT OF CLOSENESS *what was happening*	WHAT WAS FELT *by me, or what I sensed in them*	HOW DISTANCE WAS CREATED *tick, or describe*	WHAT MIGHT BE UNDERNEATH *fear, overwhelm, old hurt*
		☐ changed subject ☐ got busy ☐ joked ☐ went quiet ☐ left	
		☐ changed subject ☐ got busy ☐ joked ☐ went quiet ☐ left	
		☐ changed subject ☐ got busy ☐ joked ☐ went quiet ☐ left	
		☐ changed subject ☐ got busy ☐ joked ☐ went quiet ☐ left	

06 Next steps

complete the side that applies

IF IT IS ME

Opening a window, a little at a time

One feeling I could name to someone this week

A moment I could stay in for a few minutes longer

One small thing I could ask for help with

IF IT IS SOMEONE ELSE

Looking after my side of it

What I need from this relationship

How I could ask for it, calmly and specifically

Support I have elsewhere, and my limits if nothing changes

WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Research on attachment describes "deactivating" strategies, such as keeping distance and downplaying needs, that some people use when closeness feels risky; these patterns can shift through supportive relationships and therapy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Habitually suppressing emotion has been linked with less closeness and social support (Gross & John, 2003). Change is usually gradual, and works best when pressure is low.

SOURCES

Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*(2), 348–362. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.348

Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2016). *Attachment in adulthood: Structure, dynamics, and change* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

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