IN THIS CHAPTER

- Understanding why attachment matters
- Exploring the research
- Tracing the origins of attachment patterns

Chapter 1
Understanding Attachment

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Exploring the world of attachment requires entering into a framework that deeply values relationships. Attachment theory focuses on people's need to forge bonds with their caregivers from the moment of birth, and it continues to impact attachments in any other relationships through a person's lifetime.

Attachment theory attends to the physiological and psychological processes that shape how people connect. It provides a perspective that recognizes closeness, independence, safety, and vulnerability. Everything in attachment is dynamic and always shifting, yet the need to connect is constant. The path toward relational health starts with noticing and accepting how these forces show up in ourselves and others. This chapter introduces attachment and why it matters in our lives and relationships.

Taking Attachment Seriously

There are good reasons to take attachment theory seriously. Why does it matter?

- Attachment shapes your entire relational world. Attachment isn't just a childhood concept; it's the blueprint through which you interpret people and safety.

It influences how you read facial expressions, tones, and intentions. It shapes how much trust you extend and how quickly you pull away or confidently you move toward others. It affects your capacity for intimacy, independence, and repair after conflict.



REMEMBER

- Attachment is not just feelings; its biological. Attachment lives in the nervous system. It's built into the brain and your body's response patterns. The attachment system is tied to survival instincts, seeking closeness, coregulation, and protection. Hormones like oxytocin, cortisol, and adrenaline work with attachment needs.



WARNING

Ignoring attachment has real consequences such as:

- **Difficulty regulating emotions:** Difficulty calming down, staying grounded, or tolerating discomfort
- **Recurring relational conflict:** Misreading partner's intentions, escalating protest behaviors, avoidance, or repeated rupture cycles
- **Repeated patterns of hurt:** Choosing familiar but unhealthy dynamics, reenacting unresolved attachment injuries, or getting stuck in the same relational scripts

Attachment can also have an impact on our mental and physical health, resulting in chronic stress, inflammation, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances because the nervous system never truly rests when attachment system feels threatened.



TIP

When you take attachment seriously, you can pay attention and increase your awareness:

- You can become intentional about slowing down and noticing the patterns in your relationships. You can notice what you reach for, what you avoid, and what you fear.
- You not only notice your own attachment system but can also begin to notice and understand the attachment system of your friends, family members, and loved ones.

Researching the Research

To understand the details of attachment, it helps to understand how attachment theory developed. It didn't appear out of thin air but came from decades of observations and experiments developed by studying people across infancy,

adolescence, and adulthood. This section walks you through the foundational research so you can see why attachment matters for survival and how it develops across different stages of life.

Why attachment is essential for survival

John Bowlby was a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who radically shifted how the world understood human development. Before Bowlby, mainstream psychology assumed children were mainly motivated by food, reward, and conditioning. Bowlby challenged that position by arguing that children are driven by the need for emotional connection and protection. He was interested in the distress that babies felt when they were separated from their caregivers. Bowlby observed that when children were scared, they wanted to be close to their caregivers.

Here are the Pillars of Bowlby's work:

- **Attachment is a survival system.** Bowlby argued that humans are born with an innate system designed to keep us alive. Long before infants can walk or talk, they're wired to seek warmth and safety through crying, reaching for, and tracking their caregivers.
- **Early relationships shape internal working models.** Bowlby proposed that our earliest relational experiences become the blueprint for how we understand ourselves and others. Working models are formed from how we were held, responded to, soothed, or ignored. Bowlby suggested that a child's early attachment creates a template that guides their expectations and the way they show up in future relationships.

  Over time, these repeated experiences with caregivers shape a child's internal working model, deeply held beliefs about themselves, other people, and what they can expect from relationships, as described here:

  - **When caregivers are consistently attuned,** a child's nervous system learns, "my needs matter. People can be trusted." This creates an internal working model that supports secure attachment. Read more about secure attachment in Chapter 4.
  - **When caregiving is inconsistent, intrusive, unpredictable, or emotionally unavailable,** a child's working model might sound like, "I need to cling to stay safe," "I shouldn't need anyone," or "Closeness is risky."

- **Separation and loss matter deeply.** Bowlby took his observations and theories and applied them to grief. Bowlby identified a pattern in the way children responded to separation from their caregivers. He described three phases:
  - **Protest:** When a child is first separated from their caregiver, they cling, cry, and have an immediate intense reaction. He found that protest is the initial reaction to loss.
  - **Despair:** Despair happens when the caregiver does not return and the child becomes withdrawn and sad.
  - **Detachment:** This last stage is where the child emotionally detaches.

  These reactions to separation can later influence the way attachment patterns show up.
- **A secure base gives a child safety.** In Bowlby's work, a secure base is a caregiver who provides security and consistency so that the child can feel confident to go explore the world and return.

Categorizing attachments in infants

Developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth took Bowlby's ideas and turned them into something people could visualize. Ainsworth and her colleague Sylvia Bell created a research procedure called The Strange Situation, which was a short play session that followed this structure:

1. A caregiver and baby enter a room.
2. The baby plays.
3. A stranger enters.
4. The caregiver leaves.
5. The caregiver returns.

In the study, about 100 one- to two-year-olds and their mothers came into a playroom filled with toys. The setup was designed to feel novel enough that the children would explore but not so unfamiliar that they would immediately panic.

Over the course of 20 minutes, the mother and a friendly stranger took turns entering and leaving the room while the baby played. Researchers carefully watched for the following things:

- How the baby explored
- How upset they became when the mother left
- How they behaved when she returned
- How they interacted with the stranger

Patterns were revealed about how babies look to their caregivers for comfort and safety. From these patterns, Ainsworth identified different attachment styles, which became the foundation of modern attachment theory.

Ainsworth's three attachment patterns

Ainsworth identified three primary attachment patterns:

- **Secure attachment:** Ainsworth observed that with this form of attachment, the baby was upset when the caregiver left but was comforted easily when they returned. The baby uses the caregiver as the base, checking in but also exploring.
- **Anxious ambivalent attachment:** With this form of attachment, the baby displayed high levels of distress when the caregiver left, but they weren't comforted by their return. They also were wary of the stranger and didn't show as much exploration behavior.
- **Anxious avoidant attachment:** In this case, the baby appeared unbothered when the caregiver left and also avoided or ignored the caregiver upon their return. These babies were stressed physiologically, but they don't show it.

The importance of Ainsworth's work for adults



REMEMBER

Even though Ainsworth did her research with infants, the categories became the foundation for modern adult attachment theory. These early strategies for getting connection, protest behaviors for anxious attachment, and shutting down for avoidant attachment show up later in adult relationships, especially during conflict.

Attachment in adolescents

Joseph P. Allen and Joseph Tan's work focuses on what happens to attachment as children move into adolescence, a stage where everything shifts in the brain, body, social life, and, of course, relationships with caregivers.

The core concepts of Allen and Tan's work include these ideas:

- **Adolescence reshapes attachment.** Teens don't outgrow attachment. They reorganize it. Where young children rely directly on caregivers for comfort and coregulation, adolescents begin shifting that dependence from parents to peers. Attachment needs for safety, acceptance, and attunement remain the same.
- **Teens still need a secure base.** Allan and Tan emphasize that secure attachment in adolescence looks like:
  - A teen who feels they can explore their world but still return home for support
  - A parent who stays available, responsive, and nonreactive even when the teen pushes back
  - A parent who provides emotional scaffolding rather than control

What is emotional scaffolding?

Emotional scaffolding involves guiding a teen's emotional development by providing support and a secure base while gradually letting them develop autonomy. Control is more of an authoritative approach that can hinder teens in developing independence.

Emotional scaffolding is guiding, validation, intimacy, dialogue, coaching, debriefing, and staying attuned and consistent. Control is invalidation, dominance, and micromanaging. Research shows that high levels of control are linked to negative impacts.

Threats to the attachment system look different at various ages. In infancy, a threat shows up as crying, clinging, or shutting down. In adolescence, the same attachment system exists, but it's expressed with teen versions of these behaviors. In adolescents, protest behaviors might look like:

- Emotional flooding is feeling so overwhelmed that it becomes difficult to think clearly, stay present, or communicate effectively. It can show up in the following ways:
  - People pleasing
  - Jealousy
  - Fear of abandonment
  - "Do you even care?" testing behaviors

In adolescents, avoidant behaviors may look like:

- Pulling away
- Saying, "I'm fine" instead of sharing emotions or experiences
- Overindependence
- Minimizing emotions

In adolescence, peer relationships become part of the attachment system. For securely attached teens, this development creates healthy autonomy and supportive friendships.

However, for insecurely attached teens, peer relationships can become:

- **Overly fused (often linked to anxious attachment):** Some insecurely attached teens become intensely dependent on friendships or romantic relationships. They may fear rejection, struggle with boundaries, or feel anxious when there is distance or conflict.
- **Highly conflictual (can occur in insecure or disorganized attachment patterns):** Other teens may experience relationships as emotionally volatile, moving quickly between closeness and anger, reassurance seeking, withdrawal or emotional outbursts.
- **Distant or dismissive (often linked to avoidant attachment):** Some teens protect themselves by minimizing emotional needs, avoiding vulnerability, or keeping others at arm's length.



REMEMBER

This shift from attachment to caregivers to attachment to peers is one of the most important developmental tasks of adolescence.

Despite the shift to attachment to peers, parent regulation still predicts teen regulation. Allen and Tan's work found that teens still look to their parents for help with regulation, even though they may be more independent. The parents' nervous system still impacts the adolescent and can assist a teen through:

- Modeling
- Remaining calm under stress
- Providing healthy boundaries
- Assisting with repair after conflict

The VIDA Project: Shedding light on teen attachment



TECHNICAL STUFF

In 1998, the VIDA Project followed 184 adolescents for more than a decade to understand how attachment develops and how it shapes later relationships. Here are some of the key findings from that research:

- Early adolescent attachment security predicts later romantic competence. Teens who were more secure communicated better and handled conflict better.
- Insecure attachment predicts behavioral and emotional difficulties.
- Secure teens function better with peers. They showed stronger peer competence and were less vulnerable to negative peer pressure.



REMEMBER

The bottom line from this project is that adolescent attachment is a major developmental pathway that shapes relationships in adulthood.

Applying attachment theory to adult romantic relationships

Cindy Hazen and Phillip Shaver extended Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment framework beyond intimacy and childhood to show that romantic relationships function as attachment bonds. Their work was foundational in shifting the field toward understanding adult love through the attachment lens.

Here are the key contributions from Hazen and Shaver's work:

- **Adult romantic partners serve the same attachment functions as caregivers.** Haxen and Shaver proposed that romantic partners act as:
  - Safe havens
  - Secure bases
  - Figures of proximity
  - Figures whose loss causes distress

  Attachment is not just for children!



REMEMBER

- **Adult attachment styles mirror infant attachment patterns.** Hazen and Shaver argued that the attachment styles observed by Ainsworth appear again in adulthood as:

- Secure
- Anxious
- Avoidant

» **Early experiences shape later romantic expectations.** Drawing on Bowlby's work, Hazen and Shaver showed that internal working models formed early in life guide how adults:

- Perceive partner availability
- Interpret conflict
- Regulate emotion
- Seek or withdraw closeness

The disorganized attachment style

The fourth attachment pattern, disorganized attachment, was identified by Mary Main and Judith Solomon in the late 1980s when they noticed a subset of infants in the Strange Situation Study did not fit the existing secure, avoidant, or anxious types. These children showed contradictory, confused, or frozen behaviors when seeking comfort.

At the heart of disorganized attachment is a fundamental conflict: The caregiver is the source of comfort *and* fear. Disorganized attachment style is a combination of anxious and avoidant behaviors, leading to a push-pull dynamic. Read more about disorganized attachment in Chapter 7.

Where Do Attachment Styles Come From?

Where do our attachment styles come from? John Bowlby, a pioneer in attachment theory, believed they grow out of a person's lived experiences, especially the interactions they have with their caregivers in infancy. But research now shows that attachment isn't the product of just one source.

For example, newer research indicates that genes can also play an important role in attachment styles. One study by Leslie Atkinson (2000), which drew data from more than 2,000 parent/child pairs, found a weak but meaningful link between sensitive caregiving and secure attachment. The reason the connection wasn't stronger was because other factors also shape attachment, such as a child's temperament, a parent's mental health, social support, and even the amount of nonparental childcare.



REMEMBER

Attachment styles aren't fixed. There is increasing evidence that a person's attachment styles can shift over time, and adult romantic relationships can strengthen someone's sense of security or, in some cases, make us feel less safe in close relationships.

Understanding these core ideas gives you a roadmap for recognizing your own patterns and offers a hopeful starting point for building more secure, grounded connections moving forward.