

# Getting CLOSER

Everything you need to know about Attachment

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*“The therapist’s role is analogous to that of a mother who provides her child with a secure base from which to explore the world.” (Bowlby, 1988)*

## WHAT IS ATTACHMENT THEORY?

Attachment theory has its roots with John Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, whose work was developed by later contributors to the field. Bowlby’s main contribution was the recognition that a child needs to feel attached to his caregiver. He understood the innate necessity of the infant to maintain physical proximity to its caregiver, not just for emotional security but also literally for survival.

**There are three distinct types of behaviour which illustrate this attachment system which were outlined by Bowlby:**

- Seeking, monitoring, and attempting to maintain proximity to a protective attachment figure – which could be the mother or father or, in fact, any caregiver, but most commonly tends to be the mother regardless of the amount of time spent with her.
- Using the attachment figure as a “secure base” – from which the child can explore the environs and unfamiliar experiences.
- Fleeing to an attachment figure as a “safe haven” in situations of danger, as opposed to a physical place.

Although ‘proximity seeking’ is clearly crucial in attachment thinking, Bowlby also came to realise that it signified the need of the infant to seek comfort and emotional soothing from the caregiver. It is not just the physical availability of the caregiver, but more importantly the emotional availability and responsiveness of the caregiver. In other words, it is their ability to comfort and soothe the child.

**ATTACHMENT THEORY HAS BECOME ALMOST** universally accepted in the world of psychology, neuroscience, and anthropology in this generation. It seems to have become the foundation for much of the work therapists do in terms of understanding their clients’ behaviours and in helping their clients heal from emotional childhood wounds that may have developed with primary caregivers. It is also commonly accepted that the therapeutic relationship can provide an opportunity to repair and correct these unhealthy attachment patterns.

The safe containing environment provided by the therapist will mirror the safe-haven in the parent-child relationship. As the client begins to make sense of his past and how that impacts on his present relationships (partners, family members, colleagues) this will lead to a more fully integrated self and can ultimately create a more coherent life narrative. Clients often enter therapy wanting to work on relationships and it is my firm belief that by having an understanding of the role attachment plays can be empowering and may facilitate a more effective therapeutic process.

## THE DIFFERENT ATTACHMENT STYLES

Mary Ainsworth developed attachment theory extensively, most famously by devising a laboratory assessment lasting around twenty minutes which became known as *The Strange Situation*, in which she observed twenty-six infants’ interactions and their attachment behaviours with their mothers, in which they were left alone briefly, then with a stranger, and finally reunited with their mother. Having monitored these infants’ behaviour, and after much evaluation, Ainsworth categorised the different types of attachment styles in infancy as follows: *secure, avoidant, and ambivalent*.

*Secure* attachment was demonstrated as the child having the ability to explore their environment when they feel safe and seek comfort from their mother when they do not. The infant's response of being soothed and calmed by the mother was key to showing their secure attachment. The mothers of secure babies reflected sensitivity and being in tune with their infants' needs.

*Avoidant* babies were counterintuitively not fazed by the separation or the reunion with their mother. They barely demonstrated any reaction when their mother left and tended to reject or ignore the mother upon her return. Their lack of distress, however, has been shown to simply be a cool façade since, according to later research conducted, while their heart rates were not raised as was the case with the secure babies, their level of cortisol (stress hormone) was raised significantly higher than that of their secure peers.

Ainsworth came to the conclusion that these *avoidant* infants had given up on receiving comfort and were often noted as going limp when hugged as opposed to returning the embrace. This

was in response usually to mothers who were observed to be lacking in their ability to express emotions, with a dislike of physical contact and unable to connect with their infants.

The third attachment style is *ambivalent*. These babies showed distress upon their mother's departure and were difficult or impossible to calm upon her return. They were preoccupied with their mother's whereabouts but on her return showed anger or tantrums and some were so inconsolable that they appeared to be searching for a mother who was not there.

The development of attachment theory research was picked up in the mid-seventies by Mary Main. Main's most significant contribution was the *Adult Attachment Interview* (AAI). Through her interviews, Main discovered and categorised a fourth attachment style, known as *disorganised* attachment. A *disorganised* attachment would be exhibited by the child expressing bizarre behaviour upon the return of the parent. The child would move towards the parent and simultaneously recoil from them in a hesitant kind

of dance, resulting in the child collapsing in a heap on the floor. This kind of behaviour was believed to be the result of abuse or neglect. Main suggests that the parent becomes both a safe-haven for the child but also paradoxically a source of danger.

These four different attachment styles have been shown to have long term effects reaching from infancy into adulthood.\*

According to Daniel Siegel, a contemporary psychiatrist and writer who specialises in interpersonal neurobiology, parents with unresolved trauma or loss experiences stand a high chance of displaying behaviours which their children will experience as terrifying, thus creating a disorganised attachment in them. By not healing oneself they are inevitably perpetuating the multigenerational

\*To avoid confusion, note that Adult Attachment Styles have been categorised as follows:

- Secure
- Preoccupied or anxious (ambivalent)
- Dismissive (avoidant)
- Fearful (disorganised)

“HEALING FROM ONE’S PAST TRAUMAS NOT ONLY HELPS THE INDIVIDUAL, BUT BENEFITS THEIR CHILDREN AND FUTURE GENERATIONS TOO.”

transmission of unhealthy attachment patterns. Healing from one’s past traumas not only helps the individual, but benefits their children and future generations too.

Attachment theory has splintered off into many different directions of research such as in the area of child development. Within this sphere falls the topic of attunement. Peter Fonagy, a Hungarian-born British psychoanalyst and clinical psychologist, observed that parents who are attuned to their children convey empathy through mirroring. This happens by the parent making facial expressions or vocal displays that match or mirror the baby’s own moods, such as audible sighs to reflect the baby’s disappointment or sounds and movements that match the baby’s excitement. These kinds of interactions enable social referencing to take place. In other words, they plant the seed for the baby to begin to develop its own sense of self, its own emotions, separate from the parent.

Reflective function is also an important part of being attuned to one’s child. This means that the child is able to find their own internal experience by knowing they are being held in their mother’s mind. This is a significant part of attachment, because the child feels that they are seen. If a mother senses something in her child she can ask the child questions as a way of being reflective, like: ‘Are you feeling sad?’ This attuned question helps the child develop a sense of self and helps them feel soothed or regulated. Fonagy found that parents with a strong capacity to reflect were three to four times more likely to have secure children than parents whose capacity was deemed weak. Basically, it feels good to be seen.

Another area important to a child’s development is mentalising, which is the ability to reflect on the mind of another, to consider or imagine what others are feeling and to empathise. For example, one of my clients is able to understand

that her father’s feelings of anger towards her stem from his own issues with his attachment figures and upbringing. We can help our children develop this skill by having a reflective dialogue. For example, when a parent is reading a story to their child, they can discuss what the characters might be thinking and feeling. In general, talking about one’s emotions, interactions which encourage empathic engagement, and helping the child deepen their understanding of themselves and others will bring about mentalising, empathy, and lead to a healthy attachment.

Attachment theory continues to evolve well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More recently, Siegel claims that in most people there is no one simple attachment type. Rather, people tend to have a combination of attachment styles which may vary depending on various things. Furthermore, many people will attach differently to each parent.

A lack of attunement in childhood sadly can result in adults who do not feel seen or validated by their significant other. Certain models of couples therapy such as EFT (Emotion focused therapy) will also look at the couples’ attachment bond to each other. In fact, there has been a lot of research into adult attachment and romantic relationships (more about that another time). After all, humans are hardwired for connection, and this need does not end when we grow up.

The story of the birth of the Jewish people provides the perfect parallel narrative of secure attachment. After being enslaved and abused for many years in Egypt (see *disorganised attachment*

above), the Jewish nation was taken out of their prison of physical, emotional and psychological torture and began to attach to G-d. According to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, the single most important metaphor of the Torah is the parent-child one. As G-d’s children, we turn to Him as one would to a loving parent, to provide us with safety, a secure base, and protection. We crave to be close to Him, which in attachment terms is “proximity seeking”. The Pesach story, the birth of the Jewish nation, mirrors Bowlby’s attachment theory precisely. G-d took the Jews out of Egypt, literally rescuing them from danger, because they were like young children, who could not help themselves. They were totally dependent on Hashem. We see this repeated symbolically with the manna and the well of Miriam which nourished them, as well as the clouds of glory, which gave them protection. All their basic needs were taken care of and G-d was attuned to their every need. They were completely reliant on Him and had to learn how to trust. At times, they complained and wanted to be taken back to the familiar environment of their abusers, which is typical of victim/slave mentality. However, with time and patience, they developed trust in G-d, and a secure relationship ensued.

The therapeutic relationship can similarly provide a reparative relational experience which can be deeply healing and helpful, lending a secure base where the client feels contained. The connection developed in such a collaborative relationship can aid the insecurely attached client to gradually develop their own internalised secure base and by offering attunement, empathy, and predictability, the client can move towards the security which they may not have received in childhood. ■