

The Avoidant Attachment Style

If your score on the Attachment Assessment placed you in the avoidant style, this chapter will help you learn more about what that means and what you can do about it. The higher you scored, the more you're likely to express relationship insecurity through avoidant patterns of behavior. Whereas insecurity comes out as protest and blame in those with an anxious (preoccupied) style, the avoidant style minimizes or denies a need for others in the first place. After a presentation of the traits associated with this attachment style, the information will help you develop an awareness of how this style plays out in your relationships (whether you are avoidantly attached or your partner is), learn to accept yourself and others, develop the skills to communicate clearly, and learn how to strengthen your relationship bonds in a way that will leave you feeling more secure.

Traits of the Avoidant Style

Considering your score on the assessment, the higher your insecurity score, the more likely it is that your relationships could be affected negatively by avoidant attachment behaviors. If your insecurity score was low, your relationships may not be as affected.

People with an avoidant attachment style . . .

- Are self-reliant; that is, good at dealing with situations on their own.
- Aren't likely to complain but will show displeasure indirectly.
- Talk about things and ideas, not about themselves.
- Are more likely to report, or be reported as having, memory problems.
- Prefer to deal with conflict in the quickest way possible, even if it means cutting corners.

Avoidance behavior can show up in a variety of ways, like outright ignoring conflict, denying what happened, or escaping discomfort through substances. But it can also be subtler, such as people-pleasing or focusing so much on being helpful to others that you neglect yourself. It can be any response that protects you from feeling ashamed or inadequate.

Here are some examples of people I have come across in my practice who have an avoidant attachment style. As always, the names have been changed.

Kyle has been married for 16 years. Over the past few years, he and his wife have fought more often, with his wife complaining that Kyle doesn't talk about his feelings and gets defensive. Kyle wants to make his wife happy but doesn't know how to change, and he gets stressed when she brings it up over and over.

Dylan has been the peacemaker for his family and friends from age eight, when his parents divorced and it was discovered that he had a talent for listening and helping people feel better. He likes being the peacemaker, because as long as people are complaining to him, they can't be mad at him! He is so good at it that no one ever has an issue with him; they think he is "perfect." Dylan wonders whether people would still love and accept him if he weren't "perfect."

Jee grew up in a strict, fundamentalist Christian family, with little physical affection or emotional connection. She no longer considers herself religious after coming out as a lesbian and being rejected by the church and her parents. Even though she acts aloof about her family's rejection of her, deep down, she longs for their acceptance and can't think about it without getting tearful.

So how do you know if you're playing out an avoidant pattern in your relationships with others? Your relationship partners often tell you that something is getting in the way of their connecting with you, even if it's not readily apparent to you why it's a problem. After enough feedback like this, you might wonder if certain patterns of yours are connected to an unrealistic expectation of self-reliance. This chapter can help you clarify what avoidant attachment behavior looks like and what to do about it.

Self-Awareness

Do you tend to resist depending on people and prefer to keep your distance, even with people who are significant to you? You might have your reasons, but if you have an avoidant style, it boils down to the fact that when you get too close, you feel discomfort, and a type of stress gets activated simply by your becoming dependent on people in practical or emotional ways. Just as with any other form of stress, people create patterns of coping that are not entirely conscious or constructive.

Avoidant attachment in adulthood can take many forms, and the next section describes some patterns that are common for people with the avoidant style. As you read through the description, keep track of how much you identify with, either in the present or in relationships in the past.

HOW AVODANT ATTACHMENT FEELS TO YOU

You're fairly self-reliant and proud of that. You probably don't like to talk about yourself very much. You don't chase the spotlight by making your needs known, and it makes you cringe when other people do. Logic and reason

are your comfort zones; feelings, not so much. This has served you well in many ways.

Can you think of three specific memories from your childhood when you felt supported, celebrated, or validated by the adults around you? Take as long as you need. Many people can think of warm, joyful, and heartfelt memories with a specific person from childhood. If you can't come up with specific recollections right now, that would go along with an insecure avoidant style. It doesn't mean you don't have fond memories; you just might have fonder ones of being by yourself and entertaining yourself than of being with people. Perhaps you even preferred it that way! Some of the people I've known with strong avoidant tendencies said their fondest memories of childhood involved being by themselves for hours in the woods, daydreaming, or inventing entire plays with stuffed animals in their room.

If you do have memories of your parents showering you with affection, it's likely that in order to get that positive attention, you had to do something "right." They praised or rewarded you for your intelligence, beauty, athleticism, personality, or talent. The message you got was that you were worthy of love and attention when you made the family *look good*.

As an adult, then, it doesn't come naturally to believe that support will be there for you. You're more likely to believe that needing support would inconvenience others, and therefore you can be a better friend, partner, or team/family member by being low maintenance. You train yourself and others to think that you simply don't have needs. You identify with the phrases "I don't need much" and "My needs are simple."

If you're single, you might be interested in a romantic partnership, or want one someday, but you're often unsure because of the potential drawbacks. This leaves you wary about that type of commitment. To test the waters, you might have brief relationships that you end before things get too serious or involved. Breaking up might be uncomfortable, but it's better than feeling trapped later on.

If you're looking for a partner, you might prefer someone who "doesn't take themselves too seriously" or is "easygoing." You value people who

aren't too fussy or ask too much of you. If they are too needy, you feel stressed or inadequate and are not likely to keep them around.

If you are already in a committed romantic partnership, you might care a lot for your partner but also need a good amount of distance or "space." If someone gets too close without your invitation, you can feel uncomfortable, even if it isn't rational. Sometimes you may start to feel pressure or stress in a relationship without fully knowing why, and this makes you want to take cover

As far as your partner's needs and wants, you have a limited tolerance for how much they ask for, even if you can understand intellectually why your partner is asking for it. But in the moment, it just doesn't *seem* necessary. If you have one complaint in your relationship, it's that your partner needs too much from you. When you feel this unwelcome pressure, you seek hobbies, activities, and escapes that are familiar and predictable to you, like work, exercise, porn, or substances.

When you recognize an important desire or need of your own, it can be a lot of work, and even scary, to acknowledge and communicate it to others. It might feel unfamiliar, and you might have little confidence in people to meet your need—which is uncomfortable enough to make you want to forget becoming aware of the need in the first place.

For you, having unmet needs and desires is not the worst thing in the world, as long as you don't focus on them. What gets under your skin is feeling unfairly blamed, condemned, or judged. This hits a particular nerve and can make you want to avoid more, but if you feel unable to escape, you can get uncharacteristically aggressive toward others.

If your score on the insecurity scale was high, your avoidance behavior might take on a more physical form. You might not like hugs or a lot of physical contact in general. Sex might work for you only in specific ways.

Now We'll Do the Description to You?

Remember that no single description can apply perfectly to anyone, but if your score suggests avoidant attachment, you probably recognized yourself as you read the previous description. When you consider some of your most important experiences in close relationships, how accurate would you rate the description for you?



Which parts of that description were most true for you?

Adapted from: *The Attachment Theory Workbook: Powerful Tools to Promote Understanding, Increase Stability, and Build Lasting Relationships* (2019) by Annie Chen