

Chain Reaction

Repeating the same old patterns (and people) in life, love and work? Introducing your attachment style...

Words: Harriet Edmund



Stuck in your ways and unlikely to try – let alone embrace – a new way of doing things? There's good reason for thinking the way you do and feeling how you feel. But, knowing why some irritating insecurities persist – 'My dates are always duds!' 'I've overindulged, again!' 'I can't concentrate at work!' – will go a long way to helping you defy them. While the influence of attachment style – which is basically how secure you feel in formative minutes, months and years – was long thought to expire with childhood, more recent research has cast attachment as a key point of attention in adult behavioural quandaries. Whether you're aware of it or not, attachment style shapes virtually everything you do – from how you handle relationships to whether you go to the doctor and your workplace *modus operandi*. The good news is, it can be changed.

Street style

It comes down to this: your personality is either secure or insecure. And, if you're insecure, your attachment style is typically anxious or avoidant. In fact, the chase that anchors rom coms – the push-pull dance between the needy one and the one who just needs space – is art imitating life.

Dr Pamela Meredith, attachment theory researcher from the University of Queensland, says around 20 per cent of the population are anxiously attached, 20 per cent are avoidant and the other 60 per cent, securely attached (there's a reason script writers stay away from securely attached characters; they'd make very dull plots indeed).

Attachment theory was coined by British child psychiatrist John Bowlby, who basically espoused that the framework described an ingrained way of thinking. Developed in the first two years of life to help people cope with

life's stressors, it's informed by interactions with attachment figures – most often, parents.

"If you're anxious, chances are you felt as a child that you had to yell loudly to have your needs met, or be really alert to other people, excessively vigilant and often dependent," explains Dr Meredith.

"Whereas the avoidant group are often deactivating of their coping strategies – they look away from relationships and stresses wherever possible."

A complicating factor is nuances within attachment categories; avoidant types bifurcate into streams of fearful-avoidant (you know you're avoidant but terrified) and dismissive-avoidant (you don't even know you're avoidant; you prefer to think you're just fiercely independent).

If, on the other hand, you've turned out to be pretty level headed with plenty of quality friends (and have a healthy disrespect for social media peeps as friend proxies), promptly address health concerns (but don't Dr Google yourself into self-diagnosis) and find yourself in work situations that are constructively challenging (but not so challenging that they adversely impact other areas of life), chances are that you're securely attached.

Wired

Attachment style and related thoughts and behaviours aren't merely a matter of memory – during those formative years, the constituents of attachment style settle into your brain. Then, as your motor and sensory pathways become more practised in encouraged thought and behaviour patterns, they strengthen, becoming the default. The consequent behaviours are just what you do – as natural as waking in the morning. Why would you question it? (At worst, you might write it off as a quirk that makes you you.)

For the love of food

You wouldn't pick it, but suppressing emotions Ben & Jerry's style can be symptomatic of insecure attachment according to WH&F psychologist on call Sarah McMahon (bodymatters.com.au).

"Insecure attachment can mean that a person will have limited skills in self soothing and can ultimately seek out a connection with some other source. When there is not a secure attachment, a relationship with food can become the most important connection someone has in their life," McMahon says. Body image can also be collateral damage. "This can include an obsession with

celebrities or one's body."

But an NQR attachment style is not a disorder or character flaw.

"The fact is that everyone needs attachment and to be attached. If those primary bonds are not secure or have become weakened, the need for bonding does not simply disappear," McMahon says. Beyond idiosyncrasies, the so-called insecurity paradox attests that insecure can have exceptional output in suitable circumstances. Not-so-helpful patterns can also be changed. Accepting that "sometimes things have happened to us that we might not have liked happening in an ideal world" is a start, Dr Meredith says.

ATTACHMENT STYLE POP QUIZ

WITH SARAH McMAHON

1 SECURE

CHILD: Parents seen as a secure base from which they can venture out and independently explore the world.

ADULT: Satisfied in relationships; feel secure and connected to partner. Can seek support from and offer support to partner.

2 ANXIOUS/PREOCCUPIED

CHILD: Confused and don't know what to expect as parents are inconsistent – sometimes nurturing and attentive; other times not. Feel suspicious but may also be 'clingy'.

ADULT: Experience emotional hunger and look to partner to rescue or complete them. Feel clingy but, ironically, take actions that push their partner away. Own behaviour exacerbates fears.

3 DISMISSIVE/AVOIDANT

CHILD: Discouraged from crying and encouraged to be independent by parents unaware of child's needs. 'Self parent' from an early age and resist needing anything/anyone.

ADULT: Emotionally distant from partner and seek isolation. Self absorbed, deny importance of loved ones and turn off feelings.

4 FEARFUL/DISORGANISED

CHILD: Abusive parent is the source of distress. The child is torn between survival instinct to flee and fear of the 'protector'.

ADULT: Afraid to be too close or too distant. Feel overwhelmed by reactions and experience emotional storms. Can be mixed up or unpredictable in mood. Often in rocky relationships.

Clinical psychologist and author of *Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain For Maximum Resilience and Wellbeing* Linda Graham explains the neuroscience of attachment as being the rules, templates or schemas for relating.

When you're born, the neurons in your brain's limbic regions – responsible for emotional learning and subjective sense of personal and social self – are not fully connected. "Caregivers activate the growth of those regions of the brain through emotional availability and reciprocal interactions," she says.

Psychologist and neuroscientist Dr Ben Buchanan, from Victorian Counselling & Psychological Services, says that insecurely attached people can tend to have a hyperactive amygdala, which is responsible for fear. Its hypervigilance can result in a misfiring brain, which in real life translates to misinterpreting and overreacting to situations. It's a bit like seeing the world through a pair of coloured ski goggles, he says. "Whenever you look at someone, you presume they are going to act the way you expect; you presume they are going to abandon you or that the relationship is not going to be secure or safe. You actually see the world differently to how it really is."

Although the brain is most impressionable in infancy, life-altering events later in childhood – and into adulthood – can influence, and even change, attachment style. Dr Meredith says such changes owe to the effect of stress on the brain, which impedes cognitive development. This one can show up at work. "Your neurological state affects how you are primed to stress, how you observe it and if you have difficulty managing it," Dr Meredith says.

In a 2002 paper titled Attachment, Detachment, Nonattachment: Achieving Synthesis, US researchers blamed negative life events for most changes in attachment classification across the lifespan. (We're talking world-rocking situations such as the loss of a parent, folks getting divorced, life threatening illness or ongoing abuse – not having to wear hand-me-downs.) With enough unmitigated stress, a secure child can become an insecure child or adult.

Style upgrade

Recognising your go-to patterns is the easy part; changing what doesn't work is less straightforward (imagine someone asks you to change the source code for Facebook rather than simply clicking 'like' and you'll get an idea of what you're up against). The good news is that it's less finicky than that; while managing known patterns is an option, you can also change your attachment style, period.

RELATIONSHIPS:

Some attachment type pairings work better than others. The older we get, the more likely we are to find ourselves in relationships that trigger our own attachment-related fears and defences because, by a certain age, most secure types have shackled up and proceeded with the marriage-kids-house plan. Knowing your own attachment type and how to spot others – and having a fair idea of what to expect, at least on paper – can steel you against naively repeating the same ol' same ol'.

If you're secure

It might be weeks or even months between catching up with certain friends, but when you do, you easily pick up where you left off, says Dr Buchanan. You don't necessarily need 400 Facey friends; your friendships (and romantic relationships) are built on quality, not quantity, and are likely to have longevity. You can thank your aptitude for communicating your needs and feelings.

If you're avoidant

Getting close to someone just doesn't feel right to you. It's called a deactivating coping strategy, where you resist becoming attached to someone and distance yourself to avoid being hurt. "It often means the relationship will fall apart, creating evidence that friendships are unstable, which is why you don't get close to people in the first place," explains Dr Buchanan. You might equate intimacy with a loss of independence or feeling smothered. When you catch up with friends, you may favour an activity over a distraction-free D&M, which lets you put the focus on the activity, not the relationship. Avoidants often find themselves in relationships with anxious types, paving the way for an exhausting, sometimes disastrous push-pull dynamic, whereby anxious showers avoidant with attention, avoidant freaks out and pulls away, anxious freaks out and chases harder, causing avoidant to run a mile...until avoidant craves the very closeness they're avoiding and may do a bit of chasing. Told you, real life rom com.

If you're anxious

You might not have many friends, but the ones you do have are your all-time besties. You will want to have everything in common and will use every means of communication imaginable (social media junkie alert), to make the relationship a success. You're super sensitive to small fluctuations in their mood and often fear your partner or friend doesn't want to be as close, or worse, will abandon you. See avoidant-anxious pattern, above.

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