




Addiction as an Attachment Disorder

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What is Attachment?


We cannot live and form a sense of self outside of our attachments with our early caregivers.

Through their care and love (or lack of it) we come to know how to think and feel about ourselves and the safety and security of connecting with others.



How Addiction is both a Product of and a Barrier to Attachment

The research makes sense that those of us who did not receive a secure attachment early in life (starting in utero), are susceptible to developing addictions as a compensation for this loss.



What Constitutes a Secure Attachment?

So many of us look back and think that we had a house, food, clothing and 2 parents and siblings - and all that = happy life.

It takes more than providing physical necessities to raise an emotionally healthy child.

The key ingredient: *emotional availability*. Parents being present and attuned with you; interested and invested in who you truly are.



Why Does this Matter?

"Intimate, long-lasting relationships are an integral part of human nature, and the inability to establish long-lasting, gratifying relationships are directly related to the quality of early attachment experiences." P.Flores

To form these deep bonds with other humans we must be able to emotionally regulate, to tolerate conflict, be interested in the world of the other & be emotionally stable.



Our Addiction Becomes our Substitute

Some researchers suggest that addiction is a substitute that individuals have adapted as a means to cope with the traumatic effects of early, unmet developmental needs.

That's why AA works so well – it provides an opportunity to substitute affiliative relationships for our alcohol.



4 Types of Attachment Styles

1. Secure
2. Anxious/insecure
3. Avoidant/insecure
4. Disorganized/insecure



1. Insecure/Anxious Attachment in Childhood

If we are anxiously attached as, we suffer in the following ways:

- We are uncertain that others are interested in meeting our needs or wants
- We are ambivalent about connection (we both want to be close and pull away)
- We are prone to separation anxiety
- We cling to our parent and are anxious or fearful about exploring the world



Anxious Attachment in Adulthood

How we show up in our relationships as adults if we are anxiously attached:

- We are ambivalent about intimacy
- We are preoccupied with our partner's thoughts and feelings
- We often worry that our significant other doesn't really love us
- We lose focus, we ramble and go on tangents
- We become panic-stricken when our partners go away or if a relationship ends



2. Insecure/Avoidant Attachment in Childhood

If we are avoidantly attached as children, we suffer in the following ways:

- We lack confidence that anyone cares
- We give up believing anyone will respond to us helpfully
- We rely on ourselves to get through life
- We shut down emotionally to survive



Avoidant Attachment in Adulthood

How we show up in our relationships as adults if we are avoidantly attached:

- We tend not to seek intimacy
- We invest little emotionally in our partners
- We devalue our partners and their requests for connection
- We tend to minimize events that cause pain to our partners
- We share very little about ourselves – we are a closed book



3. Disorganized Attachment in Childhood

If we are disorganized in our attachment as children, we suffer in the following ways:

- We are chaotic - both anxious and avoidant
- We are confused & dazed by the extreme reactions to normal requests for help
- We are frightened by the emotional responses of caregivers
- We see the world as unsafe/dangerous



Disorganized Attachment in Adulthood

How we show up in our relationships as adults if we are disorganized in our attachment:

- We have a distorted (negative) view of our partner that is hard to shake
- We have trouble in normal social situations
- We have low self-esteem and have no idea what healthy behavior looks like
- We fail to use our partners to co-regulate our distress to help soothe us



Secure Attachment in Childhood

If we are securely attached as children, we develop the following capacities:

- We can manage our emotional reactions and self-regulate our own distress
- We believe in the positive nature of relationships
- We expect that others will give back to us, just as we give to them
- We have awareness of other peoples' feelings and have empathy for them




Secure Attachment in Adulthood

How we show up in our relationships as adults if we are securely attached:

- We have trusting, lasting relationships
- We take responsibility for own moods
- We tend to have high self-esteem
- We seek out social engagement and we are open to sharing our thoughts and feelings with others, especially those closest to us.



The beautiful gift of a secure attachment is that we feel safe and secure enough to explore the world. It starts in childhood and it continues into adulthood. We look out at the world and know that there is no substitute for our own encounter with life and so much life is out there waiting to be discovered.



Earning a Secure Attachment in Recovery

The good news is: we can change our attachment style if we are willing to do the work.

Steps include:

1. Remove the barriers to connection: giving up our drug of choice and not being compulsive in other ways.
2. Healing our relationship with ourself.
3. Trusting at least one other person to know all of who you are.
4. Building relationships with emotionally available people.
5. Risking being vulnerable and transparent with others.

