



Tracing Your Anxious Attachment Pattern

Let's turn now to an exercise that will help you understand what your anxious attachment behavior is really about. You'll dig deep into an uncomfortable experience, but the goal is to help you understand how this attachment style works in your relationships.

1. Think of something that happened in a relationship that made you feel bad or uncomfortable. What happened to trigger this feeling?

The incident that triggered my bad or uncomfortable feeling:

2. Incidents hurt people for reasons that are personal to each individual. If we zoom in on your experience of the event you just noted, what was the worst part about it *to you*?

The worst part about the incident for me:

Nice job for allowing yourself to be curious about your own feelings and experiences, and why they affect you uniquely! This understanding is an important part of being able to manage your feelings.

Here's a bonus exercise; while it's optional, it can be extremely helpful in understanding the pattern of this feeling across your life. Below is a timeline from birth to 20 years of age. The first couple of decades of our experiences can be very formative. If we didn't have help managing the difficult things we thought and felt during this time, they can affect how we view others and ourselves later in life.

Consider your first two decades of life. When was the first time you recall having the feeling or experience, or one similar to it? Put an X on that part of the timeline.



Age

Most incidents that evoke big feelings do so because those feelings have their origin in early life. Did you put an X somewhere on this timeline? If so, this is very normal. Now go forward on the timeline and put an X on the different ages when you remember having this same feeling. Try to put at least three X marks on the timeline and as many as you would like. Consider experiences you've had with people at home, school, work, church, and so on.

Put down your pen or pencil and take a deep breath. You are now viewing the legacy of this feeling or experience in your life. Take a look at the timeline and consider the following questions:

1. How does it look overall? Are there more X marks concentrated in one area, or are they spread out?
2. Did anything surprise you?
3. Are there certain kinds of relationships where you tend to experience this feeling more?
4. Has anyone or anything ever helped you go through this feeling with more ease?



Soothing Anxious Attachment

This exercise will help you identify your own way of approaching conflict with someone in your life who is anxiously attached. Think of someone in your life who can be rather abrasive and express their needs in a critical or pessimistic way. What is your natural response when they behave this way?

How do they usually respond in return?

With that pattern identified, think about what behaviors might be more helpful for you when responding to anxious attachment. Here are some suggestions to help your loved one in a moment of panic and anxiety.

Put a check next to the ones that you already do or have tried.

- Reassurance. "I'm here." "I'm not going anywhere."
- Proximity and contact in a way that is appropriate for the relationship. If the person is your romantic partner, use loving touch and embrace. If not, step forward, make kind eye contact and smile, or if appropriate, hold their hand.
- Take the lead. Help manage the person's anxiety with clear and simple directives. People in a state of panic are more primed for understanding short phrases. "Stop." "Slow down." "Tell me something nice." "Give me a moment to think."

- Pace their expectations and anticipation. “Let’s talk about that in a few minutes, when we’re calm.” “We’ll talk about that after we finish this.”
- Ask for specific feedback. “How did the way we talked work for you this time?”

Which of these would you like to try the next time you encounter anxious behavior? Write them below, making them specific to your relationship with the anxious individual:



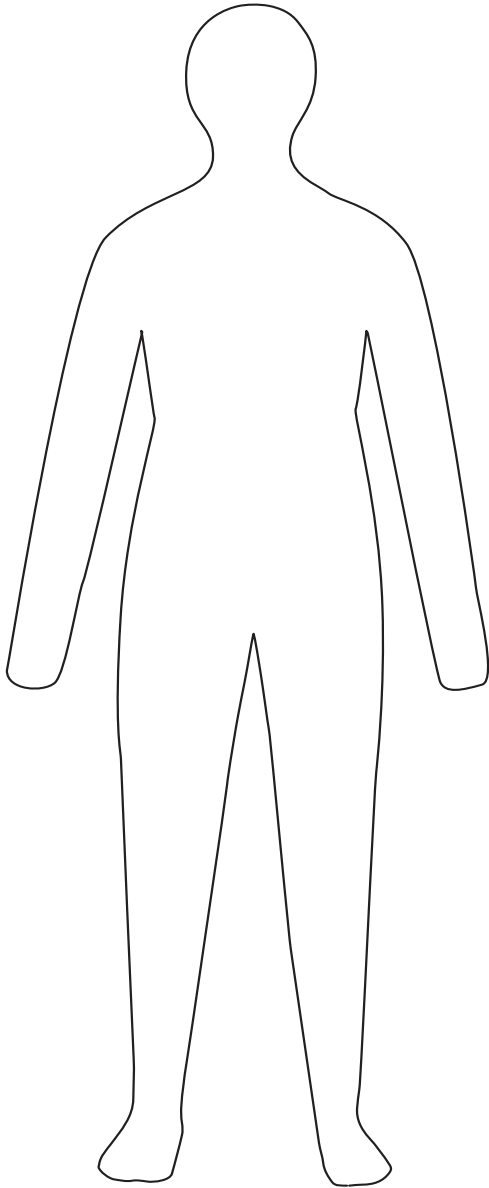
Map Your Emotions

Emotions have both a mental and a physical component, and we can feel resistant to one or the other or both. Directing our attention to the specific bodily experiences that are connected to an emotion can help facilitate greater acceptance of that emotion. Since anger is such a powerful emotion, try this next exercise to see how it works for you.

Recall the last time you were angry with someone close to you. Can you feel just a little of what it was like? Where do you feel it in your body?

Imagine what size/shape/temperature/color/quality the feeling has.

When did it appear?



Using a pen or pencil, colored, if you wish, make a sketch of what you feel on the part of the body where you feel it.

Now, take a deep breath. Even imagining anger can bring the feeling into your body! Acknowledge that sometimes this feeling is in your body and sometimes it is not. Practice telling yourself that there's no need to fight it. When the feeling is there, try to accept its physical presence, and keep an open and even curious mind about what it is there for. Learning how to manage strong emotions in this way can be helpful when you are triggered.



Safety and Security Needs

Consent is only the first step. When it comes to attachment, there are two needs: safety and security. Safety is about relief from an experience of threat in the body. Security is about reassurance that connection and resources are and will remain available. When you feel secure with someone, it feels as if that person is there for you and will continue to be there for you and that they see you in a warm, compassionate way. Feeling emotionally safe and secure with someone is the foundation of trust in a relationship.

Until safety and security are adequately present, relationship collaboration (e.g., joint decisions, projects) won't work as well, and healthy communication will be difficult to manage. This exercise will help you explore and identify what it takes for you to feel safe and secure in the midst of a stressful interaction. You might begin by thinking of a specific interaction you had with a relationship partner when your anxious feelings made communication difficult or unproductive.

What can *you* do to soothe your feelings of threat when communication becomes difficult? (Think mainly of things that help your *body* calm down when it is in a state of distress.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What kinds of things can your partner do to help you soothe feelings of threat? (Again, focus on your body.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Because difficult communication can activate feelings of insecurity, what can *you* do to soothe your feelings of insecurity and reassure yourself of the relationship connection?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What kinds of things can *your partner* do or say to help reassure you of the relationship connection?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now, find time to sit down with your partner or loved one, share what you've learned about safety and security, and explore the lists you came up with. The following prompts may guide you through a useful discussion.

- From what you know about me, how effectively do you think the listed items would soothe me?
- Is there anything you'd add to any of these lists?
- Are you willing to help me with any of these things when you recognize that I'm being reactive?

Effective, healthy communication is possible for anxiously attached people, and developing these skills can help you develop and build trust and safety in your close relationships.



Appreciation Journal

Appreciation is a wonderful way to build up your relationship capital. You and your partner will feel good spending time acknowledging the ways that you make each other's lives better.

List three things you appreciate about your relationship partner:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

List three things you appreciate about yourself:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Taking time to appreciate each other on a regular basis can build goodwill and help ease you through difficult moments. By focusing on appreciation, understanding, and acceptance and by learning healthy communication, anxiously attached individuals can build strong, healthy relationships in which both people feel safe and secure.



Avoidance Inventory

Listed below are emotions and circumstances that come up in relationships that many have reported can feel stressful. Look through the list and identify which ones are stressful for you. Circle all the experiences that make you shy away, withdraw, distract, numb out, and in general feel less connected to the people around you. If you think of others that aren't on the list, write them in the blank spaces.

I'm stressed when I feel . . .

Annoyed	Disappointed	Judged
Anxious	Disgusted	Lonely
Ashamed	Dismissed	Longing/desirous
Betrayed	Envious	Pushed to a limit
Blamed	Guilt ridden	Regretful
Burdened	Helpless	Rejected
Condemning	Humiliated	Resentful
Confused	Hurt	Sad
Contemptuous	Ignored	Self-doubting
Criticized	Inadequate	Stressed
Defeated	Indignant	Unappreciated
Demeaned	Intimidated	Uncomfortable
Devastated	Intolerant	Worried
Diminished	Jealous	_____
_____	_____	_____

I'm stressed when I want/need . . .

Support	Affection/warmth	Appreciation
Safety	Stability	Consistency
Acceptance	To be seen and heard	Fairness/mutuality
Calm/harmony	Joyful connection	To be taken seriously
Structure/order	Security	Relief from duties
_____	_____	_____

It's stressful when the relationship requires . . .

Me to self-disclose	Conflict management	Repair from injury
Me to provide emotional support	Clarifying commitment and agreements	Me to understand my partner
Collaborative decision making	Positive ritual and routine	Managing other relationships
Agreement accountability	Boundary defining	Giving evaluation and/or receiving feedback
_____	_____	_____

I get stressed when I fear . . .

Losing autonomy	Losing free time	Losing my identity
Being replaced	Being abandoned	Being excluded
_____	_____	_____

Nice work! You've just identified the kinds of events that activate your avoidant attachment. Now, go through your selections and list the top three things that cause you to withdraw. You will work with these three specific *triggers* in the next exercise.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



Avoidance Pros and Cons

Now, you're going to work with the top three *triggers* for withdrawal or avoidance you identified in the last exercise. Write one trigger at the top of each of the following three tables. Then make a check mark by each reaction you have in response. Finally, you'll explore the ways these behaviors help and hurt your relationships.

1. _____

When this happens, I . . .

- Withdraw
- Ignore
- Distract/stay busy
- Numb out/leave
- Dismiss myself or others
- Deny my experience or others'
- Justify/rationalize
- Explain something irrelevant
- Appease without follow-through
- Other: _____

What do I gain by doing these things?

What do I miss out on by doing these things?

What is a more constructive response to this trigger?

2. _____

When this happens, I . . .

- Withdraw
- Ignore
- Distract/stay busy
- Numb out/leave
- Dismiss myself or others
- Deny my experience or others'
- Justify/rationalize
- Explain something irrelevant
- Appease without follow-through
- Other: _____

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- Justify/rationalize
- Explain something irrelevant
- Appease without follow-through
- Other: _____

What do I gain by doing these things?

What do I miss out on by doing these things?

What is a more constructive response to this trigger?

Remember that all of these behaviors were learned. None of them is your fault, but the consequences of these behaviors *are* your business. If you're satisfied with how these reactions are working for you, then carry on! If you're no longer okay with the results, it's in your power to change the behaviors that cause them.



The Effect on You

Think of a time you needed help or support from someone specific, and they either were absent or were there but didn't feel entirely present.

What was the incident?

What do you remember feeling?

What thoughts do you remember having?

How did your body hold that experience?



Empathy in Action

This exercise can be helpful when you're faced with avoidant behavior that leaves you feeling disappointed or let down. Think of a specific time in your life when someone important felt absent or less engaged when you needed them. Pick an incident that isn't too activating in the present moment.

A time someone important to me left me feeling alone was . . .

Instead of what they did, I wanted them to . . .

The situation was stressful for them, because they have a difficult time with . . .

I know this is stressful for them, because . . .

They judged themselves or believed that I judged them as _____. But in reality, they are still learning how to _____, and they are not always perfect at it. When they get overwhelmed, they can _____. They react from reflex instead and forget how much I need them.

You might practice this with a number of incidents; with practice, you'll develop an approach to dealing with these incidents in real time, and you may also develop a greater understanding of and empathy for your avoidant partner.



Exploring Needs and Wants

Now, explore an issue that you don't feel totally fulfilled by in a specific relationship. If nothing comes to mind that strongly, just make a best guess. The point is to explore your thoughts and desires as they relate to that particular relationship.

When I think about this relationship, the thing I don't feel satisfied by is . . .

What would make me happy is . . .

If I got what I wanted, I would feel . . .

How will it affect my relationship in the long term if I never advocate for myself on this issue?

RATING SCALE: *How much effort am I willing to make to assert myself on this issue? (Circle)*





Secure versus Insecure Approach

In this exercise, you'll have a chance to pick a decision you've made within a relationship and explore the reasons for making the decision based on secure attachment or insecure attachment.

Fill out your own worksheet, beginning with a decision that you've already made pertaining to a relationship. Then put your thoughts and feelings about the decision in the appropriate column, Secure or Insecure. Next, fill out thoughts and feelings that would fit the other category, even if they are hypothetical. The point is to practice identifying whether thoughts and feelings emerge from a secure or an insecure place.

Decision

My Decision is:

Insecure approach:

Secure approach:

Questions to consider:

1. What conditions help you have a secure approach to a relationship?
2. What conditions promote an insecure approach?



Imagine a Secure Interaction with Conflict

Most of us get so caught up in the fast pace of conflict that we sometimes don't notice when the other person is offering an olive branch. When these moments are missed, fights last longer and are more stressful.

Recall a time when you were involved with a difficult relationship conflict that didn't go so well, and the other person reacted out of fear or hurt. Remember what this was like—the feelings, thoughts, and body sensations that you experienced in response.

What did the other person do that triggered your reaction?

Now, imagine that the other person can think and feel beyond themselves, instead of just being scared or hurt, and can make an effort to really see your perspective, as well. Imagine the other person as their most generous and compassionate self. The person speaks to you calmly and looks at you with a warm sparkle in their eye. What do you feel now?

You probably felt better. This is what happens when we feel that the person we care about can consider us. If so, really let that good feeling in. Now, imagine showing appreciation for the different response. How would you show your appreciation and encourage the other person to keep doing what you see and hear them doing?



Relationship Strengths

What are your strengths and your partner's? As you interact with someone who has a secure attachment style, it can be helpful to remind yourself of your relationship strengths. Think about what you each contribute to the relationship and gifts that you share with one another. If you're not working on a romantic relationship right now, think in terms of whichever significant relationship you have in mind, whether that's a parent, sibling, best friend, or someone else.

Now that you've picked a specific relationship, go down the column for "Me" and place a check mark by each trait that is a strength you contribute to the relationship. Then go down the column for "My relationship partner" and do the same for the strengths they bring.

The ways in which you each contribute to the relationship may be the same or very different. If they're different, try to acknowledge that some of the ways in which your partner shares those skills and talents may feel unfamiliar at times. If so, try to be open to the new feeling of receiving them in this way, little by little.

Me	My relationship partner	Strengths
		Honesty
		Fairness
		Willingness to put in hard work/effort
		Empathy
		Willingness to be open
		Trustworthiness
		Being a source of inspiration
		Commitment
		Collaboration
		Acceptance of faults
		Providing support
		Perseverance through rough times
		Dependability
		Consistency
		Ability to challenge the other in positive ways
		Playfulness
		Humor
		Readiness to express gratitude and appreciation
		Willingness to sacrifice
		Other:
		Other: