

Understanding your attachment style and why it matters

A guide to why you feel
the way that you do
in your relationships and
friendships

by Georgina Sturmer,
Counsellor, MBACP

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Welcome

Relationships aren't on the syllabus at school.

Many of us never really think about why we behave the way that we do in our relationships and friendships.

But even if we're not consciously aware of it, we often notice familiar patterns.

Some of us cling, while others withdraw.
Some of us overthink or over-apologise.
Some of us hold our feelings back and bottle things up.

'Enter attachment theory, a way of understanding ourselves with clarity and compassion.'

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This guide is here to help you make sense of your patterns through a gentle, compassionate lens.

It isn't about boxes, labels, or blame.
It is about understanding what shaped you, what you learned to protect yourself from, and how things could look different.

What is attachment?

From the moment we are born, we look to the people around us to learn how to get our needs met.

We watch, listen, and adapt, figuring out what helps us to feel safe.

We also learn which behaviours make us feel likeable or loveable, and which might lead to rejection or disapproval.

Every family teaches something different about closeness, distance, emotions, and expression. Even siblings in the same home, including twins, can develop very different internal blueprints.

Over time, these early lessons form our internal map for how we relate to others, especially in moments when we feel stressed, overwhelmed, unsure of ourselves, or emotionally exposed.

'Our earliest relationships teach us how to seek closeness, how to protect ourselves, and how to make sense of the world.'

The four attachment styles

A brief overview based on common patterns and early relational experiences.

Secure attachment

People with a secure attachment style feel comfortable with both closeness and independence.

- Able to trust that others care
- Can ask for help without shame
- Manage conflict and endings with steadiness

Anxious attachment

Closeness feels incredibly important, but uncertainty or distance may trigger worry.

- Fear of rejection or abandonment
- Overthinking or seeking reassurance
- Feeling responsible for others' emotions

Avoidant attachment

Independence feels safer than relying on others, and closeness may feel overwhelming.

- Difficulty asking for help
- Pulling away when relationships feel intense
- Downplaying emotions or needs

Disorganised attachment

Closeness is desired but also feels frightening or confusing, creating push-pull patterns.

- Feeling torn between wanting closeness and fearing it
- Difficulty trusting others
- Relationships may feel unpredictable or intense

Attachment styles are not fixed labels, but patterns shaped by experience – and patterns can change.

Secure attachment

Secure attachment does not mean a perfect childhood or perfect relationships.

It develops when our early caregivers were mostly consistent, responsive, and emotionally available.

And when those caregivers were not available or responsive, any conflict, disagreement or miscommunication was repaired in a thoughtful and calm way.

These experiences create an internal sense that relationships are a safe place to turn to.

People with a secure attachment style often:

- Trust that others care about them
- Enjoy closeness without losing their sense of self
- Feel comfortable giving and receiving support
- Communicate openly when something feels difficult
- Cope with conflict or endings without feeling overwhelmed

Secure attachment develops when caregivers are:

- Emotionally present
- Able to soothe distress
- Predictable enough that we feel safe
- Respectful of our needs and individuality

These early experiences help us internalise the message:

'I matter, and I can rely on others when I need to.'

Anxious attachment

Anxious attachment does not mean that you are needy or dramatic. It is sometimes known as preoccupied attachment, which reflects how much energy can be spent trying to feel close, wanted, or reassured.

It often develops when closeness felt uncertain, inconsistent, or unpredictable.

Growing up, you may have had moments when comfort was offered, but other moments when it was delayed, withdrawn, or dependent on your behaviour.

This can leave you feeling unsure about whether others will truly be there for you.

These experiences create an internal sense that you may need to work hard to feel safe in relationships.

People with an anxious attachment style often:

- Overthink what others think of them
- Feel responsible for other people's emotions
- Worry they have done something wrong
- Seek reassurance to feel secure
- Find endings or separations especially painful

Anxious attachment develops when caregivers are:

- Inconsistent in their availability
- Loving at times, but distracted or overwhelmed at others
- Emotionally responsive one moment and withdrawn the next
- Unclear in their communication, leaving the child to guess

These early experiences help us internalise the message:

'I worry that love might disappear, so I try hard to keep it close.'

Avoidant attachment

Avoidant attachment does not mean you do not care about others or do not want closeness.

It is sometimes known as a dismissive attachment style, which reflects the tendency to retreat inward and rely on yourself when relationships feel overwhelming.

We also sometimes talk about *compulsive self-reliance*, where independence becomes the safest and most familiar way to cope - or even the only reliable option.

Growing up, you may have learned that expressing emotions or asking for help was not welcomed, or that caregivers were unavailable, preoccupied, or dismissive when you reached out. These experiences create an internal sense that relying on others may be risky or disappointing.

People with an avoidant attachment style often:

- Find it difficult to ask for help, even when overwhelmed
- Downplay their own emotions or needs
- Feel uncomfortable with too much closeness
- Prefer to manage things alone
- Pull away from others when relationships feel intense

Avoidant attachment develops when caregivers are:

- Emotionally distant or preoccupied
- Quick to encourage independence without offering comfort
- Uncomfortable with emotional expression
- Inconsistent or unresponsive when support is needed

These early experiences help us internalise the message:

'It feels safer to manage things on my own.'

Disorganised attachment

Disorganised attachment does not mean that you are chaotic or unstable.

It reflects an internal conflict that formed early on, in environments where the people you turned to for comfort also felt frightening, unpredictable, or emotionally unsafe. It can develop when caregivers offer a mixture of comfort and fear.

This creates a powerful internal dilemma:

'I want closeness... but closeness doesn't always feel safe.'

These experiences make it harder to build a consistent map for relationships, especially in emotionally charged moments.

People with a disorganised attachment style often:

- Feel pulled between wanting closeness and fearing it
- Experience intense or unpredictable relationship patterns
- Feel flooded or overwhelmed by emotions
- Struggle to trust themselves or others
- Find boundaries difficult to navigate

Disorganised attachment develops when caregivers are:

- A source of both comfort and fear
- Unpredictable in their emotional responses
- Overwhelmed, distressed, or traumatised themselves
- Unable to provide consistent safety or soothing

These early experiences help us internalise the message:

'I want connection, but I'm not sure how to feel safe in it.'

Understanding your attachment style

It isn't always easy to recognise our own attachment patterns.

They tend to appear most clearly in moments when we feel stressed, worried, or emotionally exposed.

These questions can help you gently reflect on what feels familiar for you. Take time to review them, and write down your answers. There's no right or wrong way to answer these questions – simply notice what feels familiar for you.

When I feel threatened or unsure in a relationship, I tend to...

Growing up, I learned that expressing my feelings was...

The endings or separations I find hardest are...

Asking for help feels...

My boundaries tend to be... (rigid, flexible, porous)

What do I tend to do first when I feel overwhelmed or unsure in a relationship?

These reflections are for you alone, unless you choose to share them.

Making sense of your reflections

Rather than analysing every detail, try to notice the themes that appeared when you answered the questions.

Which answers came easily, and felt familiar? These often point to the patterns that show up most quickly when you feel stressed or unsure.

Which answers surprised you? Sometimes we write things down that we've never spoken aloud. These moments can reveal what you have been carrying quietly for a long time.

Do you notice yourself moving towards closeness or pulling away from it? Patterns of seeking, clinging, withdrawing or shutting down can offer clues about the attachment style that feels most familiar.

How do you tend to cope when you feel overwhelmed? Do you look for reassurance? Do you keep things inside? Do you feel torn between wanting closeness and wanting distance?

What emotions show up most strongly in your answers? Anxiety, fear, shame, frustration, sadness, confusion, or numbness can each link to different attachment strategies.

What your reflections might be telling you

As you look over your answers, you might begin to notice certain patterns or themes.

These can offer gentle clues about the attachment style that feels most familiar for you, especially in moments of stress, uncertainty, or emotional intensity.

If many of your reflections describe seeking reassurance, worrying about what others think, or finding separations difficult... You may recognise elements of anxious attachment.

If your reflections describe coping alone, finding it hard to ask for help, or feeling uncomfortable with too much closeness... You may resonate with avoidant attachment.

If you feel torn, conflicted, or unsure whether closeness is safe... You may recognise aspects of disorganised attachment.

If your reflections describe comfort with both closeness and independence... You may recognise elements of secure attachment.

But: remember this. This is not a test. There is no score. You are not trying to fit yourself into a box, or place blame.

These observations simply help you understand the patterns that once kept you safe, and how they may still shape your relationships today.

What you can do next

Understanding your attachment style is not about fixing yourself. It is about noticing your patterns more clearly, and responding to yourself with more kindness and compassion.

Notice your patterns

When you feel anxious, overwhelmed or unsure, pause.

Ask yourself:

- What is happening inside me right now?
- Am I reaching out quickly? Pulling away? Trying to cope alone? Feeling torn?

This awareness is the first building block to making lasting changes

Make small, gentle shifts

You do not need to change everything at once.

Small shifts can help:

- If you reach out quickly, pause before seeking reassurance.
- If you withdraw, share one small feeling with someone you trust.

Practise self-kindness

Your patterns formed early, often to keep you safe.

Try asking:

- What did I need then?
- What do I need now?

Self-compassion, not self-criticism, helps these patterns soften.

Soothe your nervous system

Your attachment system activates when your body senses threat.

- Try slowing your breathing, grounding your feet, or placing a hand on your chest.
- Calming your body can help calm the pattern.

Attachment styles – and the strategies that accompany them – are not set in stone. They are patterns, and patterns can change with awareness, support and practice.

If you'd like support

Understanding your attachment style can be the beginning of real change.

But you don't have to make that journey alone.
Many people find it helpful to explore these patterns in a safe, collaborative, and supportive space.

This is the heart of my work as an attachment-informed counsellor. I also teach and supervise other therapists in this approach, supporting them to deepen their understanding of attachment in therapy.

If you'd like to understand your patterns more deeply, or explore how they affect your relationships, I offer online therapy for adults across the UK.

You're welcome to book a free introductory chat, with no obligation.

It's simply a chance to see whether therapy feels right for you.

Find out more:

www.georginasturmer.co.uk

This guide is for general information only and is not a substitute for therapy.

