

Attachment Styles in Relationship

How we learned to reach for closeness — and what happens when we're scared.

These are patterns, not personality types or diagnoses. Most of us carry more than one, and they shift with who we're with.

TWO QUESTIONS

Underneath every conflict sit two felt questions: *Can I count on you to be there?* and *Am I worth coming for?*

TWO DIMENSIONS

Not four boxes — two dials: how much we fear being left, and how much we brace against depending. The styles below are corners of that space.

TWO DIRECTIONS

Under threat the system turns the volume *up* — protest, pursue, insist — or turns it *off* — withdraw, go quiet, get logical.

Secure

AT EASE REACHING · AT EASE DEPENDING

“When something’s wrong between us, we can talk about it and come back.”

UNDER STRESS Stays in contact. Can name being upset without attacking or disappearing.

WHAT HELPS Say the steadiness out loud — *“I’m still here, we’ll figure this out”* — so your partner can borrow it.

Anxious · Preoccupied

FEARS LOSING YOU · REACHES HARD

“If I stop reaching, I’ll be forgotten.”

UNDER STRESS Pursues, repeats, escalates; needs it resolved now. The protest is a bid for contact.

WHAT HELPS Name the need under the pursuit — *“I need to know we’re okay”* — instead of the accusation on top of it.

Avoidant · Dismissing

BRACES AGAINST DEPENDING · PULLS INWARD

“If I let you all the way in, I’ll lose myself — or let you down.”

UNDER STRESS Goes quiet, gets reasonable, needs room. The shutdown is a part working hard to keep things from getting worse.

WHAT HELPS Say the exit out loud and name the return — *“I need twenty minutes, and I’m coming back.”*

Disorganized · Fearful-Avoidant

WANTS CLOSNESS · FEARS IT AT THE SAME MOMENT

“I want you close, and closeness doesn’t feel safe.”

UNDER STRESS Reaches and recoils inside the same conversation. Warmth can arrive right after a sharp edge.

WHAT HELPS Slow the pace and lower the stakes. This is the pattern best worked with together in session, rather than alone.

The dance neither of you chose

Styles don't act alone — they interlock. Pursuit reads as danger. Withdrawal reads as abandonment. One of you steps forward to close the gap; the other steps back to survive it; and each move hands the other exactly the evidence they were most afraid of. Nobody is running this cycle on purpose, and nobody is running it alone. **The cycle is the problem — not either person inside it.**

Toward earned security

Security is built, not issued

It grows from repeated experiences of reaching and being met. That can happen in adulthood, in this relationship, starting now.

The move is a part of you

The pursuing or the pulling away is doing a job it learned long before this relationship. It isn't the whole of you — or of your partner.

Repair reliably, not perfectly

What builds trust isn't avoiding rupture. It's coming back, again and again, and finishing the conversation.

This handout describes self-reported patterns in current relationships. It is not an assessment of attachment history, and it is not a diagnosis.

Sources: Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, Vol. 1 (1969) · Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters & Wall, *Patterns of Attachment* (1978) · Main & Solomon (1990), disorganized/disoriented classification · Hazan & Shaver, *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 52(3), 511–524 (1987) · Bartholomew & Horowitz, *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 61(2), 226–244 (1991) · Brennan, Clark & Shaver (1998), ECR · Mikulincer & Shaver, *Attachment in Adulthood*, 2nd ed. (2016) · Johnson, *Emotionally Focused Therapy*.

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