

Attachment

FOR EVERYONE



Dr. Diane Poole Heller

© 2019 Diane Poole Heller


Attachment

FOR EVERYONE

Therapists and individual seekers alike have long suspected that the conditions in which we were raised as children have an impact on how we function emotionally as adults. It is easy to point out characteristics we trace to our parents – being a hard worker, certain mannerisms and expressions, the quality of the relationships we develop, even how we handle disagreements and stress. Therapists are tasked in figuring out methods to assist clients with deficits. Therapists continually seek solutions and connections between the nature versus nurture aspect of becoming uniquely ourselves and have endeavored to uncover how we can retain (or eliminate) characteristics that support or undermine our happiness and wellbeing.

Family of origin, other caregivers like close friends and grandparents, sibling relationships, and even adoption all impact our attachment styles – the way in which we relate and communicate with those closest to us. Attachment Theory, developed by therapist John Bowlby, seeks to provide the framework for how attachment develops, manifests, and becomes derailed in our interpersonal relationships. Understanding our own attachment styles can lead us on the path to healing as well as our satisfaction and wellbeing in all of our relationships.

Diane Poole Heller, PhD, has dedicated her profession to providing therapists and individuals alike with useful resources, exercises, books, and trainings to promote healing attachment wounds and enjoying more fulfilling and long-lasting relationships with our partners, children, friends, coworkers, and everyone we relate to on an intimate level.



“The human attachment system is an inherent, biological, and natural process that relates to everything we do in life, especially when it comes to our relationships with others.”

- *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*

What is Attachment?

In infancy, attachment development forms how we relate to our caregivers, expressing our needs and how our needs are met. Since infants are helpless and without language, our attachment styles develop and evolve as a matter of survival and obtaining our basic needs. We communicate by crying to alert our caregivers to our needs. We learn to behave in a way that helps us get what we need and want for our very survival – food, affection, love, trust, warmth, nurturing, safety, protection, consistency, and most of all, responsive presence.

In secure attachment, adults and infants are attuned to one another and the relationship provides the foundation for healthy relationships in the future. Attachment defines the child’s stability, social interactions, and emotional and cognitive development as they grow into adulthood.

In addition to our primary relationships during development, it is essential to recognize that a number of factors play into attachment development, including trauma, socioeconomic conditions, and environmental factors. Our childhood learned attachment styles carry into our adult lives as we try to have our more complex adult needs met. This can lead to the bolstering of healthy, secure relationships, but may also undermine our intimate relationships and friendships.

Attachment in adulthood relates to how we build relationships and manage the highs and lows of those interactions – how we communicate, repair, and relate. Adult attachment addresses our ability to connect, feel satisfied in our relationships, and how we develop and maintain intimacy. It means learning to manage mis-attunements and repairing the relationship – with the hope of coming away stronger.



“We are all born with an amazing capacity to survive, heal, and thrive, which is precisely why we have made it this far, to begin with.” - *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*

Neuroplasticity and Our Capacity to Heal

Despite attachment injury, our brains are hardwired toward healing. They are constantly seeking the resources necessary to develop and nurture secure attachment. Even the most challenging attachment injuries and trauma have the capacity to move toward secure attachment by creating new neural pathways, re-forming habitual patterns, and focusing on learned secure attachment in adulthood.

Sometimes we need help. Attachment therapists trained in the clinical interventions to assist clients toward healing attachment injury and trauma exist throughout the world. Resources are available in the form of books,

online courses, live workshops, and small groups make healing attachment wounds accessible for nearly every individual interested in improving their capacity to develop healthy intimate relationships that lead to deeper and more secure connections.

We hope that you will find this introduction into Attachment Theory a helpful stepping stone toward healthy adult relationships that you yearn for and deserve.

A man and a woman are embracing on a rooftop balcony. The man is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and a dark blue baseball cap, and the woman is wearing a floral-patterned dress. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background shows a city skyline with buildings.

Secure Attachment

“Securely attached people grew up with plenty of love and support from consistently responsive caregivers.” - *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*



Developmental Conditions That Lead to Secure Attachment

When parents maintain attunement and connection with their child, they are responsive to their needs and also comfortable with children exploring and discovering their own independence. If you watch families with small children at the park or family picnics, you will often see toddlers exploring and heading out on their own to look for insects, flowers, to play in the grass, and enjoy their own expedition into a brand-new world. You will also see the children periodically looking toward, or running back to their parents, much like a “home base” before engaging in their next adventure. Also, if the child falls down or feels startled by something, they often cry out. The parent responds to the cry of their child, comforting and consoling them until the child calms and feels settled. This example is secure attachment at work.

As the child grows, they learn to distinguish

between moments when they need their parents to comfort them, and when they can comfort themselves to continue playing.

A busy and interested child playing with his or her peers might “shake off” a scraped knee in the interest of uninterrupted fun. Parents will often notice when a child falls down and wait to see the reaction before responding, giving the child an opportunity to choose their own response. The point is that they are attuned and alert to the needs of their child.

Very young children who are securely attached will often become upset when their parent leaves, and feel comforted when they return. As children grow up, they develop the trust that their caregiver will indeed return, and feel confident that they are not being abandoned. This gives them confidence in their secure base and builds the foundation for future relationships.



Characteristics of Secure Attachment in Adults

In adults, secure attachment with an intimate partner can look like a grown-up version of children and parents at the park. When disagreements and troubles crop up in their relationship, they can comfort themselves as well as their partner. They are confident that their partner is present for them and that every disagreement does not lead to the end of the relationship. There is connection, based on trust and attunement that is stronger than the day-to-day pitfalls that relationships often present.

Securely attached couples seek to repair and comfort, to understand and be understood, as well as, having their needs and those of their partner met. They enjoy healthy intimacy – both physically and emotionally – with their partners.

Securely attached couples:

- Have long-term, trusting relationships emphasizing protection, safety, and empowerment.
- Know when to give each other space and when it's time to reconnect.
- Honor both their own needs and the needs of their partner.
- Have a strong sense of self-esteem and respects others.
- Feel comfortable sharing their feelings with their partner.
- Engage in healthy social connections that maintain relationship boundaries.
- Seek to initiate repair and accepts repair attempts.
- Enjoy playing and laughing together.
- Feel compassion for themselves and others.
- Considers their partner in a positive light most of the time.
- Knows they, too, deserve respect and will not “settle.”

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a blue shirt and a small earring, is looking down and to the left. Several hands are reaching out from the right side of the frame towards her, suggesting a desire for connection or support. The background is dark, and the lighting is soft, highlighting the woman's face and the hands.

Avoidant Attachment Adaptation

“People with this attachment style have a tendency to keep intimacy at arm’s length or to diminish the importance of relationships.” - *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*



Developmental Conditions That Lead to Avoidant Attachment

Thinking back to the park and family picnic scenario: The avoidant attachment relationship between caregivers and the child might look more like this:

The child toddles off to explore the area, play with others, and exercise their independence and falls down, skinning his or her knee. The child cries out, but the parent is in deep conversation with a peer or absorbed in their smartphone and doesn't hear, or ignores the child's cry. Seeing that the parent is not responding, the child may begin to disconnect, self-soothe or ignore their own need for comfort.

Avoidant attachment adaptation generally occurs when the primary caregiver is absent, unavailable, physically or mentally ill, or otherwise incapable of meeting the child's needs, perhaps due to their own attachment

injury or trauma – or simply because of common life circumstances like working and being away from the home much of the time. The child who finds their needs are not met may begin to withdraw and learn that they are “on their own.”

The avoidantly attached become overly self-reliant, learning by experience that if they need something, they must attain it for themselves. This independence develops as a need to avoid rejection and neglect. The individual with the avoidant attachment style may even feel shame and guilt over having needs or that they need help meeting them. They become over-attuned to themselves and need others less. These are often children who seem very mature and “grow up too fast” often appearing precocious out of necessity for maintaining their own self-care.



Characteristics of Avoidant Attachment in Adults

If you are an adult with avoidant attachment traits, you may find some or all of the following are true in your intimate relationships:

- You build walls and create distance to avoid being hurt.
- You have an over-focus on self.
- You could have difficulty with maintaining eye contact.
- You have difficulty expressing your needs or feel it is better to do it yourself.
- You may search out faults in relationships or partner.
- You have strict, sometimes unequal, and often unrealistic boundaries.
- You might choose another insecurely attached person to build a relationship with.
- You may have a number of one-night stands or short-term relationships to avoid commitment.
- Your friends and lovers might tell you that you send “mixed signals.”
- You want companionship, yet also fear being hurt, so avoid emotional closeness.
- You might even self-sabotage your relationship to avoid intimacy.
- You might over-analyze your relationships “waiting for the other foot to fall.”
- You may idealize past relationships over your current partner.
- You may long for your partner but feel stressed in their presence.
- You may live in your head or have difficulty relating to others when intimacy deepens.
- You might have a tendency to dismiss emotions, giving the impression that you do not care.

Much of the avoidant attachment adaptation is fear-based – fear of rejection, fear of shame or guilt, and fear of true intimacy. This can result in superficial relationships and affairs that never deepen.



Healing Avoidant Attachment

Healing attachment injury is never easy since these habits and responses are ingrained into our neural pathways in early development. Fortunately, healing is always possible at any age. You can move toward more secure attachment with focused and regular practices by learning secure attachment skills.

Possibilities include:

- Take calculated risks with your partner by sharing your feelings and allowing vulnerability.
- When your partner expresses their needs, let them be heard.
- Practice sharing your own needs with your partner. You can start small.
- Focus on the needs of the partnership rather than the needs of only “I” or “me.”
- Practice empathy when confronted by your partner.
- Expand your awareness beyond the self and your thoughts.
- Learn to ask for help and to accept help when it’s given.
- Seek a couples’ therapist with attachment experience.
- Allow your original longing to connect.
- Engage in activities that include your partner.
- Learn to find comfort, calming or enlivening your vitality in your relationship.

Many small steps can increase awareness and the ability to move toward secure attachment, but as with healing any attachment injury, the practice requires commitment. When we think of healing attachment injury, it should be thought of as a journey more than a destination. Many attachment injuries see improvement, but old habits can occasionally creep back in. It’s important to recognize progress and to give up the expectation of perfection.



Loving an Avoidant Attached Partner

If your partner leans toward an avoidant attachment style, it's easy to feel isolated in your own relationship or to internalize your partner's tendency to close up. You might press harder for your partner to respond, only to find that the wall grows taller and more difficult to navigate. Understanding how your partner is wired, and responding to them in a loving way that reflects their attachment style can help your partner heal.

Don't chase your partner. They will flee. Rather than pressing your partner to "open up," let them know you are available when they are ready. When your partner does begin to engage, put judgment in your back pocket. Making them feel guilty or ashamed of their feelings will only reinforce their avoidant attachment injury.

It is also important to recognize that your partner's attachment style has little to do with you. In other words, do not take their silence or distance personally. Trust in another person poses great obstacles to those with attachment injuries. Being steady, reliable, and present with your partner can help.

It's also vital that you don't give up on your partner. Provide regular and consistent messages that their needs are important to you and that they are safe with you. Encourage communication and appreciate vulnerability that arises when they begin to feel the original longing to connect.



Ambivalent (Anxious) Attachment Adaptation

“People with the ambivalent attachment adaptation deal with a lot of anxiety about having their needs met or feeling secure in being loved or lovable.”

- Dr. Diane Poole Heller



Developmental Conditions That Lead to Ambivalent Attachment

Let's go back to our park and family picnic. Our toddler wanders off from the parent to explore his or her surroundings and falls down, hurting themselves. The child cries out, and the parent ignores their cries at first. Then the child goes into full-on tantrum and panic mode, raising the level of their cry until the caregiver responds to their needs. The parent might seem annoyed or put-off by the child's need for soothing. Or worse yet, scolds the child for crying out. Other times, the parent might act overly consoling, intrusive, or melodramatic. The parent might sometimes be loving and other times distracted, which results in an "on-again, off-again" as a parenting style or inconsistent responsiveness.

This inconsistency in attunement to the child's needs creates an over-focus on the parent or "other," tuning in too precisely to measure

their reaction and to gauge the energy they currently exude. This over-focus on the parent leads to anxiety when in their presence due to the unpredictability of the situation. As a result, people with ambivalent attachment styles tend to ignore their own needs and become a caregiver or smothering to their partner. This often leads to feelings of emotional starvation and a constant need to connect or co-regulate.

In other cases, children are expected to care for their parents or younger siblings. They might be put in emotionally complex situations before they are developed enough to understand them. Their parents may also look to the child to fulfill their own attachment needs, confusing their own need for love with love for the child.



Characteristics of Ambivalent Attachment in Adults

Because love was unpredictable during childhood, ambivalently attached people tend to seek out love and approval from others while having less self-esteem and little awareness or recognition of their own needs or what healthy relationships look and feel like.

If you have an ambivalent attachment style, you might have some or all of the following characteristics in adulthood.

- You have a constant need to connect or be close to your partner.
- You feel anxious or insecure when your partner is absent.
- You might feel unlovable or undeserving of love.
- You could be overly anxious to please others with little thought of yourself.
- You might find yourself constantly thinking about the past.
- You often give too much and then grow resentful when it is not returned or appreciated.
- You keep score.
- You fear abandonment and find ways to perpetuate it.
- You could have low self-esteem or are short on confidence in relationships.
- You have a crippling fear of losing your partner and your connection.
- You often grow from feelings of anxiety or disappointment to being angry or infuriated when your partner fails to respond.
- You might unconsciously smother your partner or push them away with unrealistic demands or expectations.



Healing Ambivalent Attachment

As with avoidant attachment, breaking the cycle of behavior you learned in childhood as a matter of survival is difficult, but not impossible. As with all new habits, practicing regular small steps toward secure attachment can lead to big improvements in your relationship.

- Focus on recognizing and meeting your own needs.
- Do things for yourself that you would quickly do for others.
- Practice self-regulation.
- Learn to ask for help. You can start small. Remember that people like to be helpful.
- Calm the inner critical voice.
- Write an accurate narrative of your experiences to make sense of them.
- Avoid desperate actions for attention that push your partner away.
- Seek the expert advice of an attachment therapist for couples.
- Give your partner time and space.

A helpful practice for the ambivalently attached individuals:

“Whenever someone shows me love, I’m going to stay present and not disconnect or deflect.”

- *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*

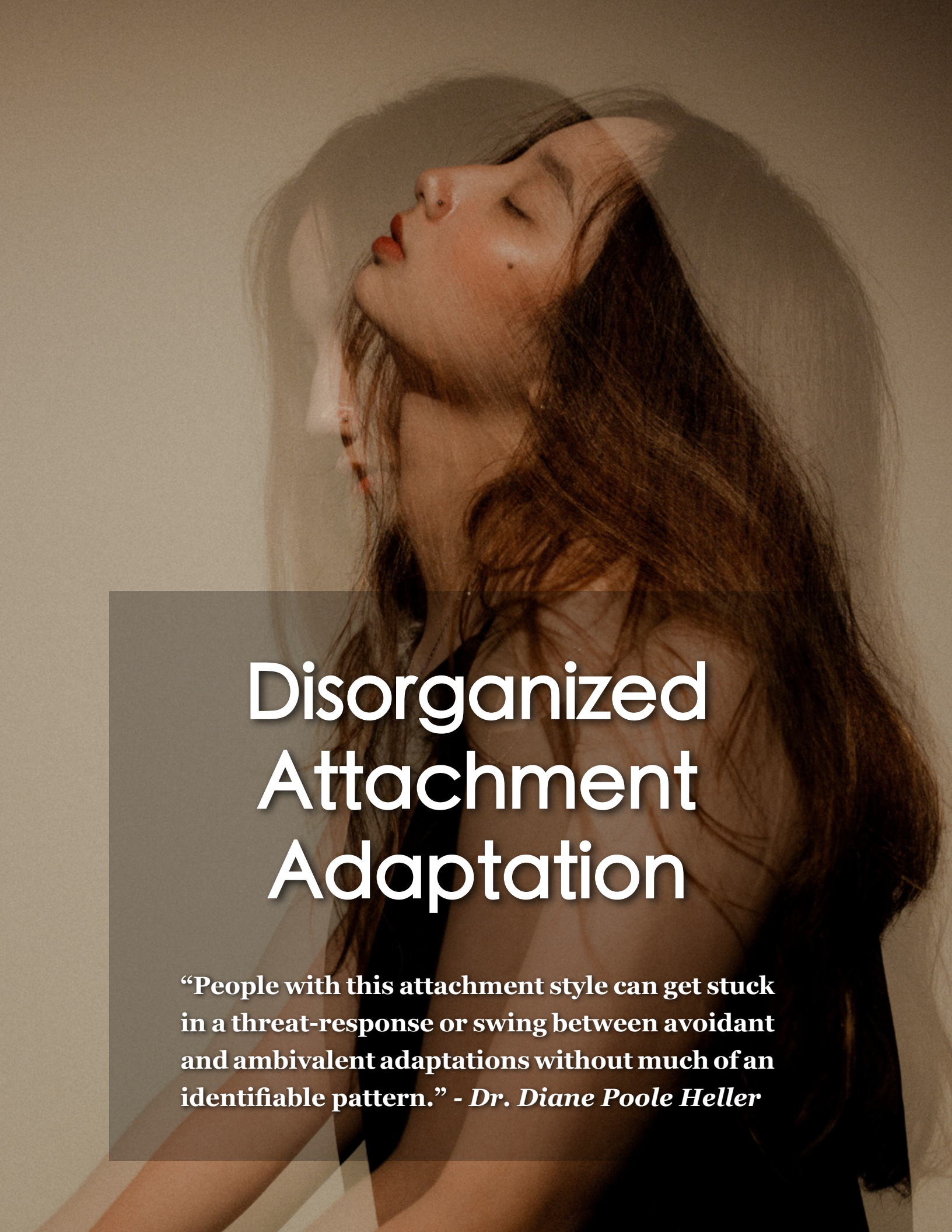


Loving an Ambivalently Attached Partner

While you might find your partner's behavior overbearing and confusing at times, it is important to realize that their attachment style was not a choice. Sometimes, irrational behaviors have very a very real foundation and understanding your partner's needs and how they are wired is helpful. You might have your phone on silent, for example, only to find a string of texts and calls that become increasingly panicked and demanding. Check in with your partner, not because they are overly clingy, but because it feels important for them to stay tethered. People with ambivalent attachment styles can be overly vigilant about finding slights or perceived rejection even when it's not helping. It is vital to act and be trustworthy as well as forthcoming and to avoid keeping secrets.

Your partner likely requires additional reassurance. By providing them with what they need, you are helping them develop the security they long for. You can listen intently and be respectful and attuned to your partner's needs while encouraging independence in the relationships and helping them carve out time to nurture themselves. Be consistent; inconsistency will trigger their attachment injury. This includes making sure that your words and actions match up. Keep your agreements.

While your partner may need additional connection and support to feel safe, your partner is likely very attentive to your needs, which might feel overwhelming or invasive. Let your partner know it's ok to look after their needs and offer to help rather than taking their constant giving for granted, which will be viewed as a lack of appreciation.



Disorganized Attachment Adaptation

“People with this attachment style can get stuck in a threat-response or swing between avoidant and ambivalent adaptations without much of an identifiable pattern.” - *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*



Developmental Conditions That Lead to Disorganized Attachment

Perhaps the most complex attachment style, disorganized attachment vacillates between avoidant and ambivalent and often develops when a caregiver or parent who was threatening, scary, or unsafe. This creates a duality of needing the parent for safety while simultaneously fearing them, causing a back-and-forth shift between avoidant and ambivalent – between turning off the signal cry completely and turning it on constantly.

In our park and family picnic scenario, when the child wanders off to explore and gets hurt, they are met with accusations of not being careful, or worse, a physical punishment for their misstep. Rather than comfort, they are faced with the situation that the person expected to comfort them becomes threatening. While physical violence is not always present in the development of disorganized attachment, it is common. This creates a no-win situation for the child. The source of safety is also dangerous

and terrifying. All too often relationships feel extremely risky.

Many of the behaviors that lead to disorganized attachment are fear-based and leave children with unmet emotional needs and the dichotomy of having to rely on unpredictable and unreliable caregivers. Parents may have their own unsolved trauma. This dynamic eliminates the sense of safety necessary to develop healthy attachment as children, which then spills into adult relationships.

The desire to connect is a natural human trait. Yearning to please caregivers or parents and the fear of abuse or neglect can both lead the child to become overly independent (avoidant) and also anxious (ambivalent) during childhood. In the disorganized adaptation, the attachment system that is designed to connect for safety and love is entangled with excessive fear and threat.



Characteristics of Disorganized Attachment in Adults

Adults with disorganized attachment have learned that relationships are scary and, as a result, they associate intimacy with fear while still feeling the urge to connect as an innate human need.

Individuals with disorganized attachment may have some or all of the following characteristics.

- In cases of physical or sexual abuse, dissociation is common.
- May experience fight, flight or freeze survival responses in relationships that block intimacy.
- Self absorption and a strong need to be in control
- Lack of presence in relationships
- Lack of impulse control
- May have flashbacks or revisit traumatic experiences in memory
- Difficulty concentrating or thinking on timeline about the past
- Easily startled or alarmed
- Constant vigilance for danger or shifts in mood
- Can appear to be “checked-out”

Navigating relationships and intimacy feels like dangerous territory to people with disorganized attachment, but progress is possible.



Healing Disorganized Attachment

Understanding disorganized attachment and the unique challenges it poses is a great first step. Because abuse or trauma is common with disorganized attachment, specific trauma-related therapy or even post-traumatic stress support can be beneficial. In many cases, progress could require the help of a professional therapist with experience in clients with disorganized attachment.

Often, disorganized attachment comes from inter-generational attachment injuries, passed from parent to child. Breaking the attachment injury cycle begins with acknowledging its impact on children and its impact on adult relationships.

It might be helpful to identify those in your life with whom you feel safe. This might be a friend, partner, or even a beloved pet. When you think of those safe individuals, what sensations arise in your body? Do you feel warm? Calm? More relaxed?

Safety and healing are possible and identifying allies who have your back can help ground your emotions, keep the threat response in check, and give you a safe home base.



Loving an Disorganized Attached Partner

Loving someone with a disorganized attachment style can seem like a roller coaster ride at times. As their partner, you can help them along their path to healing. In addition to couples' therapy with a qualified attachment therapist, a few personal exercises at home can help.

Be clear with communication and avoid mixed messages, which can be confusing for a partner with disorganized attachment. You can also try speaking to your loved one in a calm and consistent tone of voice. Raising your voice or shouting matches can cause your partner to retreat or dissociate. Take the time to give space for regulation.

It is important always, but especially with people who have abuse histories to practice safe touch when your partner feels able to receive. Check in with your partner and ask, "Does this feel ok and comfortable to you?" You can teach your partner that you are their safe home base with affectionate and safe touch.

Look at your partner with a loving eye gaze. Dr. Heller refers to this as the "Kind Eyes" exercise. Practicing this essential contact can help your partner to connect and be present.



Continuing the Journey to Secure Attachment

Today, with the instant satisfaction of internet searches, it feels like information is everywhere. When it comes to relationships and the importance of Attachment Theory in how we interact with others, it is a great idea to be discriminating in the information you choose to digest. Seek information in whatever form, from trusted leaders in the field of attachment theory.

Full-length books, like [*The Power of Attachment* by Diane Poole Heller](#), provide in-depth information and experiential exercises to aid in healing attachment wounds and enjoying deeper intimacy and connection. The commitment to reading such books and implementing just a little at time into your journey have can a profound impact. Forming new patterns and habits takes time, but is well worth the effort.

In many cases, healing will happen much faster with the assistance of an attachment therapist or at live workshops where you can see healing exercises in action, witness actual case demonstrations, and participate in discussions.

You can find support in online communities like our [Facebook group](#) or by sending an email to Diane Poole Heller's team directly to discover more attachment resources and programs at help@dianepooleheller.com.



About Dr. Diane Poole Heller

Diane Poole Heller, PhD is an established expert in the field of Adult Attachment Theory and Models, trauma resolution, and integrative healing techniques. She is a trainer, presenter, and speaker offering workshops, teleseminars and educational materials on trauma, attachment models and their dynamics in childhood and adult relationships, as well as many other topics.

Dr. Heller has lectured and taught around the world as both a Somatic Experiencing trainer and special topics presenter, most recently with her very popular DARE (Dynamic Attachment Re-Patterning experience) series on Adult Attachment.

DARE is a four-part series of trainings designed to identify the different attachment styles, heal attachment wounds, understand the science behind attachment theory, help couples enjoy greater connectedness and intimacy, and also addresses complex topics such as trauma and abuse. DARE trainings are held annually across the country, and while originally designed with clinicians and therapists in mind, is open to the public.

Her recent audiobook, [*Healing Your Attachment Wounds*](#) and paperback, [*The Power of Attachment*](#) both published by Sounds True, have made accessing valuable information and practical exercises to heal attachment injury convenient for individuals around the world.

Dr. Heller has also created several online courses including Attachment Mastery Program, Therapy Mastermind Circle, SECURE Relationships, SECURE Parenting with Kim John Payne, Healing Sexual Trauma with Dr. Peter Levine, and contributed (or presented) several FREE online summits on trauma, attachment, and couples counseling as well as a conference series called DARE to Connect.

“It’s all right here within us. We’re hardwired for secure attachment; we have the equipment. Deep down, all of us are designed for intimacy, connection, awareness, and love.” - *Dr. Diane Poole Heller*

What’s Your Adult Attachment Style? Take The Free Attachment Quiz At:

www.DianePooleHeller.com