

Adult Attachment Styles and Their Impact on Romantic Relationships, Anxiety, and Depression

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Abstract

Attachment theory, which was first studied through infant and caregiver relationships, was later found to impact adult relationships as well. Research has found a relationship between diverse adult attachment styles and individuals' personal experiences within their romantic relationships. In addition, prior work has examined how adult attachment styles impact internalizing disorders such as anxiety and depression. This literature review synthesizes current research examining different types of adult attachment styles and their impact on romantic relationships, anxiety, and depression. Future directions and implications will also be presented.

Secure Attachment

Romantic Relationships

- Positive correlation between secure attachments and higher levels of satisfaction in romantic relationships (Sesemann et al., 2017).
- Higher levels sexual communication found in securely attached individuals than avoidant-insecure and anxious-insecure (Goldsmith et al., 2016).
- More benefits than costs regarding their relationship (Monteoliva et al., 2016).
- Feeling more comfortable with intimacy (Monteoliva et al., 2016).
- More effective communicator in comparison to insecure attachment styles (McNeil et al., 2018).

Anxiety

- Less likely to experience anxiety than any other type of attachment (Eng et al., 2001; Erozkhan, 2009).
- Associated with better mindsets and less negativity (Surcinelli et al., 2010).
- Lower levels of anxiety sensitivity (Watt et al., 2005).
- Negative correlation between secure attachment and social anxiety; one explanation may be less negative thoughts than other attachment styles (Eng et al., 2001).

Depression

- Linked to less depression (Eng et al., 2001).
- Shifts in depression due to changes occurring naturally in attachments (Martin et al., 2017).
- Possible explanation for correlation between depression and attachment style influenced by early life experiences that caused lower self esteem and negative view of self (Permyu et al., 2010).

Anxious-Insecure Attachment

Romantic Relationships

- More likely to worry about their current romantic relationships as well as feeling less independence (Simpson, 1990).
- Lower levels of sexual satisfaction than any other attachment style (Goldsmith et al., 2016).
- More difficult to relate to others and form stable relationships (Yen, 2014).
- More likely to feel distress after a breakup (Madley & Jilek, 2012).
- Less likely to take blame for relationship ending and their readiness to date is later than secure attachment styles (Madley & Jilek, 2012).

Anxiety

- Found that they struggle to be able to clarify their emotions, leading to more anxiety (Stevens, 2014).
- Higher levels of social anxiety and avoidance/discomfort in social settings (Read et al., 2018).

Depression

- At higher risk for developing depressive symptoms (Lee & Hankin, 2009).
- Interpersonal stress is more common in people with anxious-insecure attachment which leads to higher levels of depression (Jinyao et al., 2012).
- Doubts about finding close friendships leads to higher levels of loneliness (Yen, 2014).

Avoidant-Insecure Attachment

Romantic Relationships

- More likely to sabotage new relationships in addition to being less likely to need intimacy (Shrivastava & Burianova, 2014).
- Lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Goldsmith et al., 2016); may be due to expressing themselves negatively when communicating sexual concerns with partner (McNeil et al., 2018).
- Higher levels of infidelity (DeWall et al., 2011).

Anxiety

- Linked to higher levels of generalized anxiety (Marganska et al., 2013).
- High levels of social anxiety (Read et al., 2018).

Depression

- More likely to have negative thoughts about themselves or others (Surcinelli et al., 2010).
- Negative outlooks lead to more depressive symptoms (Stevens, 2014; Volling et al., 1998).
- Contrary from prior results, higher levels of depression in anxious-insecure attached individuals than avoidant-insecure attachment (Bishop et al., 2018).

Future Directions

- Other factors may come into play when examining how adult attachment impacts individuals' romantic relationships, anxiety, and depression. Research should explore these.
- Future research should focus more on how specific personality traits and attachment styles may impact individuals' overall satisfaction in romantic relationships and overall psychological well-being.
- In addition, future research should examine how attachment styles towards parents' correlate to attachment styles within romantic relationships.
- More research on effective therapeutic approaches for working with individuals is also needed.

Implications

- Because there are negative impacts of having insecure attachments in comparison to securely attached individuals, it is very important to educate therapists on the impact of attachment styles on romantic relationships.
- Research regarding the different types of therapy found that individuals with avoidant-insecure attachment styles are most receptive to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy in comparison to a psychodynamic approach (Bucci et al., 2016). This may be due to the fact that individuals with avoidant attachment styles have difficulties working directly with their emotions and being able to open up in a client-therapist relationship (Bucci et al., 2016). Educating counselors on these findings can help them choose the right therapeutic approaches for clients.
- It may also be helpful to educate individuals about how their attachment style may be impacting their romantic relationships and psychological well-being.