

ATTACHMENT

OUR ATTACHMENT STYLE:

The unconscious blueprint shaping our self-esteem and our intimate relationships.



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HEART TO HEART COUNSELING

OUR ATTACHMENT STYLE: THE UNCONSCIOUS BLUEPRINT SHAPING OUR SELF-ESTEEM AND OUR INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS.

- Do you sometimes or often feel sad or depressed, and can't seem to put your finger on why?
- Are your current or previous intimate relationships less than fully satisfying, despite you and your partner's best efforts to get close and remain close?
- Do you wonder if you are *ENOUGH* (i.e., Smart enough, attractive enough, sexy enough, etc., etc.)? Do you wonder if you are *TOO MUCH* (i.e., Talking too much, expressing feelings too much, weigh too much, ask for things too much, etc., etc.)



Quite often the answer to these questions lies in our style of attachment, which was created in infancy, and once created, appeared to be set in stone, never to be investigated or thought of again. In this e-book, we will look more closely at what attachment really is, and how it can affect our lives so profoundly, without us ever being aware of what is happening within us and between us. Why should we look at this? Because the truth, is that our attachment style is NOT set in stone, and can be healed, when we have the intention, the tools, and the awareness of how to do so.

What is attachment?

Attachment is the name that John Bowlby (1907-1990) assigned to the way that infants relate to their primary caregiver, usually the mother. Since infants are completely dependent on their caregivers for survival, their need to stay close and connected drives much of their emotions and behaviors. Depending upon the mother's ability to understand, and effectively reply to the infant's signals, the infant learns different strategies designed to gain the mother's attention and keep her close. Those strategies are recorded in the infant's subconscious, which affects their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors throughout their life.



What are the four styles of attachment, and how do they impact your self-esteem, self-worth, and relationships, especially your intimate relationship?

Bowlby and others who have studied infant-mother relationships in-depth, have identified four distinct styles of attachments. Our attachment styles serve as compasses, guiding us through the ups and downs of life. Awareness of your attachment style empowers you to understand your emotional triggers, as well as make conscious choices in partnerships. The four attachment styles that psychology classifies as ubiquitous to everyone, are called:

Our attachment styles serve as compasses, guiding us through the ups and downs of life.



- **Healthy attachment**, which is also known as contingent attachment or contingent communication.
- **Avoidant- dismissive attachment**, when applied to adults, or anxious-avoidant when applied to children.
- **Anxious – preoccupied**, when applied to adults, or anxious-ambivalent when applied to children.
- **Disorganized attachment**, when applied to adults, or disoriented attachment when applied to children.



When we talk about attachment style, it is important to remember that we all have a mixture of styles within us, since no person is kind, loving, and empathic all the time. The styles that we are discussing are generalities, and as such, produces within each of us, a mixture of attachment styles, some positive, and some challenging. The more you understand some of the challenges inherent in your style of attachment, the easier it becomes to have compassion for yourself, and for the challenges you have experienced in your personal relationships. It also allows you to be more gentle with others, realizing some of the challenges they experience with their own attachment difficulties. Understanding and recognizing your style of attachment, as well as understanding *others*, without judgement is a profound act of self-love and empathy. The more you understand about how your attachment style came into being, the easier it becomes to recognize the issues that it has created in your life. This recognition allows you to repair the deficits left over from childhood. Further, this knowledge will equip you with the tools to build resilient, nurturing relationships, while fostering a compassionate understanding between yourself and others. This process can become your own transformative journey, leading to emotional healing, authentic connections, and a more empathic world.



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You might have a **contingent attachment** style if you have:

- The ability to both identify and regulate your emotions.
- A basic belief that others are trustworthy until shown otherwise.
- An assertive communication style versus passive-aggressive.
- The ability to ask for emotional support when needed.
- A comfortable feeling being alone as well as with others.
- The desire for intimacy in close relationships.
- The ability to self-reflect and accept criticism without becoming defensive.
- An acceptance of the differences in others without being judgmental or comparing yourself.
- The ability to engage in conflict without taking it personally.
- A high regard for oneself without feeling better than others.
- An ability to access one's emotions and express them clearly, honestly, and kindly.

Contingent attachment/communication:

Contingent attachment/communication is the foundation of a well-rounded personality, beginning in infancy. As infants we communicate continuously, expressing our needs and emotions, through every tiny movement, blink, or sound we make. These real, but subtle signals, form the language of our desires and states of mind, enabling us to reach out to our mother or caregiver, desirous of an understanding and loving response.

The caregivers' ability to decipher the infant's signals, to comprehend their unspoken language, sets the stage for the profound relationship that is about to unfold. When the mother or caregiver's response contains joy, pleasure, and love, the infant attaches with a secure and harmonious bond. This is referred to in psychological literature as contingent communication, meaning that the mother's response is contingent upon the baby's unspoken request, and the baby's response is contingent upon the mother's accurate understanding of his/her needs and the fulfillment thereof. When contingent communication is the mainstay of the infant/mother/caregiver's relationship, the child experiences profound feelings of safety and security, two of the main elements of love.

As infants we communicate continuously, expressing our needs and emotions, through every tiny movement, blink, or sound we make.



As the child's attachment needs are fulfilled, a natural maturing process develops, and the child interacts with others in the world, bringing with them the memory and experience of their contingent communication from infancy. This allows them to be their authentic true-selves with others, without having to sacrifice their own unique identities. This maturational process of dependency, moving to independency, and finally merging into interdependency, happens naturally, and they often attract into their lives others, who have experienced similar relationships with their caregivers.



An infant is designed by nature to be finely attuned to the mother's nervous system, which is reflected in her breathing, heart rate, facial expressions, relaxation or tenseness of her body, and voice tone. If she is calm and relaxed, and happy to hold him/her, the infant is able to feel safe, cared for, peaceful and relaxed. This sets the stage for how the infant will feel about the world and gives him/her permission to have their authentic thoughts and feelings, i.e., to feel excited, safe, and curious about what is next in life.

This also allows the infant, later the child and the adult, to comment on what they see, think, and feel, without worrying about the parents' response. This is called the beginning of contingent attachment, or also called contingent communication (Siegel 1999), meaning that both the mother and infant's signals are attuned to each other in a happy, relaxed, playful manner.

The infant experiences the three aspects of personal integrity, which include *safety*, *stability*, and *nurturance*. As a result, they feel loved, and therefore loveable, and begin to feel like their communication signals matter, their needs will be met, and that they have personal power, the beginnings of feeling competent. Most importantly, they know *I matter*, which sets the stage for high self-esteem later on. When the mother is often calm and happy to be with her infant child, and is able to distinguish her own needs from those of her child, she creates an environment



where her child can express him/herself openly and authentically, free from the fear of judgment or punishment. It's within these nurturing connections that men and women experience the foundation for emotional well-being and genuine self-expression which is the blueprint for them learning as adults, how to create a happy life and successful intimate relationship.

What happens then, when the mother suffers from distress, and is unable to present to her infant a positive nurturing, safe, loving, energetic connection?

The seeds of anxiety and low self-esteem:

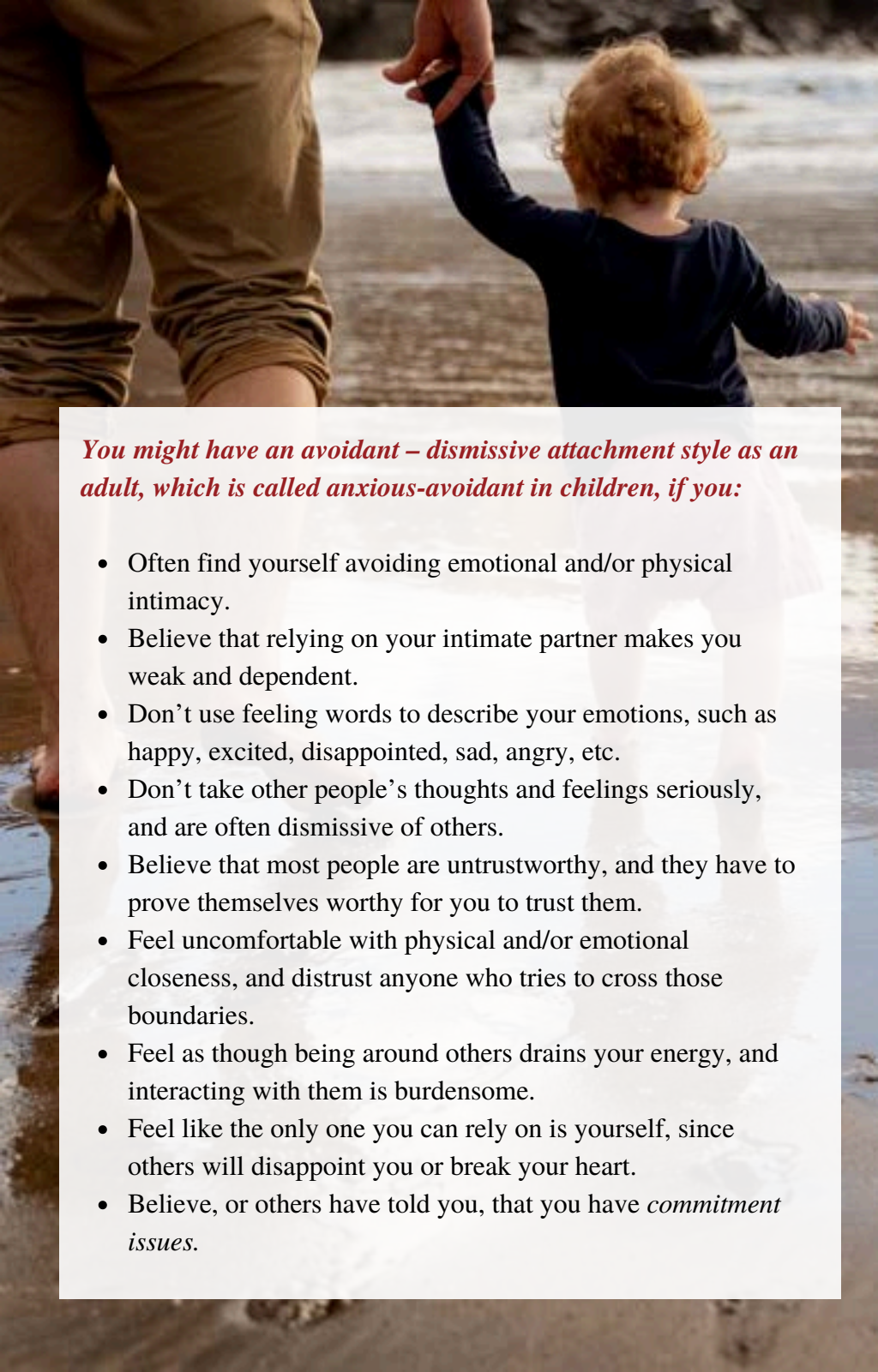
Unfortunately, when the mother/caregiver has not had the benefit of contingent communication in her own childhood, and has not done the emotional work necessary to repair this deficit, the child does not have the benefit of a safe, secure attachment experience. When this happens, the secure attachment with the child's caregiver becomes fragile, and the child begins to fear the loss of the caregiver, which such loss, is equivalent to death, since the child has no way to survive without the caregiver's beneficence. In this instance, the child is faced with the choice of giving up their authentic true-selves (by not expressing themselves spontaneously, openly, or honestly) in order to comply with the needs of the caregiver, or hold on to their authentic true-selves, and risk the punishment and/or abandonment of the caregiver. This is a *NO WIN* scenario, and both carry with them severe negative consequences for the child.



In the example, when children raised by overly controlling parents, they often find themselves trapped in a suffocating environment. Constant scrutiny, strict rules, and micromanagement can sow the seeds of anxiety and low self-esteem. Often, these individuals, as adults, become rigid and dogmatic, and find it difficult to compromise, as they see it as a weakness and a loss of their true-self. Sometimes, as adults, they have difficulty making their own decisions, fearing punishment if the decision turns out to be *wrong*.



To navigate the challenges posed by overly controlling parents, children often develop various coping mechanisms, often referred to as ego-defenses. Some may become people-pleasers, always seeking validation and approval. Others might rebel and engage in risky behaviors to assert their independence. These coping strategies can be both protective and detrimental, depending on the circumstances. While we are discussing the effects of problematic parenting, it is important to remember that any form of problematic parenting can be healed as an adult with the help of reparative psychotherapy. In our Multidimensional model of psychotherapy (MDRT), we encourage our clients to identify and explore the parenting style they were raised in so that they can begin the important journey of restoration. We would like to invite you to read more about ego functioning and defenses in Dimension One of our MDRT model of psychotherapy.

A photograph of a person's legs in khaki pants and a young child with curly hair in a dark blue shirt, walking on a sandy beach. The person is holding the child's hand. The background shows the ocean and a rocky shore.

You might have an avoidant – dismissive attachment style as an adult, which is called anxious-avoidant in children, if you:

- Often find yourself avoiding emotional and/or physical intimacy.
- Believe that relying on your intimate partner makes you weak and dependent.
- Don't use feeling words to describe your emotions, such as happy, excited, disappointed, sad, angry, etc.
- Don't take other people's thoughts and feelings seriously, and are often dismissive of others.
- Believe that most people are untrustworthy, and they have to prove themselves worthy for you to trust them.
- Feel uncomfortable with physical and/or emotional closeness, and distrust anyone who tries to cross those boundaries.
- Feel as though being around others drains your energy, and interacting with them is burdensome.
- Feel like the only one you can rely on is yourself, since others will disappoint you or break your heart.
- Believe, or others have told you, that you have *commitment issues*.

Avoidant- dismissive in adults, or anxious-avoidant in children

This type of attachment style often is the result of having a primary caretaker who does not meet the physical and/or the emotional needs of the infant much of the time. As a result, the infant, or child, sometimes attempts to caretake the caretaker, both to keep them functioning, and in an effort to keep them close. Avoidant attachment carries within it a rather negative view of oneself and others.



A child who grows up with this pattern, displays a mixture of avoidant and anxious behaviors, while deeply desiring to be in relationships. During their early years, this child experienced significant trauma since their primary caregiver was, unfortunately, a source of both protection and threat. This contradiction left the child struggling to find stability and safety. The result was an unresolved developmental trauma, that made the child hypersensitive to danger, causing them to process all incoming information through a lens of fear.

As this child grows into an adult, the effects of this attachment style become clearer. They find themselves bouncing between two fears: the fear of becoming too close (engulfment) and the fear of being abandoned. This internal conflict often leads to contradictory coping strategies. You might notice them seeking negative attention on one hand, and then swiftly transitioning to lengthy monologues on the other, trying to gain positive attention.

They perceive themselves as victims, and are conflicted about desiring the intimacy that most people find comforting. Believing that genuine love is beyond their reach, they face difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships, due to a core sense of profound shame, that taints their self-perception. Helping them resolve the conflicting feelings related to their internal conflicts over intimacy issues is the work of psychotherapy. Within the context of a safe, supportive, trusting relationship with the therapist, the client can explore the origins and depths of this conflict. In so doing, they can create the necessary internal changes needed to resolve, once and for all, their pain and confusion.

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Signs you might have an anxious - preoccupied attachment style in adulthood (anxious-ambivalent attachment style in childhood) when you exhibit:

- Clingy tendencies with your partner
- A high sensitivity to criticism (real or perceived)
- A strong need for approval from others
- Jealous tendencies
- Uncomfortable feelings about being alone
- Low self-esteem (negatively comparing yourself to others)
- Feelings of unworthiness (no one will love me)
- A strong belief that you will be rejected.
- An irrational fear of abandonment (I won't be able to survive if you leave me.)
- Consistent difficulty trusting others

Anxious - preoccupied in adulthood, or anxious-ambivalent attachment style in children

An anxious attachment style, also known as anxious-ambivalent or anxious-preoccupied, involves fear of rejection and abandonment, which can leave individuals dependent on their partner for validation and emotional stability. This may lead to tendencies of codependency, where one partner feels compelled to caretake his/her partner's feelings. When this occurs, the co-dependent partner (sometimes both partners) believes that if his/her partner is unhappy, then they must FIX them or their survival is threatened.

This attachment style develops in early childhood, where the parents acted inconsistently in response to the child's needs. This left the child confused, not knowing what to expect from them in any given moment. In this confusing environment, the child felt insecure and/or frightened much of the time, regardless of whether their parent was present or not. Adults who have experienced this anxious attachment style, may recall times when their parents hugged and kissed them, as well as times when their parents did not seem to know that they were around. In addition, they may have observed their parents being overwhelmed by stressors, which made the child feel desperate to take care of them, creating a maladaptive role reversal. This created, within the child, later the adult, strong feelings that they needed to take care of their partners' feelings, which is one of the main characteristics of co-dependency.

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People with an anxious - preoccupied attachment style often struggle with feelings of unworthiness, as well as a constant need for reassurance from their partners. They often take full responsibility when things go awry. They tend to blame themselves when challenges arise in their relationships, and often can become jealous and mistrusting of their partner. These people also struggle with a feeling of low self-worth, which is connected with a deep-seated fear of being abandoned, rejected, or left alone, and often feel ashamed of themselves for feeling this way.

If you are aware of your anxious-preoccupied tendencies, through psychotherapy you can learn to communicate your needs nondefensively, creating a more secure connection. Similarly, if you recognize yourself as possessing dismissive-avoidant traits, you can learn ways to develop greater intimacy and trust with your partner, by noticing and commenting about your own distancing behavior. This self-awareness, both nurtures existing relationships, as well as allowing you to choose more compatible partners, creating a healthier, more fulfilling romantic life.

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A man and a woman are sitting on a brown couch in a room with wood-paneled walls and a large window. The woman, on the left, has long dark hair with bangs and is wearing a white off-the-shoulder top. She is looking towards the man with a slight smile. The man, on the right, has short dark hair and is wearing a blue t-shirt. He is looking back at her. A semi-transparent white box with text is overlaid on the image.

Signs you might have acquired a disorganized attachment style in adulthood (disoriented attachment style in childhood) when you exhibit:

- A profound fear of rejection
- Difficulty or inability to regulate your emotions
- Behaviors which contradict each other
- Persistently high feelings of anxiety
- Suspicion in your dealings with others
- Traits common to both avoidant and anxious attachment styles

Disorganized attachment style in adults (disoriented attachment style in children)

The fourth attachment style, called disorganized attachment, some have said, is a combination of the *avoidant- dismissive and anxious preoccupied* styles of attachment. People who struggle with a disorganized attachment style, have difficulty trusting others, and exhibit inconsistent behavior patterns, making it difficult for those around them to understand what they are attempting to communicate. Similar to the two other problematic styles just discussed, childhood trauma is the root cause. Parents or caregivers who are inconsistently supportive, leave the child with both feelings of support and anxiety. The very people who the child relies upon for their safety and security, can also be their greatest source of fear and confusion.



When individuals struggle with disorganized attachment issues, it often brings with it other kinds of mental health challenges. Mood disorders, substance and process addictions, as well as self-harm and self-sabotaging behaviors are common. As just stated, due to contradictory behaviors, relationships, especially intimate relationships, are also problematic to the person.

Many people with disorganized attachment, exhibit behaviors of strong emotional intensity, and clinginess, followed by phases of emotional detachment, disconnection from their partners, and desire for extreme self-sufficiency. They often give their partner powerful signals of *come here*, and *go away*, leaving their partner confused, angry, and insecure. Often, these individuals, by giving these contradictory messages to their partner, causes them to feel rejected, and unfortunately, creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of their worst fear.



Like most mental health challenges, the main issue with respect to healing, is the issue of denial. When people have received problematic parenting that has led to attachment difficulties, the majority of people resist looking at the truth of what has occurred in their childhood. The statement they did the best they could, referring to the parents, is often used as a rationalization to keep them from experiencing the pain created by their inadequate parenting. The negative feelings associated with this, and the repression of those feelings, permit the individual to continue acting out the damage that they have carried with them since childhood.

The feelings of fear of reprisal from the parents, (regardless of whether the parent is still alive) and the desire to be loyal to their parents, subconsciously, keeps them from admitting the pain and distress those relationships have created. Without the admission of pain, healing cannot take place. Healing the damage created through the three negative attachment styles needs to begin, so that the individual is able to reclaim their authentic true-selves, allowing them to finally connect with their significant other, in a truly loving intimate manner.

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Without the admission of pain, healing cannot take place.

How does your attachment style impact your level of happiness and your intimate relationships?

How these different attachment styles play out in our adult relationships is vital to understand. Being able to talk about these issues with your partner, can alleviate a lot of miscommunications leading to hurt, and angry feelings that may arise without understanding the cause. The good news is that these styles of attachment are learned, and thus, with new learning through psychotherapy, can be repaired and replaced, to create more secure attachments with each other.

Individuals with contingent attachment styles (also known as contingent communication), more often approach relationships with a sense of trust and confidence. Having grown up with consistent and caring caretakers, they believe that their needs will usually be met, which leaves them with a strong foundation of self-worth.



As adults, it becomes easier for them to have open communication, which often allows them to create emotional intimacy with their partner. As a result, those with secure attachments often experience higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction. Their ability to form and maintain meaningful connections provides them with a safety net, enabling them to traverse life's challenges with greater resilience and a positive outlook.

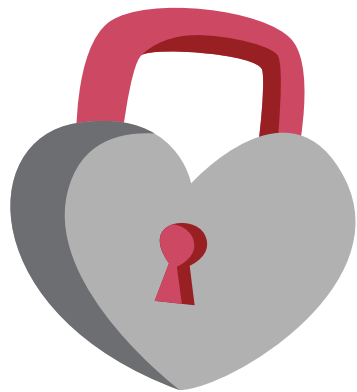
Two consequences of problematic attachment in childhood can lead to an adult becoming co-dependent and/or clingy. Co-dependence occurs when pleasing the partner for the sake of remaining within the relationship, becomes the most important task. Clinginess occurs when the person's significant other, takes on the role of the good parent, and the individual holds on for dear life, believing that they cannot survive without the partner. Neither of these modes promotes healthy, growing relationships, where each individual desires to grow into the best version of themselves, and then shares that growing-self with each other.

An anxious-preoccupied attachment style carries a deep-seated fear of abandonment, and an overwhelming need for reassurance. People with this attachment style often find themselves experiencing fear and insecurity within their intimate relationship, leading to emotional turbulence.

Having a constant craving for validation, plus a fear of rejection, can hinder their ability to experience genuine happiness. The anxieties originating from attachment insecurities may overshadow any positive experiences, making it challenging to find contentment and satisfaction in their romantic life.

People who struggle with an avoidant attachment style, tend to avoid emotional intimacy and vulnerability, as they often distance themselves from deep connections. Dismissive-avoidant individuals suppress their attachment needs, prioritizing independence over emotional closeness. Fearful-avoidant individuals, contrarily, go back and forth between the desire for intimacy and the fear of rejection, creating confusion, hurt feelings, and distance within their relationship. As a result, this pattern of avoidance may lead to a sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction, since the avoidance of meaningful connections deprives them of the richness of authentic human relationships.

*Dismissive-avoidant
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Healthy attachment, intimacy, and life happiness

Healthy attachment with an intimate partner allows for deep emotionally shared connections between two souls. Our emotions are intricately intertwined with our authentic true-selves, and thus are deeply personal. We yearn to share these intimate aspects of ourselves with those we hold close, desiring that this sharing remain sacred, a secret realm not to be unveiled without our consent. When we open up and share our emotions, we take a daring leap, risking vulnerability, in the hope that the other person will truly care for us. It's a profound gift, not to be taken lightly, a delicate exchange of trust and understanding.



Our ability to comprehend and empathize with another person's emotions hinges on our capacity to understand our own. As we allow ourselves to be, and show our own vulnerability, we invite our partners to do the same. It is here that true human connections flourish, reminding us of the profound significance of healthy attachment in our lives.

Recognizing the impact of attachment styles on happiness is an invitation for growth and healing. Through increasing one's self-awareness, and by obtaining therapeutic support, individuals can work towards developing a more secure attachment style. Within the therapeutic environment, the skills of mindfulness, self-reflection, and compassionate self-care can be learned. Old wounds, including wounds from childhood, can be healed, and replaced with a sense of inner security and self-love. As these healing processes unfold, individuals often find that their capacity for happiness expands, and life satisfaction deepens



We would like to invite you to read more about attachment styles in Dimension Four of our MDRT model of psychotherapy, where we will explore more ways of healing problematic styles of attachment.

“Who am I, and who am I in this relationship?”

Heart To Heart Counseling is proudly introducing a non-pathologizing way of raising self-esteem and eliminating ‘stuck-ness’ in your most important relationships...!

Multi-Dimensional Relational Therapy (MDRT)

Based on our many decades of research and clinical experience, we have designed a new model, which we have named Multi-Dimensional Relational Therapy (MDRT). Our objective is to assist you in transforming the inner core of your being, to create high self-esteem, lasting love, connection, and intimacy, both with yourself, and between you and your partner.

Dimension 1 – Ego Functioning and Defenses

Before we grew up and developed an adult intimate relationship with another person, we were all individuals who were learning about ourselves and the world around us. This learning took place through the culture we were raised in, and through childhood life experiences. These experiences gave us both positive loving, and/or negative interactions and connections, which left us with feelings of being loved and cared for, or the lack thereof. How do those experiences shape and form our personality, and affect our ability to create intimacy later in life?

Dimension 2 – Spiritual Transcendence

What most couples say they want when they come to counseling, is to achieve a ‘more fulfilling relationship’. What we have found is that this usually has to do with one or both partners not feeling loved in the way that is meaningful to them.

How does spirituality and the embodiment of spiritual values inform our ability to have high self-esteem, and to give and receive love in the way that is most meaningful to us and our partner?

Dimension 3 – Sexuality

How happy are you with your sexual life? Has sex with your partner become routine and/or unfulfilling? Is sexual desire an unresolved issue between you and your partner?

Can you say exactly what you want in bed, or let your partner really see you during an orgasm (or do you have orgasms)? How inhibited do you feel in bed? Do you have sexual questions that remain unanswered? Have you stopped having sex altogether? Have you attempted and tried to use sex to get non-sexual needs met in your relationship? Do you fantasize or act out your desires to have sex outside your relationship?

Dimension 4 - Attachment and Childhood development

When we care deeply about another person, we form an emotional attachment to that person. This is ubiquitous in human development throughout the world. One dictionary definition of *attachment* is that *attachment is a deep and enduring emotional bond between two people in which each seeks closeness and feels more secure, when in the presence of the attachment figure.* How we attach emotionally in our romantic relationships is a vital area to be both explored and understood if we desire true intimacy to develop.

There are three basic attachment styles:

1 – Secure attachment

2 – Anxious, Ambivalent attachment

3 – Avoidant attachment

Understanding how these develop, and which style you utilized can help you to co-create the secure attachment style that everyone needs and wants.

Dimension 5 – Trauma and the loss of the authentic true-self

Many individuals enter into a relationship with one another while having many unexamined traumas as part of their unique life histories, which have impaired the formation of their self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and ultimately the formation of their authentic true-selves. We call this impairment the ‘adapted-self’, or the ‘co-dependent-self’. Many marital conflicts are the end result of these unexamined and unresolved traumas they carry with them. This dimension’s primary focus will be on the impact of trauma on the individuals’ authentic true-self, and by extension his/her relational-self. Gaining a deeper understanding of this will allow us to transcend these traumatic experiences and help form positive loving relationships within ourselves and with our significant other.

Dimension 6 – Communication

How we express ourselves to our partners often informs how our partners respond to us. Do we focus on the negative, i.e., say what we are not getting (you never hug me when you come home from work) or do we focus on the positive and ask for what we want more directly? (i.e., I really appreciate you coming home on time, and if you would give me a hug when you enter you would make my day!).

What makes communication so vitally important to long-lasting romance, and what are the secrets to having intimate communication with your partner? Do you listen to each other in order to understand, or do you listen to respond, and to be right?

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Dr. Rashidian earned her Ph.D. in Counseling at the University of New England (UNE), School of Health, in Armidale, Australia. She then completed a two-year post-Doctoral fellowship position at UNE with the focus on sexual healthcare and inclusion. She received a Master

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Committed to sexual healthcare and mental well-being research, Dr. Rashidian has focused on the enhancement of relationships and sexual enrichment over the past 25 years. Her passion is to help all people achieve and experience joy and fulfillment with their partners. “We all want everlasting happiness in our lives, and I believe that this is achievable.”

In addition to her clinical and research pursuits, she possesses a remarkable talent in the culinary arts, an enduring passion for painting, a fervent dedication to gardening, and a strong commitment to maintaining a healthy lifestyle through mindful eating and regular exercise habits.

Further information about her clinical work and focus can be obtained at Psychology Today, [trfsq.com](https://www.trfsq.com), and ResearchGate.

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