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# Relationship Sabotage in Adults with Low Self-Esteem from Attachment Trauma in Childhood

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*Attachment trauma experienced in childhood can lead to the development of anxious and avoidant insecure attachment styles resulting in relational sabotage in romantic relationships. Individuals with an anxious attachment style may enact behaviors that are beneficial to relationships, but their unhealthy motives in said behaviors often erode their relationships. Those with an avoidant attachment style can be withdrawn and distant with partners in their efforts to avoid hurt from intimacy, thus negatively impacting their relationships. Thus, attachment trauma in both avoidant and anxious individuals may lead to behaviors that sabotage their romantic relationships that may greatly decrease relationship satisfaction.*

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One important factor that influences adult romantic relationships is attachment trauma experienced in childhood (Beeney et al., 2019; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Kinley & Reyno, 2019; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015; Poulsen, Holman, Busby, & Carroll, 2013; Strauss & Kito, 2012; Towler & Stuhlmecher, 2013). Attachment theory states that beginning in infancy, children form attachment relationships with their caregivers, seeking to meet their physical and emotional needs (Meyer, Rorer, & Maxwell, 2015). The main ways that infants engage with their attachment figures are by seeking physical proximity and seeking comfort or help when distressed (Poulsen et al., 2013). If attachment figures are available and respond sensitively, the distress is alleviated, but if they are unresponsive or unavailable when proximity is sought, the distress may be compounded (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Reiner & Spangler, 2013). This cycle may repeat many times, and repeated attachment experiences eventually form individuals' *working model* of attachment expectations in relationships—stable behaviors and expectations in attachment relationships, responses to distress and conflict, and concepts of themselves and others (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Kinley & Reyno, 2019; Mattingly & Clark, 2012). While working models can change—there is hope—early and later formative experiences represent enduring influences on attachment engagement.

These stabilized behaviors and beliefs are known as an individual's attachment style (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Mattingly & Clark, 2012). Repeated negative experiences with one's attachment figures can lead to attachment (relational) trauma and the development of insecure attachment styles (Kinley & Reyno, 2019; Maxwell & Huprich, 2014). While attachment styles are first formed in infancy and childhood in regard to the attachment relationships with an individual's primary caregiver(s), attachment patterns persist into adulthood and affect attachment relationships with romantic partners (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015; Reiner & Spangler, 2013). Adult attachment finds expression in the *pair-bond* relationship (Cassidy, 2008; Feeney, 1999; Hazan & Zeifman, 1999; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008).

Adults with a secure attachment style generally have positive views of themselves and others, are comfortable with intimacy, experience more positive emotions, and are more trusting (Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Towler & Stuhlmecher, 2013). The two main types of insecure attachment styles in adults, avoidance and anxiety, are associated with more negative relational outcomes. Adults with anxious attachment may experience fear of rejection and abandonment, worry over the attachment figure's availability, experience negative emotions, have poor emotional regulation, and experience anxiety in distressing situations and conflict (Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Reiner & Spangler, 2013; Strauss & Kito, 2012). Adults with avoidant attachment may experience fear of intimacy and demonstrate low proximity seeking, poor emotional regulation, and less positive emotional response. They tend to be emotionally unavailable and lack prosocial behaviors (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015; Reiner & Spangler, 2013; Strauss & Kito, 2012). Significant physical, psychological, relational, and spiritual benefits are associated with secure attachment and diminished or forfeit where attachment is insecure.

Since view of self and others is foundational to attachment styles, attachment styles are often closely related to self-esteem or self-concept (Liu et al., 2018; Lockhart et al., 2017). Self-esteem is individuals' internal framework of the self and the degree to which they think they are valued and worthwhile (Liu et al., 2018; Lockhart et al., 2017). Attachment trauma may disrupt self-esteem formation as individuals who are not responded to sensitively often come to believe that their needs and they themselves do not matter (Kinley & Reyno, 2019; Liu et al., 2018; Lockhart et al., 2017). Although relationship satisfaction is influenced by many diverse factors, attachment trauma experienced in childhood may be a significant contributor to adult romantic relationship dissatisfaction because attachment trauma often compromises self-concept and leads people to feel unworthy of healthy relationships, which may lead them to sabotage their romantic relationships. This literature review discusses the different sabotaging behaviors of people with anxious and avoidant attachment styles resulting from childhood attachment trauma and how those sabotaging relationships may be connected to self-concept.

### **Sabotaging Behaviors Associated with Anxious Attachment**

In the context of relationships, individuals with an anxious attachment style have core beliefs and desires that influence the types of sabotaging behaviors they engage in. They have a high desire to be valued, but they believe that people do not value them very much, underestimating their partner's care and regard for them (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015). This combination can create anxiety and fear of rejection and abandonment (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012). This fear and anxiety, stemming from poor caregiver responses in childhood, can lead to intense emotional distress around several relational situations, including conflict, violated trust, unresponsive partners, and other threatening stimuli (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015; Reiner & Spangler, 2013). Individuals with an anxious attachment style may respond to this emotional distress in a variety of unhealthy ways, sabotaging the relationships that could provide the love and care they seek.

In general, people with insecure attachment styles choose partners who also have insecure attachment styles, so anxiously attached people also often choose people with an anxious or avoidant attachment, which impairs their relationship from the start since it becomes difficult for either of them to rely on their insecure partner to scaffold their own insecure attachment. Consequently, insecure attachment styles are predictors of relationship dissatisfaction (Beeney et al., 2019; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Meyer et al., 2015; Strauss & Kito, 2012). An

anxious attachment style also influences the rate at which individuals are selected as partners by others because securely attached people are more likely to ask out and form relationships with people who have good self-esteem and who they perceive as being a potential secure base (Poulsen et al., 2013). For example, an individual with an anxious attachment style might text constantly after a first date or want to hang out every day, which can come across as clingy and undesirable to a securely attached person. Thus, it is likely that anxiously attached individuals may sputter and stall out in relationships with secure individuals, even setting their own partner preferences aside (Poulsen et al., 2013).

Even after individuals with an anxious attachment style are in a relationship, sabotage often continues. Individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to react intensely and hyperactively to relational situations (Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015). They often use ineffective conflict resolution styles such as inducing guilt to indirectly express their hurt, being controlling, and expressing or implying distrust in their partner (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015). While thus expressing their emotions in ways that are dissatisfying to their partners, individuals with an anxious attachment style simultaneously may cling to their partners, striving to minimize physical and emotional distance (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Meyer et al., 2015). For example, if their partner brings up a problem in the relationship, individuals with an anxious attachment style might respond by yelling, crying, and bringing up mistakes their partner has made. They might act very hurt and try to make their partner feel bad for ever bringing the issue up, implying that their partner would not do so if he or she really loved them. While engaging in these behaviors, they may beg their partner not to leave, text him or her constantly, or demand that he or she engage further in the conflict. This creates an unpleasant, confusing combination for partners of anxiously attached individuals—closeness and intimacy may not turn out to be the positive experience they anticipate.

Individuals with attachment anxiety also tend to be unhappy, experience distress associated with intensified negative emotions, and remember and ruminate over negative experiences (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Meyer et al., 2015; Reiner & Spangler, 2013.) They often allow this distress to affect other areas of their lives as they attribute lower-than-actual regard and care to their partners and fear that they will be abandoned by them (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Meyer et al., 2015; Reiner & Spangler, 2013.) For example, after an argument, individuals with an anxious attachment style might stay stuck on the experience, thinking over everything that was said, remembering how bad they felt, and attributing their partner's words and actions to his or her lack of care for them.

Interestingly, despite these unhealthy behaviors, individuals with an anxious attachment style produce behaviors that are generally beneficial to relationships at a high rate compared to individuals with an avoidant attachment style and even as compared to individuals with a secure attachment style (Mattingly & Clark, 2012). Their anxiety drives these bids. However, these pro-relationship behaviors have two opposite and competing motives. Because they strongly desire love and care from their partners, individuals with anxious attachment styles may enact behaviors that are beneficial to relationships and work hard for the relationship with prosocial, altruistic motives, genuinely wanting to do nice things and show love to their partners (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012). On the flip side, because anxiously attached individuals fear abandonment and rejection, they may also enact pro-relationship behaviors due to their desperate anxiety, meaning their pro-relationship behaviors are fear-based attempts to avoid negative relationship outcomes such as the dissolution of the relationship (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012). For example, an anxiously attached individual might always do the dishes because they think that if they can do the right things, maybe their partner will want to stay.

Pro-relationship behaviors arising from egoistic motives are found to have a negative effect on relationship satisfaction (Mattingly & Clark, 2012). This can create a destructive and frustrating cycle with anxiously attached individuals often putting forth substantial effort and doing many of the right things in their efforts to preserve relationships, but because the behavior is driven by relationship anxiety and fear, the behaviors slowly weaken and erode the relationships the person is working so hard to preserve (Mattingly & Clark, 2012). As individuals with an anxious attachment style may already have low self-esteem, this cycle reinforces the belief that they are unworthy of love and care from others—because “no matter how hard they try,” people eventually distance themselves—thereby further weakening their self-esteem (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Lockhart et al., 2017; Mattingly & Clark, 2012).

### **Sabotaging Behaviors Associated with Avoidant Attachment**

Individuals with an avoidant attachment style also frequently sabotage their relationships but in different ways than anxiously attached individuals due to the unique way they deal with their attachment insecurity (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Towler & Stuhlmecher, 2013). Individuals with an avoidant attachment style are often

anxious and uncomfortable about intimacy—not anxious for it, but anxious about it—similarly stemming from a belief that they will not be loved and cared for, but in the case of avoidant attachment, the problematic formative experience and ensuing attachment anticipation is not that they are unworthy and unlovable but that *others* are not attachment trustworthy and will not “be there for them” when they need them. Consequently, unlike those who are anxiously attached, they prefer to avoid rather than pursue close, connected relationships where they are vulnerable to rejection by an untrustworthy other (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015). Due to their negative attachment experiences with their caregivers, they often do not trust their partners, have negative feelings toward their partners, and have less positive emotional experiences (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Strauss & Kito, 2012). Individuals with an avoidant attachment style are less likely to seek out potentially rewarding relationships, including romantic relationships (Jiang & Tiliopoulos, 2014; Meyer et al., 2015). In addition to avoiding intimacy and other positive relationship experiences, individuals with an avoidant attachment style may try to minimize negative emotions but are often very physiologically distressed, indicating that their efforts to avoid pain by avoiding or denying their attachment hunger and drive are unsuccessful (Reiner & Spangler, 2013).

As seen with anxious attachment, these beliefs and attitudes of avoidant attachment also impact the early stages of dating before entering a relationship (Poulsen et al., 2013; Strauss & Kito, 2012). Individuals with an avoidant attachment style prefer partners who are also avoidant when describing their ideal partner, but in practice they often choose partners who they perceive as anxiously attached (Strauss & Kito, 2012). Choosing other insecure partners may sabotage their prospects for relationship satisfaction from the start since either anxious or avoidant attachment are correlated with decreased relationship satisfaction (Beoney et al., 2019; Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Meyer et al., 2015; Strauss & Kito, 2012). Also, avoidant individuals are less likely than their secure counterparts to be asked on subsequent dates, and they are significantly less likely to succeed in landing relationships since secure individuals are seeking partners who can be a secure base and will be engaged and responsive (Poulsen et al., 2013). For example, an avoidant individual might seem distant and uninterested on a first date, which can discourage subsequent dates.

Individuals with an avoidant attachment style that do enter a romantic relationship are less likely to engage in relationship-strengthening behaviors (Mattingly & Clark, 2012); instead, they are prone to engage in relationship-damaging behaviors such as withdrawing from conflict

and resisting intimate discussions of their own and their partner's thoughts or feelings (Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Meyer et al., 2015). They are hypervigilant to avoid relationship risk and vulnerability which could lead to being hurt, so they may detach from distressing interactions or feelings, minimize involvement in close relationships, dismiss negative feelings, especially of hurt, and seeking to establish emotionally aloof "independence" from relationships (Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015; Reiner & Spangler, 2013). For example, if their partner begins to talk about how they feel, avoidant individuals might act uncomfortable or uninterested or change the subject. They are, to say the least, well-boundaried. As with anxiously attached persons, when they do engage in relationship-strengthening behaviors, it is often out of obligation or a desire to avoid negative outcomes, again resulting in decreased relationship satisfaction even from positive behaviors (Mattingly & Clark, 2012). For example, an avoidant individual might put up with frustrating behavior from their partner because they do not want to bring it up and cause conflict. The entire constellation of avoidant behaviors frequently leaves their partners feeling isolated and unsupported (Meyer et al., 2015), opening up distance in the relationship. Thus, individuals with an avoidant attachment style, in their efforts to avoid being hurt, frequently entirely avoid or sabotage romantic relationships that could bring them joy and satisfaction (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015). These negative relationship experiences have the potential to reinforce the belief that others will not be there for them (Mattingly & Clark, 2012).

## Conclusion

Individuals with insecure attachment sabotage their relationships but in different ways depending on their attachment style. Anxiously attached individuals greatly desire and seek after the validation of being in relationships while individuals with avoidant attachment do not normally seek out or desire relationships (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015). Both insecure attachment types say they prefer partners with similar levels of anxiety or avoidance, but in actuality describe their partners as being the opposite insecure attachment style from them (Strauss & Kito, 2012). Individuals with anxious attachment work very hard at relationships and work hard to please while individuals with avoidant attachment disengage and offer little of themselves (Mattingly & Clark, 2012). Anxious individuals are clingy, controlling, and emotional while avoidant individuals are withdrawn, disconnected, and emotionally unavailable

(Feeney & Fitzgerald, 2019; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015).

Overall, individuals with an anxious attachment style work hard to please in order to be in and maintain relationships—with their negative view of self, they believe that is what they have to do—but their effort is tainted by unhealthy practices and motives, leading them to sabotage the relationships they work so hard to preserve (Mattingly & Clark, 2012). Individuals with an avoidant attachment style, on the other hand, do not work hard at relationships, do not put themselves out to maintain them, withhold vulnerability and emotional closeness *in* relationships, and often avoid entering into relationships altogether, all of which sabotages relationship satisfaction (Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Mattingly & Clark, 2012; Meyer et al., 2015). Though these behaviors are different, they stem from the same thing: the attachment trauma these individuals experienced in childhood (Kinley & Reyno, 2019; Lemay & Sponberg, 2015; Liu et al., 2018; Lockhart et al., 2017).

Many individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles do not even know what attachment is and find themselves in unhealthy, unsatisfying relationships over and over again without knowing the cause. As relationships continue to fail, their belief that they are unimportant and unworthy of love is only reinforced, leading to more unhealthy behaviors which sabotage their relationships, and the cycle continues (Mattingly & Clark, 2012).

However, attachment styles are not set in stone (Black, 2019). Through awareness and treatment, there is hope to break the cycle, learn healthy behaviors, and achieve satisfying relationships (Black, 2019). Thus, awareness of the adult relational problems resulting from self-esteem damaged by attachment trauma can help individuals lead more satisfying lives. For example, as individuals learn about attachment styles, they may recognize some beliefs and behaviors in themselves consistent with an insecure attachment style. As they recognize these unhealthy beliefs, they can understand that they stem from trauma and do not necessarily reflect reality. They can employ cognitive strategies to rewrite unhealthy thoughts. As they recognize unhealthy behaviors, they can make conscious efforts to learn and engage in healthy behaviors. They can seek therapeutic treatment to help in this process, which has been found to be effective in developing secure attachment (Black, 2019). Thus, while attachment trauma can perpetuate a frustrating cycle of failed relationships, the cycle can ultimately be broken.

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