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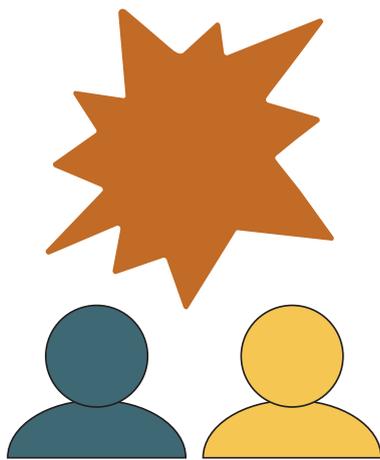
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Do Attachment Behaviors Decrease the Negative Influences of Adverse Conflict Styles?

By Danielle Gandola Webb

Conflict is inevitable in most marital relationships. When couples use healthy conflict resolution styles, conflict does not necessarily pose a threat to marital satisfaction, but destructive conflict styles can be detrimental to relationship quality.

A recent study at Brigham Young University found that adverse or extreme conflict styles are significantly associated with decreased relationship quality for both men and women (Hee et al., 2019).¹ Additionally, the study revealed that attachment behaviors are connected to greater relationship quality in men and women, and may even diminish the negative effects of conflict style for women.

Attachment behaviors are behaviors that promote security in relationships and increase closeness. When observing attachment behaviors, researchers typically look at accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement. Accessibility refers to being available for one's partner, responsiveness refers to responding appropriately towards a partner's emotions, and engagement refers to interacting in ways that enhance closeness and connection.

"One major purpose of this study is to determine if attachment behaviors can moderate the negative association between adverse conflict styles and

marital quality,"² BYU researchers said. "We are interested in the potential moderating influence of attachment... due to previous findings that attachment behaviors do moderate some relationships where marital quality is the primary outcome."³

To measure the impact of attachment behavior on conflict style and relationship quality, the study sampled 1,718 people from heterosexual marriages. Participants completed the RELATE survey, which contains over 300 questions regarding contextual, relationship, and individual variables. These items helped to determine relationship strengths and weaknesses. Researchers also measured joint income and length of marriage, as these factors may also impact marital quality.

These researchers' interests were addressed by another study, which found that attachment behaviors account for more of the variance in relationship quality than even overall feelings of security within a relationship, also known as attachment style.⁴

This study found that greater use of attachment behaviors among husbands and wives was connected with higher relationship quality for both males and females. Thus, when individuals demonstrate accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement

within a marriage, overall marital quality increases.

However, findings also showed some gender differences when looking at how attachment behaviors moderate for conflict styles. For men, attachment behaviors did not make a significant difference in relationship quality when negative conflict styles were present. For women, on the other hand, attachment behaviors did seem to diminish the negative impacts of conflict style on marital quality. This finding was not statistically significant, however, and can therefore only be considered directional.

One finding that was consistent across gender was that couples who reported lower attachment behaviors also reported lower marital quality, regardless of conflict style.

These findings show that, along with conflict styles, attachment behaviors are an important factor in relationship satisfaction. Even if attachment behaviors may not remove the negative effects of conflict styles, they do help to improve many aspects of the relationship, especially for women.

This research is beneficial for couples seeking to improve their own relationships as well as for clinicians helping to improve the relationship of a client. Individuals can utilize

healthy attachment behaviors in order to create security for their partners and satisfaction within their relationship. Clinicians can encourage clients to implement the behaviors of accessibility, responsiveness, and engagement to help create greater relationship quality, thus aiding in overcoming other relationship barriers.

Endnotes

- 1 Hee, C. W. H., Sandberg, J. G., Yorgason, J. B., & Miller, R. B. (2019). Can attachment behaviors moderate the influence of conflict styles on relationship quality? *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 18(4), 281–302. <https://doi-org.erl.lib.byu.edu/10.1080/15332691.2019.1590273>
- 2 Hee, C. W. H., Sandberg, J. G., Yorgason, J. B., & Miller, R. B. (2019). Can attachment behaviors moderate the influence of conflict styles on relationship quality? *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 18(4), 281–302. <https://doi-org.erl.lib.byu.edu/10.1080/15332691.2019.1590273>
- 3 Hee, C. W. H., Sandberg, J. G., Yorgason, J. B., & Miller, R. B. (2019). Can attachment behaviors moderate the influence of conflict styles on relationship quality? *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 18(4), 281–302. <https://doi-org.erl.lib.byu.edu/10.1080/15332691.2019.1590273>
- 4 Sandberg, J. G., Bradford, A. B., & Brown, A. P. (2017). Differentiating between attachment styles and behaviors and their association with marital quality. *Family Process*, 56(2), 518–531. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12186>