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### Loving Your Partner Enough to Give Them Space

Dallie Johnson

*Brigham Young University*, [Johnson.dallie@gmail.com](mailto:Johnson.dallie@gmail.com)

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# Loving Your Partner Enough to Give Them Space

by Dallie Johnson

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When I first learned to drive, I was a nervous wreck. My tense shoulders and white knuckles clued my dad in on my anxiety. He warned me that I would get tired if I continued to drive that way. Then, he told me to adjust my grip and focus. Instead of darting my gaze back and forth between the speedometer and the pavement in front of the car, I needed to lift my gaze to stay safely between the lines.

Sure enough, taking a deep breath, lifting my gaze, and loosening my death grip made driving much easier—and more enjoyable.

Interestingly, the same principle applies to romance. Clingy behavior won't strengthen your relationship, and here's why.

## The Rundown on Attachment Theory

[Attachment](#) is a hot topic with a long theoretical history in the world of relationship studies.<sup>1</sup> Many researchers agree that infants often form a life-long attachment style through their experience with their caregiver.

Attachment styles fall into two categories: secure and insecure. Warm, responsive caregivers help the baby form a secure attachment style. With distant or overreactive caregivers, the child tends to form an insecure attachment.

One important subset of insecure attachment is anxious attachment.<sup>2</sup> Researchers give a few different ideas about how an anxious attachment style forms, but the general belief is the

same: anxious attachment develops when a caregiver repeatedly fails to meet the needs of a child. Over time, the child may worry that all of their loved ones will turn away and ignore their needs. As you can imagine, this leads to a lot of anxiety within relationships!

While we've all had different caregivers and childhoods, many of us can say that we've felt some degree of panic about our relationships. That's understandable, considering that many people view their relationships as the most important part of their lives. In fact, one Harvard study found that close relationships were more important than money or fame in making people happy.<sup>3</sup>

The study director Robert Waldinger noted, "Our relationships and how happy we are in our relationships has a powerful influence on our health."

Most of us want a close relationship, recognize the health benefits, and want to be happy. But is an ideal relationship something you should white-knuckle into existence?

In one word, no. Let's examine how trying to force a good relationship can actually have [the opposite effect](#).<sup>4</sup>

## What Anxious Attachment Looks Like

Anxious behavior screams clinginess. People with an anxious attachment style may have an intense [fear of abandonment](#) that leads them to jealousy and desperation.<sup>5</sup>

Think of the movie *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days*. The main character, Andie, intentionally demon-

strates anxious attachment behaviors and other typical mistakes women make in relationships—all to try to get a man to break up

with her. She calls him repeatedly, leaves multiple messages, and wails when the man forgets to water their "love fern."

We all have that one friend—or maybe you are that one friend—who demonstrates similar anxious behaviors. This anxiety surfaces in ways such as constantly texting a significant other or reading into everything they say and do. It

**Clingy behavior won't strengthen your relationship.**

is also manifest in taking comments personally, excessively sacrificing personal needs, and struggling to calm down even after a partner expresses love.

Whether your relationship is in jeopardy or not, this anxiety makes sense if you have an insecure attachment. Early inconsistent care from a caregiver may help explain these behaviors. When needs go unmet or uncommunicated, the relationship can start to feel shakier than it really is.

But that doesn't mean you're stuck with this insecurity, and it *definitely* doesn't mean that you need to run around, trying to hold up every wall of your relationship at the first sign of tremors—real or imagined.

In fact, the [emotional overreaction](#) of anxious attachment can turn a little bit of friction in the relationship into a full-blown wildfire.<sup>6</sup>

## Effect on Relationships

Experts have found a pattern among those with anxious attachment. The anxious partner pushes too hard for closeness. Then, the other partner often responds by withdrawing from the relationship. This pattern is called the [pursuer-distancer dynamic](#).<sup>7</sup>

**You don't need to run around, trying to hold up every wall of your relationship at the first sign of tremors.**

In response to stress, the pursuer, or partner with anxious attachment, becomes needy, demanding, and even critical of his or her partner. Uncomfortable with opening up, the distancer seeks emotional and physical distance from the pur-

suer. The harder the pursuer pushes, the more the distancer withdraws. As the distancer withdraws, the pursuer grows more anxious and pushes harder.

Can you see the toxic cycle developing?

This tends to lead to further miscommunication

and tension in the relationship. Both partners may want a stronger relationship but simply deal with relationship stress in unhelpful ways. The pursuer-distancer dynamic may even cause partners to feel contempt for one another. If the couple isn't careful, they can get stuck in

this mode. According to family researcher E. Mavis Hetherington, couples stuck in the pursuer-distancer mode are at the highest risk of [divorce](#).<sup>8</sup> Sounds a little scary, right?

Thankfully, there is hope. If you're worried about having an anxious attachment style or demonstrating anxious behaviors, you can help break the cycle through a few simple actions.

### Breaking the Cycle

First, try to [make sense](#) of what you are feeling.<sup>9</sup> Label your emotions. Are you jealous, self-conscious, fearful, stressed, or paranoid? What

childhood experiences may have led to the way you're feeling now? You may not be able to change the past, but at least you can take control of your future. Start by figuring out where the connection lies between your past and your current relationships.

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Next, learn to soothe your [inner child](#).<sup>10</sup> Because of past experiences, part of you may become demanding of others when stressed. Accept that your inner child exists, then begin developing an inner parent for soothing this inner child. The inner parent may help by reassuring the child that they have value and potential. Explore what

works for you—daily self-affirmations, positive letters to self, or another strategy you prefer. Whatever you decide, remember the importance of treating yourself with kindness.

Finally, practice managing your emotions. When

you're tempted to freak out, demand reassurance, or smother your partner—pause. You can go for a walk, listen to music, or journal about your worries. If nothing else, take some deep breaths and focus on relaxing any tense muscles. These activities can not only ground your anxious thoughts, but they can also help you avoid giving into anxious impulses. As you avoid immediately acting out in response to emotion and first take time to individually regulate, you'll find that dealing with relationship stress becomes a lot easier.

Like learning to drive, a clingy grip won't make your relationship any easier. It may seem counterintuitive, but giving your partner appropriate space can lead to the closeness you're hoping for. However you approach your relationship, focus on what you can control, and let go of unnecessary stress. Your relationship will not be perfect, but you can work on becoming a better partner. Once you realize that you can't force your relationship into perfection, you—and your partner—will be a lot more likely to enjoy the ride.

## Endnotes

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