Attachment styles: an introduction

How early experiences of closeness shape what we expect from people now.

As children, we learn what to expect from other people through our earliest relationships: whether comfort comes when we need it, and whether it is safe to depend on someone. Those lessons become a kind of template for closeness.

Attachment styles are tendencies, not fixed types or diagnoses. Most people are a mix. Patterns differ between relationships and can change over time.

Secure
Comfortable with closeness and with being apart. Can ask for support and give it. Trusts that problems can be talked through.

Anxious
Longs for closeness and worries about losing it. Sensitive to signs of distance. May seek a lot of reassurance or find it hard to be alone.

Avoidant
Values independence. Closeness can feel crowding. Tends to pull back, keep feelings private and handle things alone.

Fearful
Wants closeness and fears it. May swing between reaching out and pushing away. Often linked with early experiences of being hurt by people who were meant to be safe.

How this plays out

A common pattern is one person who pursues and one who withdraws. The more one reaches, the more the other backs off, and the more the first reaches. Each is trying to feel safe, in the opposite way. Neither is to blame.

What helps

- **Knowing your pattern,** and what sets it off.
- **Saying the need under the behaviour.** "I get anxious when I do not hear from you" works better than twenty texts. "I need half an hour to myself, and then I will come and find you" works better than disappearing.
- **Relationships that are steady.** Consistent, kind experiences with partners, friends or a therapist gradually update the template.

Note
Your pattern made sense in the situation where you learned it. It can change.

What I recognise in myself, and what I tend to do when I feel insecure with someone

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

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