

Anxious Attachment Style: Signs, Causes, and How to Change



Medically reviewed by [Jacquelyn Johnson, PsyD.](#) — Written by [Hilary I. Lebow](#) on June 22, 2022

[Signs of anxious attachment style](#) | [Causes](#) | [Impact on relationships](#) | [Is change possible?](#) | [4 Tips for secure attachments](#) | [Recap](#)

If you have an anxious attachment style, you may live with fear of abandonment and need constant reassurance from your loved ones.

Anxious attachment is one of four types of attachment styles that have been associated with your primary bonds as a baby. These early relationships you established in childhood with your caregivers may impact how you relate to others in adulthood.

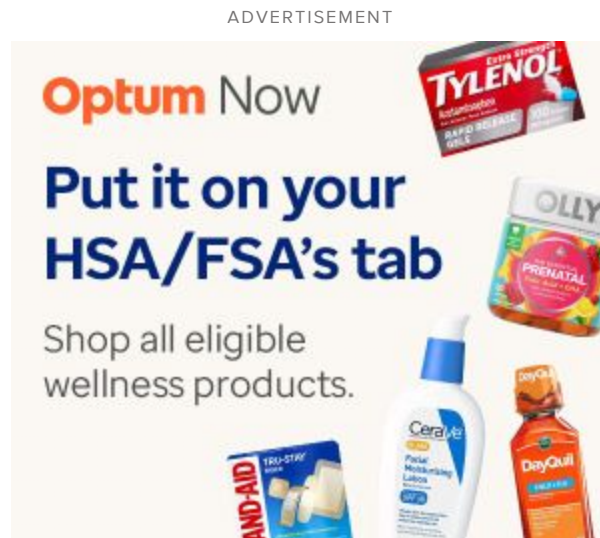
In the world of psychology, this is known as [attachment theory](#). This theory identifies these four attachment styles:

1. **secure attachment:** you are trusting and feel comfortable with intimacy and space
2. **anxious-ambivalent attachment (or anxious attachment):** you have a strong desire for intimacy combined with doubts and abandonment anxiety
3. **dismissive-avoidant attachment: (or avoidant attachment)** you live with a strong desire for independence and a sense of not needing others

4. **fearful-avoidant attachment (or disorganized attachment):** you may face inner conflicts between wanting intimacy and having fear of getting too close

The last three attachment styles — anxious, avoidant, and disorganized — fall under the category of [insecure attachment styles](#).

But even if the way you relate to others is currently greatly impacting your life, you can change attachment styles, including anxious ones. The first step may be to identify the signs.



14 Signs of anxious attachment styles

A few signs that you may have an anxious attachment include:

1. [signs of codependency](#)
2. intense emotional discomfort or avoidance of being alone
3. [difficulty setting boundaries](#)
4. [fear of abandonment](#)
5. [feeling like you're unworthy of love](#)
6. feeling dependent on others
7. frequent need for validation
8. an intense desire for intimacy or closeness
9. tendency to feel or act [jealous](#)
10. [people-pleasing tendencies](#)
11. [low self-esteem](#)

12. sensitivity to changes in how others feel, speak, or behave
13. [tolerating unhealthy behaviors in relationships](#)
14. difficulty trusting others

Examples of anxious attachment

An anxious attachment style can manifest in many ways.

For example:

- calling or texting your partner repeatedly until they respond
- frequently checking social media for information
- feeling suspicious when everything is calm
- going along with whatever your friends want to do even if you don't feel like it
- overextending on work projects to please your coworkers
- having a hard time saying “no” even when you feel you should
- repeatedly asking your partner if they find you attractive
- trying to avoid breaking up by all means even when the relationship isn't healthy

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Causes of anxious attachment style

Everyone's story is different. An anxious attachment style is likely the result of a combination of factors and, in some cases, attachment trauma.

Some factors involved in developing an anxious attachment may include:

- [your temperament](#)
- [history of traumatic events](#)
- inconsistency and unpredictability in your early environment
- your primary caregiver's capacity to attune to your needs when you were a baby and throughout childhood

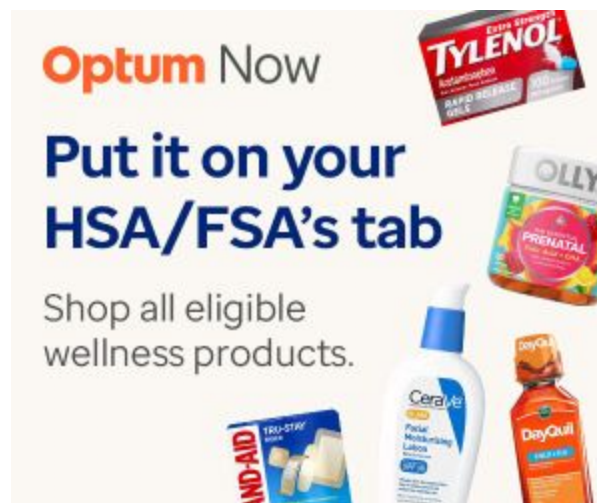
An anxious attachment style can emerge when a child's interactions with their caregiver feel inconsistent, intrusive, or overwhelming, says [Dr. Sarah Bren](#), a licensed clinical psychologist in Pelham, New York.

"When a caregiver themselves has an anxious attachment style, if they are unpredictable in how well they meet the child's needs, or if the environment is chaotic or unpredictable, an anxious attachment can develop," she says.

For example, perhaps your primary caregiver was inconsistent with their affection toward you. Sometimes they might have paid a lot of attention while other times they might have pushed you away. It's also possible they felt overwhelmed when handling your care.

You might have developed a sense that your caregiver's emotional state and mood were your responsibility and you had to make extraordinary efforts to "make them happy" or get love in return.

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How an anxious attachment style affects relationships

An anxious attachment style can impact the amount of joy you feel in your relationships, says [Dr. Lori Lawrenz](#), a licensed clinical psychologist in Honolulu.

In fact, a [2019 meta-analysis](#) of existing literature found that those who live with an anxious attachment style may have reduced relationship satisfaction, compared to those with secure attachments.

“Those with an anxious attachment style can sabotage their relationships with questions and concerns about small details, instead of being present and in the moment and enjoying their relationship,” explains Lawrenz.

Certain behaviors can also contribute to the very outcome that you fear: abandonment.

“When a lot of energy is spent thinking about if your partner is responding to you enough, or paying enough attention to you, it can be off-putting and turn your partner away,” adds Lawrenz.

As a result, you may experience:

- [being called “clingy” or “needy”](#)
- communication challenges or [ghosting](#)
- [increased arguments](#)
- [self-sabotaging](#) tendencies

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Can you change attachment styles?

Yes, it's possible to [change your attachment style](#) from insecure to secure, says Bren.

“Therapy can help, as well as working to develop safe, trusting relationships with healthy and secure individuals. In psychology, we often refer to relationships like these as ‘corrective emotional experiences,’” says Bren.

A [corrective emotional experience](#) is when you update an old memory or belief system (such as feeling everyone abandons you) with something new: like being heard and understood by a person when you express your feelings.

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How to go from anxious to secure attachment style

With some intention and support, it's possible to shift from an anxious to a secure attachment style.

1. Try to practice vulnerability

In order to become more secure, you may find it helpful to focus on [practicing vulnerability](#) and [building emotional safety](#) to show yourself that it's worth the risk, says

Bren.

“For example, stepping out of your comfort zone and asking explicitly for what you want, or saying no when you don’t like something,” she explains. “Being clear with others about your needs, desires, and feelings, even when you fear it might disappoint or upset them.”

Relationships with secure people can help you learn that taking up space interpersonally is emotionally safe, she adds.

2. Consider a mindfulness practice

“Overanalyzing the relationship with a negative filter and thinking about the ‘what ifs’ instead of what is actually happening can hurt your relationship,” says Lawrenz.

A regular [mindfulness practice](#) may help you tune into the here and now and move through uncomfortable feelings in a positive way.

“Mindfulness is an important way for you to be present in the moment,” she says. “By learning mindfulness, you can engage with others, be more present, and develop relationship security.”

Some [mindfulness-based activities](#) may include:

- gardening
- guided meditation
- tai chi
- walking meditation
- yoga

You may also want to explore what [cognitive distortions](#) you use and when. These negative filters on your thoughts may be preventing you from seeing the positive in your relationships.

3. Try to learn about attachment theory

You may find it empowering to [learn more about your attachment style](#) and how to move into a secure relationship.

Some popular titles include:

- “[Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How It Can Help You Find—and Keep—Love](#)” by Amir Levine and Rachel S.F. Heller
- “[Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples](#)” by Harville Hendrix
- “[How to Be an Adult in Relationships](#)” by David Richo

You may also find it helpful to tune into the [Personal Development School](#) on Youtube, a popular channel all about attachment theory by Montreal-based therapist [Thais Gibson](#).

4. Try working with a therapist

If your attachment style is causing instability in your relationships, you may find it helpful to [work with a therapist](#) or couple’s counselor who specializes in attachment theory.

“Knowledge is power — if you know better you can do better,” says Lawrenz. “By engaging in therapy and learning to know and understand yourself, you can develop self-compassion and increased self-esteem, which are the building blocks of a secure attachment style.”

[Emotionally Focused Therapy \(EFT\)](#) is an effective approach for attachment style challenges.



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Let's recap

An anxious attachment style may manifest in fear of abandonment and a need for validation and constant reassurance from your loved one. It's typically caused by an unpredictable primary caregiver when you were a child.

Living with an anxious attachment style can pose challenges in your relationships, like difficulty being alone, people-pleasing behavior, or preoccupation with how others think and feel about you.

You're not alone and there is hope. You may find it helpful to engage in mindfulness-based activities, practice setting boundaries, and work with a therapist in order to become more secure in your relationships.

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