The Anxious Attachment Style

If your score on the Attachment Assessment placed you in the anxious style, this will help you learn more about what that means and what you can do about it. The higher you scored, the more likely you are to express any relationship insecurity you feel with anxiety. After a description of the traits associated with this attachment style, the information and exercises later will help you see how this style plays out in your relationships (whether you are anxiously attached or your partner is), learn to accept yourself and others, develop the skills to communicate clearly, and learn how to strengthen your relationship in ways that will leave you feeling more secure.

Traits of the Anxious Style

Attachment theory is concerned with safety and trust in intimate relationships. Considering your score on the insecurity part of the assessment, the higher your score, the harder it can be to feel consistently safe and trusting in your close relationships, and the more likely it is that they could be negatively impacted by your anxious attachment patterns.

People with an anxious attachment style . . .

- Can be incredibly generous and attentive to those they care about.
- Are sensitive to what they perceive as abandonment.
- Will readily tell someone how they feel.
- Tend to blame their feelings on others ("You made me feel this way!").

The biggest fear for people with an anxious style of attachment is abandonment. When this fear is triggered, even in small ways, they can panic. They may express their need for support, but the way they communicate this might end up pushing away the very person they want support from. They can be quick to feel hopeless and show their disappointment pre-emptively. Because of this, even when their need is urgent, their way of seeking support can come off as alarming or off-putting to others.

Here are some examples:

> Asha was in her early 20s and noticed a pattern in her life: She would make a good friend and become very close to them, but within a couple of years, they would grow apart due to her anger and jealousy about that friend taking on interests and friendships that didn't include her.

Nora's husband, Damian, was a fire-fighter who worked 48-hour shifts. They had a great time when he was home, but when he left for work, Nora struggled and felt depressed. She texted him often for updates about what he was doing. If Damian didn't respond within a few minutes, Nora's anxiety worsened.

Bruno was an outgoing person who'd started to date again after his last relationship ended with a lot of turmoil. In the past, he'd jumped "all in" from the first sign of a connection, but he'd become apprehensive about doing that again. He wanted to figure out how to be his passionate, expressive self without making the same mistakes as before.

Remember, attachment styles exist on a spectrum, and many people with insecure attachment display both anxious and avoidant patterns at various times. You might also recognize important people in your life—parents, former or current romantic partners, or others—in these pages.

How anxious attachment feels to you

There are common experiences among people who form anxious attachments. As you read the description in this section, consider how closely it resembles your experiences in relationships. If an aspect doesn't match exactly, don't worry about it. However, in the places you do recognize yourself, you might feel comforted to know that you are not alone. The patterns I'm describing here are very common.

If you have an anxious style, you like the idea of attaching to people, and romantic attachment in particular is very attractive to you. Something just feels right about having someone special to confide in, support, and be supported by. Your fantasy of an ideal relationship is one where your partner just "gets" you, down to your core. When you start a new relationship, it's important to you that there is the promise or possibility of feeling truly understood. If you feel understood, then you can attach and be long-term friends or partners. You're unlikely to want to pursue the relationship if you don't feel attended to or if the other person doesn't "get" you.

Trouble can start once you settle into commitment. The person who seemed so promising at first, attentive and understanding, eventually skips a beat or gets distracted with other things, and that's when you remember that people aren't always what they seem. You've had a script running since childhood about what to expect when you depend on someone, and it sounds something like, "I need them . . . but they will disappoint me." You're driven by your desire to connect, which often means you over focus on the other person, always

putting them first, while feeling unhappy about your own needs not being met. You want to give and receive, with maximum connection.

When you begin to feel anxious in the relationship, you feel the hurt deeply, even for minor incidents—as though the betrayal you fear has already happened. In those moments, you truly need and want support. You can imagine getting that support, but your stomach churns with doubt that the person you love will be there for you. The connection you crave always seems just out of reach, even when you're trying hard to get it. This adds to your distress. You've probably said to yourself, more than once, "I just don't know what to do anymore."

When your anxious style is on full display, you threaten the relationship, make ultimatums, and say and do things you later regret, like "I hate you," "I want a divorce," or "You don't give a shit about me." You're not proud of this behaviour, but when you're in the moment, you don't feel that you have a choice. You need to show how much pain you're in. You hope the person you love will notice and finally give you the feeling of security you crave; instead, your behaviour pushes the person away.

Eventually the crisis passes, and you iron things out. But the incident has reinforced a familiar hurt and assumption: The people you love can't be depended on. You still want that connection, but you wonder if you're too needy for anyone to want to deal with you. You know you ask for extra, but you also give extra.

Attachment theory teaches us that you learned this model of giving and receiving, even when it might not have been appropriate. Perhaps when you were a child, you were put in an unfair position to help a parent feel better when they were having a hard time. Of course, you complied at the time, because that's what we do when our survival is dependent on the well-being of someone else—we pitch in. But developmentally, when you're asked to do this before you have the resources to take care of yourself, you're doing it out of a sense of survival anxiety, which can then be built into your blueprint of what's needed to get love from someone. Hence, it's familiar to you to play rescuer and over perform—as well as over demand—in your closest relationships.

You might have memories from childhood of being unhappy with the amount of attention and care you received from one or both of your parents. You had at least one caregiver, even if it was a grandmother or nanny, who was there in significant ways during important and formative times, and you remember some of the ways you felt truly loved. But this was an inconsistent experience; you couldn't rely on love being there when you needed it. It's the same inconsistency that drives you bonkers when relationships deepen and your dependence on another person increases.

How well does that description fit you?

Remember that no single description can apply perfectly to anyone, but if your score suggests anxious attachment, you probably recognized yourself as you read the previous description. When you consider some of your most important experiences in close relationships, how accurate would you rate the description for yourself?

Where …

1 = Not at all accurate ---------- 10 = Completely accurate

Adapted from: *The Attachment Theory Workbook: Powerful Tools to Promote Understanding, Increase Stability, and Build Lasting Relationships* (2019) by Annie Chen