

# Attached

The New Science of Adult Attachment  
and How It Can Help You Find—  
and Keep—Love



AMIR LEVINE, M.D.,  
AND  
RACHEL HELLER, M.A.

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New York



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*To my father, who taught me how to dive into  
the biggest waves, and to my mother, who made  
scientific discovery part of growing up*  
A.L.

*To my family*  
R.H.

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# INTRODUCTION

## **The New Science of Adult Attachment**

## ***Decoding Relationship Behavior***

- *Only two weeks into dating this guy and already I'm making myself miserable worrying that he doesn't find me attractive enough and obsessing about whether or not he's going to call! I know that once again I'll manage to turn all my fears about not being good enough into a self-fulfilling prophecy and ruin yet another chance at a relationship!*
- *What's wrong with me? I'm a smart, good-looking guy with a successful career. I have a lot to offer. I've dated some terrific women, but inevitably, after a few weeks I lose interest and start to feel trapped. It shouldn't be this hard to find someone I'm compatible with.*
- *I've been married to my husband for years and yet feel completely alone. He was never one to discuss his emotions or talk about the relationship, but things have gone from bad to worse. He stays at work late almost every weeknight and on weekends he's either at the golf course with friends or watching the sports channel on TV. There's just nothing to keep us together. Maybe I'd be better off alone.*

Each of these problems is deeply painful, touching upon the innermost core of people's lives. And yet no one explanation or solution fits the bill. Each case seems unique and personal; each stems from an endless number of possible root causes. Deciphering them would require a deep acquaintance with all the people involved. Past history, previous relationships, and personality type are just a few of the avenues that a therapist would need to pursue. This, at least, is what we, as clinicians in the field of mental health, were taught and believed, until we made a new discovery—one that provided a straightforward explanation for *all* three problems described above and many more. The story of this discovery, and what came after it, is what this book is about.

## **IS LOVE ENOUGH?**

A few years ago, our close friend Tamara started dating someone new:

*I first noticed Greg at a cocktail party at a friend's house. He was unbelievably good-looking, and I found the fact that I caught his eye very flattering. A few days later we went out for dinner with some other people, and I couldn't resist the glimmer of excitement in his eyes when he looked at me. But what I found most enticing were his words and an implicit promise of togetherness that he conveyed. The promise of not being alone. He said things like "Tamara, you don't have to be home all by yourself, you can come and work over at my place," "You can call me any time you like." There was comfort in these statements: The comfort of belonging to someone, of not being alone in the world. If I'd only listened carefully, I could have easily heard another message that was incongruent with this*

*promise, a message that made it clear that Greg feared getting too close and was uncomfortable with commitment. Several times he'd mentioned that he'd never had a stable relationship—that for some reason he always grew tired of his girlfriends and felt the need to move on.*

*Though I could identify these issues as potentially problematic, at the time I didn't know how to correctly gauge their implications. All I had to guide me was the common belief that many of us grow up with: The belief that love conquers all. And so I let love conquer me. Nothing was more important to me than being with him. Yet at the same time the other messages persisted about his inability to commit. I shrugged them off, confident that with me, things would be different. Of course, I was wrong. As we got closer, his messages got more erratic and everything started to fall apart; he began telling me that he was too busy to meet on this night or that. Sometimes he'd claim that his entire work week looked "crazy" and would ask if we could just meet on the weekend. I'd agree, but inside I had a sinking feeling something was wrong, but what?*

*From then on I was always anxious. I was preoccupied with his whereabouts and became hypersensitive to anything that could possibly imply that he wanted to break up. But while Greg's behavior presented me with ample evidence of his dissatisfaction, he interspersed pushing me away with just enough affection and apologies to keep me from breaking up with him.*

*After a while, the ups and downs started to take a toll and I could no longer control my emotions. I didn't know how to act, and despite my better judgment, I'd avoid making plans with friends in case he called. I completely lost interest in everything else that was important to me. Before long the relationship couldn't withstand the strain and everything soon came to a screeching halt.*

As friends, we were happy at first to see Tamara meet someone new that she was excited about, but as the relationship unfolded, we became increasingly concerned over her growing preoccupation with Greg. Her vitality gave way to anxiousness and insecurity. Most of the time she was either waiting for a call from Greg or too worried and preoccupied about the relationship to enjoy spending time with us as she had done in the past. It became apparent that her work was also suffering, and she expressed some concern that she may lose her job. We had always considered Tamara to be an extremely well-rounded, resilient person, and we were starting to wonder if we were mistaken about her strength. Although Tamara could point out Greg's history of being unable to maintain a serious relationship and his unpredictability, and even acknowledged that she would probably be happier without him, she was not able to muster the strength to leave.

As experienced mental-health professionals, we had a hard time accepting that a sophisticated, intelligent woman like Tamara had so derailed from her usual self. Why was such a successful woman acting in such a helpless way? Why would somebody whom we've known to be so adaptive to most of life's challenges become powerless in this one? The other end of the equation was equally puzzling. Why would Greg send out such mixed messages, although it was clear, even to us, that he *did* love her? There were many possible complex psychological answers to these questions, but a surprisingly simple yet far-reaching insight into the situation came from an unexpected source.

## **FROM THE THERAPEUTIC NURSERY TO A PRACTICAL SCIENCE OF ADULT LOVE**

At about the same time that Tamara was dating Greg, Amir was working part-time in the Therapeutic Nursery at Columbia University. Here, he used attachment-guided therapy to help mothers create a more secure bond with their children. The powerful effect that attachment-guided treatment had on the relationship between mother and child encouraged Amir to deepen his knowledge of attachment theory. This eventually led him to a fascinating discovery: as research findings first made by Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver indicated, adults show patterns of attachment to their romantic partners similar to the patterns of attachment of children with their parents. As he read more about adult attachment, Amir began to notice attachment behavior in adults all around him. He realized that this discovery could have astounding implications for everyday life.

The first thing Amir did, once he realized the far-reaching implications of attachment theory for adult relationships, was to call his longtime friend Rachel. He described to her how effectively attachment theory explained the range of behaviors in adult relationships, and asked her to help him transform the academic studies and scientific data he'd been reading into practical guidelines and advice that people could use to actually change the course of their lives. And that's how this book came to be.

## THE SECURE, THE ANXIOUS, AND THE AVOIDANT

Attachment theory designates three main “attachment styles,” or manners in which people perceive and respond to intimacy in romantic relationships, which parallel those found in children: Secure, Anxious, and Avoidant. Basically, *secure* people feel comfortable with intimacy and are usually warm and loving; *anxious* people crave intimacy, are often preoccupied with their relationships, and tend to worry about their partner's ability to love them back; *avoidant* people equate intimacy with a loss of independence and constantly try to minimize closeness. In addition, people with each of these attachment styles differ in:

- their view of intimacy and togetherness
- the way they deal with conflict
- their attitude toward sex
- their ability to communicate their wishes and needs
- their expectations from their partner and the relationship

All people in our society, whether they have just started dating someone or have been married for forty years, fall into one of these categories, or, more rarely, into a combination of the latter two (anxious and avoidant). Just over 50 percent are secure, around 20 percent are anxious, 25 percent are avoidant, and the remaining 3 to 5 percent fall into a fourth, less common *disorganized* category.

Over the past two decades, adult attachment research has produced hundreds of scientific papers and dozens of books that carefully delineate the way in which adults behave in close romantic ties. These studies have confirmed, many times over, the existence of these attachment styles in adults in a wide range of countries and cultures, including the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

Understanding attachment styles is an easy and reliable way to understand and predict people's behavior in any romantic situation. In fact, one of the main messages of this theory is that in romantic situations, we are programmed to act in a *predetermined* manner.

# Where Do Attachment Styles Come From?

•

Initially it was assumed that adult attachment styles were primarily a product of your upbringing. Thus, it was hypothesized that your current attachment style is determined by the way in which you were cared for as a baby: If your parents were sensitive, available, and responsive, you should have a secure attachment style; if they were inconsistently responsive, you should develop an anxious attachment style; and if they were distant, rigid, and unresponsive, you should develop an avoidant attachment style. Today, however, we know that attachment styles in adulthood are influenced by a variety of factors, one of which is the way our parents cared for us, but other factors also come into play, including our genes and life experiences. For more, see chapter 7.

## TAMARA AND GREG: A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

We revisited our friend Tamara’s story, and saw it in an entirely new light now. Attachment research contained a prototype of Greg—who had an avoidant attachment style—accurate down to the last detail. It summarized how he thought, behaved, and reacted to the world. It predicted his distancing, his finding fault in Tamara, his initiating fights that set back any progress in their relationship, and his enormous difficulty in saying “I love you.” Intriguingly, the research findings explained that though he wanted to be close to her, he felt compelled to push her away—not because he wasn’t “into her” or because he thought “she’s not good enough” (as Tamara had concluded). On the contrary, he pushed her away because he felt the closeness and intimacy increasing.

As it also turned out, Tamara wasn’t unique either. The theory explained her behaviors, thoughts, and reactions, typical for someone with an anxious attachment style, with surprising precision as well. It foresaw her increasing clinginess in the face of his distancing; it predicted her inability to concentrate at work, her constant thoughts about the relationship, and her oversensitivity to everything Greg did. It also predicted that even though she decided to break up with him, she could never muster up the courage to do so. It showed why, against her better judgment and the advice of close friends, she would do almost anything to try to be close to him. Most important, this theory revealed why Tamara and Greg found it so hard to get along even though they did indeed love each other. They spoke two different languages and exacerbated each other’s natural tendencies—hers to seek physical and emotional closeness and his to prefer independence and shy away from intimacy. The accuracy with which the theory described the pair was uncanny. It was as though the researchers had been privy to the couple’s most intimate moments and personal thoughts. Psychological approaches can be somewhat vague, leaving plenty of room for interpretation, but this theory managed to provide precise, evidence-based insight into a seemingly one-of-a-kind relationship.

Although it’s not impossible for someone to change his or her attachment style—on average, one in four people do so over a four-year period—most people are unaware of the issue, so these changes happen without their ever knowing they have occurred (or why). Wouldn’t it be great, we thought, if we could help people have some measure of control over these life-altering shifts? What a difference

it would make if they could consciously work toward becoming more secure in their attachment style instead of letting life sway them every which way!

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Learning about these three attachment styles was a true eye-opener for us; we discovered that adult attachment behavior was everywhere. We were able to view our own romantic behaviors and those of people around us in a fresh new light. By assigning attachment styles to patients, colleagues, and friends, we could interpret their relationships differently and gain much more clarity. Their behavior no longer seemed baffling and complex, but rather predictable under the circumstances.

## EVOLUTIONARY TIES

Attachment theory is based on the assertion that the need to be in a close relationship is embedded in our genes. It was John Bowlby's stroke of genius that brought him to the realization that we've been programmed by evolution to single out a few specific individuals in our lives and make them precious to us. We've been bred to be dependent on a significant other. The need starts in the womb and ends when we die. Bowlby proposed that throughout evolution, genetic selection favored people who became attached because it provided a survival advantage. In prehistoric times, people who relied on themselves and had no one to protect them were more likely to end up as prey. More often than not those who were with somebody who deeply cared about them survived to pass on to their offspring the preference to form intimate bonds. In fact, the need to be near someone special is so important that the brain has a biological mechanism specifically responsible for creating and regulating our connection with our attachment figures (parents, children, and romantic partners). This mechanism, called the *attachment system*, consists of emotions and behaviors that ensure that we remain safe and protected by staying close to our loved ones. The mechanism explains why a child parted from his or her mother becomes frantic, searches wildly, or cries uncontrollably until he or she reestablishes contact with her. These reactions are coined *protest behavior*, and we all still exhibit them as grown-ups. In prehistoric times, being close to a partner was a matter of life and death, and our attachment system developed to treat such proximity as an absolute necessity.

Imagine hearing news of a plane crash in the Atlantic on the evening your partner is flying from New York to London. That sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach and the accompanying hysteria you'd feel would be your attachment system at work. Your frantic calls to the airport would be your protest behavior.

An extremely important aspect of evolution is heterogeneity. Humans are a very heterogeneous species, varying greatly in appearance, attitudes, and behaviors. This accounts to a great extent for our abundance and for our ability to fit into almost any ecological niche on earth. If we were all identical then any single environmental challenge would have the potential to wipe us all out. Our variability improves the chances that a segment of the population that is unique in some way might survive when others wouldn't. Attachment style is no different from any other human characteristic. Although we all have a basic need to form close bonds, the way we create them varies. In a very dangerous environment, it would be less advantageous to invest time and energy in just one person because he or she would not likely be around for too long; it would make more sense to get less attached and move on (and hence, the avoidant attachment style). Another option in a harsh environment is to act in the opposite manner and be intensely persistent and hypervigilant about staying close to your attachment

figure (hence, the anxious attachment style). In a more peaceful setting, the intimate bonds formed by investing greatly in a particular individual would yield greater benefits for both the individual and his or her offspring (hence, the secure attachment style).

True, in modern society, we are not hunted by predators as our ancestors were, but in evolutionary terms we're only a fraction of a second away from the old scheme of things. Our emotional brain was handed down to us by *Homo sapiens* who lived in a completely different era, and it is their lifestyle and the dangers they encountered that our emotions were designed to address. Our feelings and behaviors in relationships today are not very different from those of our early ancestors.

## **PROTEST BEHAVIOR IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

Armed with our new insights about the implications of attachment styles in everyday life, we started to perceive people's actions very differently. Behaviors that we used to attribute to someone's personality traits, or that we had previously labeled as exaggerated, could now be understood with clarity and precision through the lens of attachment theory. Our findings shed a new light on the difficulty Tamara experienced in letting go of a boyfriend like Greg who made her miserable. It did not necessarily come from weakness. It originated, instead, from a basic instinct to maintain contact with an attachment figure at all costs and was amplified greatly by an anxious attachment style.

For Tamara, the need to remain with Greg was triggered by the very slightest feeling of danger—danger that her lover was out of reach, unresponsive, or in trouble. Letting go in these situations would be insane in evolutionary terms. Using protest behavior, such as calling several times or trying to make him feel jealous, made perfect sense when seen in this light.

What we really liked about attachment theory was that it was formulated on the basis of the population at large. Unlike many other psychological frameworks that were created based on couples who come to therapy, this one drew its lessons from everyone—those who have happy relationships and those who don't, those who never get treatment and those who actively seek it. It allowed us to learn not only what goes “wrong” in relationships but also what goes “right,” and it allowed us to find and highlight a whole group of people who are barely mentioned in most relationship books. What's more, the theory does not label behaviors as healthy or unhealthy. None of the attachment styles is in itself seen as “pathological.” On the contrary, romantic behaviors that had previously been seen as odd or misguided now seemed understandable, predictable, even expected. You stay with someone although he's not sure he loves you? Understandable. You say you want to leave and a few minutes later change your mind and decide that you desperately want to stay? Understandable too.

But are such behaviors effective or worthwhile? That's a different story. People with a secure attachment style know how to communicate their own expectations and respond to their partner's needs effectively *without* having to resort to protest behavior. For the rest of us, understanding is only the beginning.

## **FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE—DEVELOPING SPECIFIC ATTACHMENT-BASED INTERVENTIONS**



By understanding that people vary greatly in their need for intimacy and closeness, and that these differences create clashes, attachment findings offered us a new way of looking at romantic relationships. But while the research made it easy to *understand* romantic liaisons better, how can we make a difference in them? The theory held the promise of improving people's intimate bonds, but its translation from the laboratory to daily life didn't exist. Believing that we'd found a key to guiding people toward better relationships, we set out to learn as much as we could about the three attachment styles and the ways they interacted in everyday situations.

We started interviewing people from all walks of life. We interviewed colleagues and patients, as well as laypeople of different backgrounds and ages. We wrote summaries of the relationship histories and romantic experiences they shared with us. We conducted observations of couples in action. We assessed their attachment styles by analyzing their comments, attitudes, and behaviors and at times offered specific attachment-based interventions. We developed a technique that allowed people to determine—in a relatively short time—someone's attachment style. We taught people how they could use their attachment instincts rather than fight them, in order to not only evade unhappy relationships but also uncover the hidden “pearls” worth cultivating—and it worked!

We created what we call Applied Adult Attachment, a methodology that is relevant for a variety of relationship situations. We discovered that unlike other relationship interventions that mostly focus either on singles or existing couples, attachment theory is an overarching theory of romantic affiliation that allows for the development of useful applications for people in *all* stages of their romantic life. There are specific applications for people who are dating, those in early stages of relationships, and those who are in long-term ones, for people going through a breakup or those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. The common thread is that attachment theory can be put to powerful use in all of these situations and can help guide people throughout their lives to better relationships.

## PUTTING INSIGHTS INTO ACTION

After some time, attachment-related lingo became second nature to the people around us. We'd listen to them during a therapy session or at dinner saying, “I can't go out with him, he's clearly avoidant,” or “You know me, I'm anxious. A short fling is the last thing I need.” To think that until recently they weren't even aware of the three attachment styles!

Tamara, of course, learned everything there was to know about attachment theory and about the new discoveries we'd made—she brought the subject up in nearly every conversation we held. She finally had summoned the strength to break off her loose ties with Greg. Shortly afterward, she began dating again with a vengeance. Equipped with her newly acquired attachment knowledge, Tamara was able to elegantly dodge potential suitors with an avoidant attachment style, who she now knew were not right for her. People whom she would have spent days agonizing over in the past—analyzing what they were thinking, whether they would call or whether they were serious about her—fell by the wayside effortlessly. Instead Tamara's thoughts were focused on assessing whether the new people she met had the capacity to be close and loving in the way that she wanted them to be.

After some time Tamara met Tom, a clearly secure man, and their relationship developed so smoothly she barely discussed it. It wasn't that she didn't want to share intimate details with us, it was

that she had found a secure base and there were just no crises or dramas to discuss. Most of our conversations now revolved around the fun things they did, their plans for the future, or her career, which was in full swing again.

## **GOING FORWARD**

This book is the product of our translation of attachment research into action. We hope that you, like our many friends, colleagues, and patients, will use it to make better decisions in your personal life. In the following chapters, you'll learn more about each of the three attachment styles and about the way in which they determine your behavior and attitudes in romantic situations. Past failures will be seen in a new light and your motives—as well as the motives of others—will become clearer. You'll learn what your needs are and who you should be with in order to be happy in a relationship. If you are already in a relationship with a partner who has an attachment style that conflicts with your own, you'll gain insight into why you both think and act as you do and learn strategies to improve your satisfaction level. In either case, you'll start to experience change—change for the better, of course.

## *Dependency Is Not a Bad Word*

A few years ago, on a TV reality show that features couples who race against each other around the world and perform challenging tasks, Karen and Tim were the show's dream couple: beautiful, sexy, smart, and successful. In the face of the various challenges they encountered, intimate details about their relationship emerged: Karen wanted to get married but Tim was reluctant. He valued his independence and she wanted to get closer. At certain high-pressure moments during the race and often after an argument, Karen needed Tim to hold her hand. Tim was hesitant to do so; it felt too close, and besides, he didn't want to succumb to her every whim.

By the last show Tim and Karen were leading the race. They almost won the big cash prize, but at the finish line they were beaten. When they were interviewed for the season finale, they were asked in retrospect they'd do anything differently. Karen said: "I think we lost because I was too needy. Looking back I see that my behavior was a bit much. Many times I needed Tim to hold my hand during the race. I don't know why it was so important to me. But I've learned a lesson from that and I've decided that I don't need to be that way anymore. Why did I need to hold his hand so much? That was silly. I should have just kept my cool without needing this gesture from him." Tim, for his part, said very little: "The race in no way resembled real life. It was the most intense experience I have ever had. During the race we didn't even have time to be angry with each other. We just dashed from one task to the next."

Both Karen and Tim neglected to mention an important fact: Tim got cold feet before a joint bungee-jump challenge and almost quit the race. Despite Karen's encouragement and reassurance that she too would be jumping with him, he just wouldn't do it. It reached the point that he took off all his gear and started walking away. Finally, he mustered the courage to take the challenge after all. Because of that particular hesitation they lost their lead.

Attachment theory teaches us that Karen's basic assumption, that she can and should control her emotional needs and soothe herself in the face of stress, is simply wrong. She assumed that the problem was that she is too needy. But research findings support the exact opposite. Getting attached means that our brain becomes wired to seek the support of our partner by ensuring their psychological and physical proximity. If our partner fails to reassure us, we are programmed to continue our attempts to achieve closeness until they do. If Karen and Tim understood this, she would not feel ashamed of needing to hold his hand during the stress of a nationally televised race. For his part, Tim would have known that the simple gesture of holding Karen's hand could give them the extra edge they needed to win. Indeed, if he knew that by responding to her need early on, he would have had to devote less time to "putting out fires" caused by her compounded distress later—he might have been inclined to hold her hand when he noticed that she was starting to get anxious, instead of waiting until she demanded it. What's more, if Tim was able to accept Karen's support more readily, he would probably have bungee jumped sooner.

Attachment principles teach us that most people are only as needy as their unmet needs. When the

emotional needs are met, and the earlier the better, they usually turn their attention outward. This is sometimes referred to in attachment literature as the “dependency paradox”: The more effectively dependent people are on one another, the more independent and daring they become. Karen and Tim were unaware of how to best use their emotional bond to their advantage in the race.

## **WE’VE COME A LONG WAY (BUT NOT FAR ENOUGH)**

Karen’s self-blaming view of herself as too needy and Tim’s obliviousness to his attachment role are not surprising and not really their fault. After all, we live in a culture that seems to scorn basic needs for intimacy, closeness, and especially dependency, while exalting independence. We tend to accept this attitude as truth—to our detriment.

The erroneous belief that all people should be emotionally self-sufficient is not new. Not too long ago in Western society people believed that children would be happier if they were left to their own devices and taught to soothe themselves. Then attachment theory came along and turned these attitudes—at least toward children—around. In the 1940s experts warned that “coddling” would result in needy and insecure children who would become emotionally unhealthy and maladjusted adults. Parents were told not to lavish too much attention on their infants, to allow them to cry for hours and to train them to eat on a strict schedule. Children in hospitals were isolated from their parents and could only be visited through a glass window. Social workers would remove children from their homes and place them in foster care at the slightest sign of trouble.

The common belief was that a proper distance should be maintained between parents and their children, and that physical affection should be doled out sparingly. In *Psychological Care of Infant and Child*, a popular parenting book in the 1920s, John Broadus Watson warned against the dangers of “too much mother love” and dedicated the book “to the first mother who brings up a happy child.” Such a child would be an autonomous, fearless, self-reliant, adaptable, problem-solving being who does not cry unless physically hurt, is absorbed in work and play, and has no great attachments to any place or person.

Before the groundbreaking work of Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby, the founders of attachment theory in the fifties and sixties, psychologists had no appreciation of the importance of the bond between parent and child. A child’s attachment to her mother was seen as a by-product of the fact that she offered food and sustenance; the child learned to associate her mother with nourishment and sought her proximity as a result. Bowlby, however, observed that even infants who had all of their nutritional needs taken care of but lacked an attachment figure (such as infants raised in institutions or displaced during the Second World War) failed to develop normally. They showed stunted physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development. Ainsworth’s and Bowlby’s studies made it clear that the connection between infant and caretaker was as essential for the child’s survival as food and water.

## **ATTACHMENT NEEDS: THEY’RE NOT JUST FOR CHILDREN**

Bowlby always claimed that attachment is an integral part of human behavior throughout the *entire*

lifespan. But it wasn't until the late 1980s that Cindy Hazan and Philip Shaver, pioneers in the field of adult attachment, published a "love quiz" in the *Rocky Mountain News* that confirmed this hypothesis. In the quiz, they asked volunteers to mark the one statement out of three that best described their feelings and attitudes in relationships. The three statements corresponded to the three attachment styles and read as follows:

- I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending on them and having them depend on me. I don't often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me. (Measure of the secure attachment style)
- I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely and difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when anyone gets too close, and often, love partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being. (Measure of the avoidant attachment style)
- I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me or won't want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person and this desire sometimes scares people away. (Measure of the anxious attachment style)

Remarkably, the results showed a similar distribution of attachment styles in adults as that found in infants: Here too most respondents fell under the "secure" category and the remaining subjects were divided between anxious and avoidant. The researchers also found that each style corresponded to very different and unique beliefs and attitudes about themselves, their partners, their relationships, and intimacy in general.

Further studies by Hazan and Shaver and others corroborated these findings. The emotions, thought patterns, and behaviors automatically triggered in children in attachment situations appear similarly in adults. The difference is that adults are capable of a higher level of abstraction, so our need for the other person's continuous physical presence can at times be temporarily replaced by the knowledge that they are available to us psychologically and emotionally. But the bottom line is that the need for intimate connection and the reassurance of our partner's availability continues to play an important role throughout our lives.

Unfortunately, just as the importance of the parent-child bond was disregarded in the past, today the significance of adult attachment goes unappreciated. Among adults, the prevailing notion is still that too much dependence in a relationship is a bad thing.

## **THE CODEPENDENCY MYTH**

The codependency movement and other currently popular self-help approaches portray relationships in a way that is remarkably similar to the views held in the first half of the twentieth century about the child-parent bond (remember the "happy child" who is free of unnecessary attachments?). Today's experts offer advice that goes something like this: Your happiness is something that should come from within and should not be dependent on your lover or mate. Your well-being is not their responsibility and theirs is not yours. Each person needs to look after himself or herself. In addition, you should learn not to allow your inner peace to be disturbed by the person you are closest to. If your partner acts in a way that undermines your sense of security, you should be able to distance yourself from the

situation emotionally, “keep the focus on yourself,” and stay on an even keel. If you can’t do that, there might be something wrong with you. You might be too enmeshed with the other person, or “codependent,” and you must learn to set better “boundaries.”

The basic premise underlying this point of view is that the ideal relationship is one between two self-sufficient people who unite in a mature, respectful way while maintaining clear boundaries. If you develop a strong dependency on your partner, you are deficient in some way and are advised to work on yourself to become more “differentiated” and develop a “greater sense of self.” The worst possible scenario is that you will end up *needing* your partner, which is equated with “addiction” to him or her. And addiction, we all know, is a dangerous prospect.

While the teachings of the codependency movement remain immensely helpful in dealing with family members who suffer from substance abuse (as was the initial intention), they can be misleading and even damaging when applied indiscriminately to all relationships. Karen, whom we met earlier in the televised race, has been influenced by these schools of thought. But biology tells a very different story.

## THE BIOLOGICAL TRUTH

Numerous studies show that once we become attached to someone, the two of us form one physiological unit. Our partner regulates our blood pressure, our heart rate, our breathing, and the levels of hormones in our blood. We are no longer separate entities. The emphasis on differentiation that is held by most of today’s popular psychology approaches to adult relationships does not hold water from a biological perspective. Dependency is a fact; it is not a choice or a preference.

A study conducted by James Coan is particularly illuminating to that effect: Dr. James Coan is the director of the Affective Neuroscience Laboratory at the University of Virginia. He investigates the mechanisms through which close social relationships and broader social networks regulate our emotional responses. In this particular study, which he conducted in collaboration with Richard Davidson and Hillary Schaefer, he used functional MRI technology to scan the brains of married women. While these women were being scanned, Dr. Coan and his colleagues simulated a stressful situation by telling them that they were about to receive a very mild electric shock.

Normally, under stressful conditions the hypothalamus becomes activated. And indeed this is what happened in the experiment to the women when they were alone awaiting the shock—their hypothalamus lit up. Next, they tested the women who were holding a stranger’s hand while they waited. This time the scans showed somewhat reduced activity in the hypothalamus. And when the hand that the women held was their husband’s? The dip was much more dramatic—their stress was barely detectable. Furthermore, the women who benefited most from spousal hand-holding were those who reported the highest marital satisfaction—but we’ll get back to this point later.

The study demonstrates that when two people form an intimate relationship, they regulate each other’s psychological and emotional well-being. Their physical proximity and availability influence the stress response. How can we be expected to maintain a high level of differentiation between ourselves and our partners if our basic biology is influenced by them to such an extent?

It seems that Karen from our example instinctively understood the healing effect of holding her partner’s hand under stressful conditions. Unfortunately, she later gave in to common misconception

and viewed her instinct as a weakness, something to be ashamed of.

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## THE “DEPENDENCY PARADOX”

Well before brain imaging technology was developed, John Bowlby understood that our need for someone to share our lives with is part of our genetic makeup and has nothing to do with how much we love ourselves or how fulfilled we feel on our own. He discovered that once we choose someone special, powerful and often uncontrollable forces come into play. New patterns of behavior kick in *regardless* of how independent we are and *despite* our conscious wills. Once we choose a partner, there is no question about whether dependency exists or not. *It always does.* An elegant coexistence that does not include uncomfortable feelings of vulnerability and fear of loss sounds good but is not our biology. What proved through evolution to have a strong survival advantage is a human couple becoming one physiological unit, which means that if she’s reacting, then I’m reacting, or if he’s upset, that also makes me unsettled. He or she is part of me, and I will do anything to save him or her. Having such a vested interest in the well-being of another person translates into a very important survival advantage for both parties.

Despite variations in the way people with different attachment styles learn to deal with these powerful forces—the secure and anxious types embrace them and the avoidants tend to suppress them—all three attachment styles are programmed to connect with a special someone. In fact, chapter 6 describes a series of experiments that demonstrate that avoidants have attachment needs but actively suppress them.

Does this mean that in order to be happy in a relationship we need to be joined with our partner at the hip or give up other aspects of our life such as our careers or friends? Paradoxically, the opposite is true! It turns out that the ability to step into the world on our own often stems from the knowledge that there is someone beside us whom we can count on—and this is the “dependency paradox.” The logic of this paradox is hard to follow at first. How can we act more independent by being thoroughly dependent on someone else? If we had to describe the basic premise of adult attachment in a single sentence, it would be: If you want to take the road to independence and happiness, first find the right person to depend on and travel down it with them. Once you understand this, you’ve grasped the essence of attachment theory. To illustrate this principle, let’s take another look at childhood, where attachment starts. Nothing better demonstrates the idea we’re conveying than what is known in the field as the strange situation test.

## THE STRANGE SITUATION TEST

Sarah and her twelve-month-old daughter, Kimmy, enter a room full of toys. A friendly young research assistant is waiting in the room and exchanges a few words with them. Kimmy starts to

explore this newfound toy heaven—she crawls around, picks up toys, throws them to the ground, and checks whether they rattle, roll, or light up, while glancing at her mom from time to time.

Then Kimmy's mother is instructed to leave the room; she gets up and quietly walks out. The minute Kimmy realizes what has happened she becomes distraught. She crawls over to the door as quickly as she can, sobbing. She calls out to her mother and bangs on the door. The research assistant tries to interest Kimmy in a box full of colorful building blocks, but this only makes Kimmy more agitated and she throws one of the blocks in the research assistant's face.

When her mother returns to the room after a short while, Kimmy rushes toward her on all fours and raises her arms to be held. The two embrace and Sarah calmly reassures her daughter. Kimmy hugs her mom tight and stops sobbing. Once she is at ease again, Kimmy's interest in the toys reawakens and she resumes her play.

The experiment Sarah and Kimmy participated in is probably the most important study in the field of attachment theory—referred to as the *strange situation test* (the version described here is an abbreviated version of the test). Mary Ainsworth was fascinated by the way in which children's exploratory drive—their ability to play and learn—could be aroused or stifled by their mother's presence or departure.

She found that having an attachment figure in the room was enough to allow a child to go out into a previously unknown environment and explore with confidence. This presence is known as a *secure base*. It is the knowledge that you are backed by someone who is supportive and whom you can rely on with 100 percent certainty and turn to in times of need. A secure base is a prerequisite for a child's ability to explore, develop, and learn.

## A SECURE BASE FOR GROWN-UPS

As adults we don't play with toys anymore, but we do have to go out into the world and deal with novel situations and difficult challenges. We want to be highly functional at work, at ease and inspired in our hobbies, and compassionate enough to care for our children and partners. If we feel secure, like the infant in the strange situation test when her mother is present, the world is at our feet. We can take risks, be creative, and pursue our dreams. And if we lack that sense of security? If we are unsure whether the person closest to us, our romantic partner, truly believes in us and supports us and will be there for us in times of need, we'll find it much harder to maintain focus and engage in life. As in the strange situation test, when our partners are thoroughly dependable and make us feel safe, and especially if they know how to reassure us during the hard times, we can turn our attention to all the other aspects of life that make our existence meaningful.

Brooke Feeney, the director of the Carnegie Mellon University Relationship Lab, illustrates how a secure base works in adult relationships. Dr. Feeney is particularly interested in studying the way in which partners get and give support to each other and the factors that determine the quality of that support. In one of her studies, Dr. Feeney asked couples to discuss their personal goals and exploratory opportunities with one another in the lab. When participants felt that their goals were supported by their partner, they reported an increase in self-esteem and an elevated mood after the discussion. They also rated higher the likelihood of achieving their goals after the discussion than before it. Participants who felt that their partner was more intrusive and/or less supportive, on the



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