Attached Summary

By Amir Levine

Can we use science to improve our relationships?

Attached gives us the scientific story behind adulthood attachment, and how this understanding can help us find and keep love.

Attachment is just a fancy word for love. Close friends and authors Amir Levine and Rachel S. F. Heller collaborated to write a book, to help us make better choices regarding love. Dr. Levine is a psychiatrist and neuroscientist. Heller graduated from Columbia University with a master's degree in social-organizational psychology. *Attached* gives us the scientific foundation of romantic relationships, how our evolutionary past defines our present experiences regarding romantic relationships, and how we seek out certain relationships based on our attachment style. So if you need to understand why some relationships don't work out, or want to bring more happiness and fulfillment into your current relationships, then this is a very worthwhile read.

Briefly, we'll unpack the science of adult attachment, and the tips and tricks we can use to better navigate our relationships, by deciphering our attachment style, and that of our partners.

Where Does Our Need For Relationships Come From?

It's the age-old "nature and nurture" answer. And, at the end of the day,

our genes and life experiences govern our desire to form relational bonds with others.

Our desire for attachment stretches back in time to when our ancestors had to rely on each other to survive hardships and the threat of predators. Therefore, finding a dependable mate allowed them to raise offspring and continue the human lineage. Genetically we're programmed to be in relationships, but how we *relate* to our romantic partners is where attachment theory comes in.

Western mid-20th-century parenting books advocated against parents coddling and smothering their children. If parents wanted their children to grow up fearless and self-reliant, the idea was for affection to be offered sparingly. However, the tide turned in the 1960s, when psychologists and founders of attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby, published research demonstrating the importance of the "parent-child bond." Seminal studies looked at children raised in orphanages and institutions, which showed that children aren't just reliant on parents for food and shelter, but also for emotional support. Even with basic needs such as food and shelter being met, a child raised without a parent or attachment figure has a much higher risk of physical, emotional, intellectual, and relational difficulties. The opposite is also true: secure child-parent bonds predicated greater life success, with children being more likely to form meaningful relationships as adults.

However, our genes and parents aren't solely accountable when it comes to our desire for, and behavior in relationships. We might not still need the tangible security that comes from the parent-child relationship, but supportive everyday actions and just a few kind words from our significant other, can go a long way to help us thrive.

We're Only As Needy As Our Unmet Needs

As with children, *adults* need and benefit from being in supportive, nurturing relationships. When a significant other can satisfy a basic attachment need – a deep-seated need for security, comfort, and love – this inadvertently gives us the courage to go out into the world and thrive. But the opposite is also true. If our partners can't satisfy our basic emotional needs, they may unwittingly inhibit our ability to grow and achieve our goals.

However, this isn't what we've been taught. Western culture promotes self-reliance above all else. Self-help books and magazine articles are packed with advice on how to be more "independent." We're told to "put ourselves first," "set clear boundaries," "focus on our own happiness." The list goes on. And this is where self-help can hurt rather than help, because we're wired to be in relationships. The "dependency paradox" is such that our *need* to depend on others is what makes us independent. When our emotional needs are met, our anxiety diminishes, and our bravery grows.

You may have heard of "The Strange Situation Test." Psychologist Mary Ainsworth placed a mother and a child in an unfamiliar room. When the mother and the child were together, the child felt secure enough to explore the space and play with the different toys she found. But when the mother left the room, the child quickly became distraught. Only when the child's mother returned did the child relax and start to play again. Of course, a secure relational base of support encourages a child to explore and develop, but Ainsworth also insists that we have attachment needs throughout our lives – not just as children.

As adults, we face strange situation tests daily. Safe relationships give us the stability and emotional nourishment that can help us meet life's ups and downs. Dependency isn't a sign of weakness, and being able to depend on a significant other for emotional nourishment is good for our mental and physical health.

Research at Carnegie Mellon University shows that people with partners who are genuinely interested in their goals have higher self-esteem than those whose partners are less supportive or interested. Romantic relationships don't just affect our heads and hearts, but our whole bodies. Just being in close proximity to our partners alters blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate, and hormone levels. Research at Toronto University shows that participants who suffer high blood pressure but believe their marriages to be happy and satisfying, actually experience lower blood pressure when their partners are present, and vice versa. Those with unhappy marriages experience even higher blood pressure when their partners are present.

For better or worse, how we experience our relationships can alter our mental and physical wellbeing. So how can we use the science of attachment to our advantage? To begin, we can learn more about the

three different attachment styles: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Understanding these three broad categories can help us make sense of our own intimacy needs, those of our partners, and help us predict how someone might behave in a romantic setup.

What's Your Type?

Let's explore the three types. Regardless of age, sex, and location, we each have an "attachment style." 50% of us are secure attachers, 20% anxious, and about 25% are avoidant. And the remaining 5% are a mixture of anxious and avoidant.

Which of the following best describes you?

You're naturally warm and loving, you enjoy being intimate and close, and you take relational ups and downs in your stride. As a result, you can easily communicate your needs and desires, anticipate your partner's needs, and try your best to meet those needs. If this sounds like you, then you're likely to have a secure attachment style.

Or perhaps, as with secure types, you enjoy intimacy and closeness, but for some reason, you find that relationships take up a large chunk of your energy. Because of this, fear creeps in, and you tend to worry more often than not that your partner doesn't love being "close" as much as you do. You're sensitive to fluctuations in your partner's moods or behavior, and hesitate to say anything that your partner might find disagreeable. If this sounds more like you, then it's likely that you're the anxious type.

You may fit into the third type if independence and autonomy trump closeness and intimacy. Unlike the anxious types, you don't worry as

much about relationships, and rejection doesn't bother you too much either. If you're an "arm's length" kind of person when it comes to relationships, then you're possibly the avoidant type.

Intuiting our attachment style can help highlight how we act and why we say the things we do in relationships. But getting to grips with our partner's attachment style can be equally, if not more helpful. Suppose we learn to better understand our partner's beliefs and attitude towards intimacy? This will allow us to learn to deepen the emotional connection, or let go of a relationship that might not serve us well.

How do we decode our partner's attachment style? Actions and words can be telling. Here are some cues.

What's Your Partner's Type?

Secure types are the "go with the flow" types. They give us space when we need it and hold us tight when we feel lonely. Unlike anxious types, they don't overly fret about the relationship, but they're not like avoiders who sometimes appear indifferent to our needs. They keep their promises, show up on time, and phone when they say they will. They talk about plans with you, but don't make decisions without your input. They open their lives to you, and you'll likely be introduced to their family from early on. They're good at communication. They know how to ask for what they need. And when they're concerned about something, they'll tell you. They're not afraid to say *those* words: "I love you," or talk about "touchy" subjects. Relationship-wise, secure attachers care, and when disagreements arise, they're fair and compromise when necessary. They offer and enjoy being a base of support for their partners.

Anxious types on the other hand, want intimacy, but they're highly attuned threat detectors. They're preoccupied with making a relationship work, which might mean they fret about relationships more so than others. Anxious types might quiz you on your shared love life, and previous relationships to see if they measure up. They might come across as overly concerned about what you're doing when not together. However, their sensitive nature makes them highly attuned and affectionate. They're the hand-holders, the huggers, and the kissers. Anxious types need someone with the emotional resources to provide them with emotional security. Consistency, reliability, and availability can help diffuse their many fears. So, if you can reassure their worries and offer them the affection they need, they'll be loving and devoted partners, and help you navigate the perils of the outside world.

Avoidant types don't have the same overwhelming need for closeness. They seek connection, but if partners get too close, they can quickly feel suffocated. Avoiders can give off mixed signals. One week they might call you eight times, and then the following week, zero. They might come on strong at first, but they might start to create emotional distance when you get closer. They'll give the age-old, 'I've got too much work' excuse, and seek breaks from all the togetherness. They need distance and space. Will you meet their friends and family immediately? Probably not. Moving in together won't happen anytime soon either. And "marriage" is a word they don't throw around lightly. If they don't get the level of independence they need in a relationship, they might withdraw further, or the relationship may end.

Research-wise, being in a relationship with a secure type is the best predictor of relationship satisfaction. And based on their instinctual responses to intimacy, anxious-avoidant pairs tend to be the least compatible. But interestingly, research shows that despite their

incompatible styles, anxious-avoidant types tend to be drawn to each other. The trouble is that anxious-avoidant relationships can be a rollercoaster ride if both parties aren't careful. Conflicts can escalate, and both partners get trapped in a destructive cycle; the attacher tries harder to get closer, and the avoidant tries harder to distance themselves. No matter how much they might love each other, if needs aren't met, and compromises aren't made, the relationship suffers.

Just knowing the three different types of attachment styles can empower us to make wiser choices when it comes to who we decide to date, marry, or perhaps even when it might be time to leave a relationship that's no longer serving us. But no matter who we're in a romantic relationship with, learning to communicate and engage in conflict effectively, can give a relationship a fighting chance.

Effective Communication Is How We Find and Keep Love

We all know that communication is essential, but "effective" communication isn't a skill everyone's versed in. The question is, why is it hard to talk about touchy subjects, especially in the early stages of a relationship? Maybe we fear partners will think we're too needy, or we're afraid of what they'll say in response to raising a specific issue?

Most often than not, we sweep worries and touchy topics under the rug, and hope that they disappear. Sadly, this doesn't work. Dust collects, and relational fears and frustrations build up over time. Effective communication is how we find and keep the right partner for us. If we've met someone we like, our authors advocate that we learn to spell out our needs and concerns early on. This may feel uncomfortable, but it's a

great way to get insight into how our partner understands the nature of the relationship. Often we may not like what we hear, but it's essential to set out expectations.

However, we should note the word "effective" in "effective communication." *How* and *when* we communicate is a skill, and it's one we can all learn.

We need to learn to be brave and assertive, and not to apologize for feeling what we feel. Our partner might not see our concerns as legitimate, but this lack of legitimacy is often why concerns are brought up in the first place.

Tips for communicating effectively include using specific phrases. Try using phrases such as "I feel," "I need," and "I want to help distill what exactly it is you feel, need, and want." Use specific examples to illustrate your concerns to avoid misunderstandings. Stick to concrete language and avoid the blame game. Our intention isn't to make another feel inadequate, but to have an honest, forthright conversation.

No matter how much we communicate, arguments inevitably arise, so here are some insights into navigating conflict.

Learn To Fight Right

The Hollywood notion that romantic relationships are conflict-free is a myth. And this is a good thing. "Fighting" can bring us closer, and paradoxically, make us happier. But we need to learn to fight right.

Firstly, remember that none of us are mind readers. What you might think

is obvious, might not even cross your partner's mind, so be sure to communicate your needs and feelings. Disagreements aren't a zero-sum game. When it comes to relationships, our happiness is, to an extent, dependent on our partner's happiness, so pay attention to their wellbeing. Try your best to tune how your partner is feeling, and what it is that they really need. Even when we disagree, we should at least validate their needs and feelings.

Furthermore, stick to the issue at hand, so the argument doesn't escalate unnecessarily. Don't let previous fights or gripes about "who didn't do the dishes," bleed into a conflict about whose family you'll visit over the holidays. And be sure not to withdraw or play the "silent treatment" card until some mutual agreement is reached.

For the anxious-avoidant pairs, it's helpful for anxious types to give their avoidant partners plenty of space. If they need to withdraw, then let them. Don't take it personally. The reason for withdrawal isn't always about you. Anxious types can learn to reinforce the positive actions they'd like from their avoidant partners and tell them what they value in the relationship. Avoidant partners can aim to see the positives, be slow to blame their anxious partner, and take accountability when necessary.

If we can learn to stay present, engaged, keep to the issue at hand, and remain sensitive to our partner's happiness, not only can we resolve conflict, but respect it as a way to build intimacy. However, there are also times when conflicts can't be resolved, compromises can't be made, and things just can't be worked out. In cases such as these, we need to decide if the relationship we're in is worth our time. Walking away from a relationship where our needs may never be met, can be the best thing we do for our happiness in the long run.

In Conclusion

What our authors make clear is this: 'The ultimate secret to a happy relationship lies in finding a partner who is able to meet your needs.'

At some point, we might have to accept that our partner's wants and needs are incompatible with our own. Rather than judge ourselves or our partner, we can acknowledge and appreciate our deep relational needs, and align ourselves with someone whose needs and expectations are more in line with our own. If we can do this, we have a better chance of finding happiness and security within a relationship.

Secure, healthy relationships are emotionally nourishing. So why leave love to chance? We can learn about what science has to say about our own attachment style and find a partner whose style is compatible with ours. Healthy attachment doesn't mean being attached at the hip, but knowing our partner believes in us, can communicate with us, and has our back, can give us a leg up in life.