

Relationships: Avoidant and Anxious Attachment Styles by J. Alan Graham, Ph.D.

Introduction

In my article, “Relationship Therapy and Attachment Style: The Basics,” I briefly reviewed the four Styles of Attachment: Secure, Anxious, Avoidant and Fearful-Avoidant. I talked about patterns couples get into and what to do about that. The Anxious, Avoidant and Fearful-Avoidant are all insecure styles but manifest that insecurity differently. This article is a brief review of what to understand about the tendencies of the Avoidant individual. It is also a brief guide about what to do if your Avoidant Attachment Style is interfering with dating or relationship success. As you read, keep in mind two things: First, no one is fully one style or the other. Most of us are somewhat to mostly one style or somewhat to mostly another style. Thank goodness. That gives us some wiggle room to work things out! Secondly, if you are not Secure, you probably have one basic insecure style (Avoidant or Anxious). Yet, it’s possible for the other style to emerge in response to the style of the person you’ve met. In other words, an Avoidant person may find themselves preoccupied and pursuing, thus looking more like an Anxious person if the person they meet is more Avoidant and distancing than they are. (“Someone has to close this gap if we’re going to date!”). This is because both styles are insecure styles and are reactive to the anxiety each experience about closeness and connection. We’ll talk more about the Fearful-Avoidant style in another article.

Pitfalls of the Avoidant Style

People with an Avoidant Attachment Style can feel overwhelmed by the closeness that a partner seeks, especially when the newness of a relationship wanes. Also, as a relationship matures, increased closeness is necessary for it to continue thus challenging the Avoidant’s comfort zone. Their insecurity is more about how relationships will be too demanding and that they won’t have enough “space” in the relationship. Out of their history, they don’t have the expectation that their wishes, needs, feelings, etc. will be recognized and important. Hence, they often don’t have the skills to present their wishes, needs, feelings, etc. to their partner so they keep these inside until they get to a boiling point or to the point of feeling the need to distance to get “space.” They are also likely to fear being a failure in a relationship, failing to sufficiently meet the relationship needs of their partner. They are the folks that “close the door” which often inspires their partners to “knock harder” on the door they have closed. Once this has happened, the Avoidant can interpret their partner’s escalation as excessive neediness or out of control anger, thus justifying their withdrawal and completely miss the point that their withdrawal is the point of origin, all in response to their anxiety about closeness. They also often miss the point that their Anxious partner’s distress is completely understandable and that it’s true: they have stepped away from the connection in an important emotional way. Research indicates that helping the Avoidant person open the door and step back into the relationship is the only way to shift this dynamic. In other words, it would seem that if the anxious person “calmed down” all would be O.K. However, that isn’t enough. The avoidant person has to learn how to move back into the relationship.

Avoidant people often long for relationships when they are alone although they use “deactivating strategies” to cope. “Deactivating strategies” are those mental processes by which the Avoidant person convinces themselves that being alone is just as good or better than being in relationship. This can include review of the benefits of being single (i.e., only one schedule to worry about, not having to deal with someone else’s needs, having the ability to see other partners thus potentially meeting someone better, etc.). Further, the Avoidant person may long for the ideal lover, reviewing how all previous

potential partners fell short of that ideal and rationalize their single status with impossibly high standards. These deactivating strategies are also used when an Avoidant person is in a relationship. They may prioritize things that take them away from the relationship and mentally dismiss the importance of the relationship. They may focus on their partner's shortcomings and all the ways the relationship isn't ideal. This helps them manage the anxiety they are in denial about. Ultimately, this strategy leads to conflict and disconnection. The Avoidant person sends mixed messages, fails to say, "I love you" and is very hesitant to commit. These tendencies may show up in non-romantic relationships as well although they are most noticeable in romantic relationships.

The Avoidant and Anxious Meet

As I discussed in my other articles, the dating pool is disproportionately weighted toward Anxious and Avoidant people. Secure people wade out of the dating pool together. When an Anxious person meets an Avoidant person, their eagerness for closeness can raise the anxiety of the Avoidant one. Often, the Avoidant person will come out of a period of loneliness with a renewed commitment to see a new partner in a more positive light. They want to give relationships another shot, hoping their resolve will continue and for a while they will be happy with a new opportunity. Sometimes the newness of a relationship helps the Avoidant person successfully "show up" with their feelings, wishes and needs. However, our Attachment Styles are pretty resilient. We need conscious effort to change them and if our patterns are not dealt with successfully, the withdrawal of the Avoidant person ignites the pursuit of the Anxious person and that well-known dance of pursuer-distancer begins. Sometimes, this dance can last for a long time with varying degrees of satisfaction. Sometimes, this dance doesn't last at all and sadly, the sense of repeated failure can lead both partners toward separation and possible resolve to move away from relationships.

Tips for the Avoidant Person

If you recognize yourself as someone with an Avoidant style and you feel frustrated that your Avoidant behaviors are interfering with maintaining connections and relationships, here are 10 things you can do to get a different outcome.

Learn to identify your "Deactivating Strategies." Deactivating strategies are the mental processes by which Avoidant people convince themselves that relationships are not that important and their need for connection and closeness is less than others. Remember both Avoidant and Anxious individuals suffer similar distress as compared with Secure individuals when assessed by physiological measures, even though the Avoidant "looks" just fine. The suggestions on this list are all variations on the theme of "Deactivating Strategies." Hopefully, this list will identify ones for you to work on and help you recognize the ones you use that are not articulated here.

Notice whether the mental list of your partner's shortcomings is as valid as you think. We all have shortcomings and it may be that you'd be losing a lot to push this person away. Remember, these are strategies you use to manage your anxiety about closeness. Talk about your anxiety (as opposed to evaluating your partner negatively) and you will both feel closer and more secure. Talking about your feelings is hard for Avoidant people but it is important. You must bring yourself into the relationship or your withdrawal invites the person you're with to fill the space. I recently told an Avoidant client that he would do better to be and express himself in his relationship rather than continue to believe that it was only possible away from his relationship. This made a lot of sense to him.

Question your fierce self-reliance. Self-reliance is a valuable quality but too much gets in the way of relationships. Do you know someone who refuses help, tends not to talk much about what they're feeling,

and keeps to themselves most of the time? It's often not very rewarding to be their friend and sometimes very frustrating to try. Consider the benefits of mutual support and camaraderie. When you let someone get close to you and especially when you let them help you, you give them the gift of feeling good about their generosity. It's a give-give, a win-win.

Find a Secure partner. Secure partners help Avoidant and Anxious people become more secure. A Secure partner will be able to tolerate the periodic withdrawal that feels necessary for an Avoidant person. When the Secure person can easily grant the "space" that the Avoidant person says they need, the Avoidant person often realizes more quickly they no longer need space. See how that works? An Anxious person would be distressed and ambivalent at best to grant that space, thus making it likely more space is experienced as essential. This is a frustrating pattern with Avoidants and Anxious people. Finding a Secure partner is helpful for both. Also, a secure partner will successfully model being present and is more likely to successfully invite you to be present as well, particularly when it is harder to share what's going on.

Be aware of your tendency to misinterpret behaviors in negative ways, thus setting up justification for your withdrawal. Consider that your partner has your best interest at heart. Consider that they want to be close, not that they want to control you. Most importantly, consider they are human and have foibles just like you. The things that may be "negative" may not be fatal flaws (deal breakers) about them or the relationship. You can still love someone even though they have faults.

Make a relationship gratitude list. Remind yourself daily to focus on the positives. Consider the ways your partner contributed, even in minor ways, to your well-being and why you're grateful they are in your life. Tell them something from your list often. It will make it more real for you and it will be wonderful for your partner to hear. Also, when we express gratitude for the things we like, they are more likely to recur. (It's called positive reinforcement and it works with people just like it works with pets).

Find a way to turn your attention away from a phantom ex. or the idealized future lover. It's likely there were things you didn't like about the former lover that you now miss and wish you could reconnect with. Euphoric recall is never accurate and dissatisfaction with a current relationship may likely be a Deactivating Strategy that is best to identify and stop. More, look to see if dissatisfaction is a means by which you justify half-hearted engagement in other areas of your life, not just your relationships. Dealing more with this Deactivating Strategy could be life changing!

Don't wait for "The One" who fulfills your checklist perfectly. If you're with a good partner, actively turn to them and acknowledge your need for closeness (even as it makes you uncomfortable). And keep in mind that there are no "ones" out there! That's an illusion. We're all ".72," ".85," and if we're lucky, we find a ".91." It's in the rounding up to "1.0" that the love happens. And when they round you up to 1.0, you are gifted with love, too.

Use distraction strategies. A common activity that functions as a "ramp-up" to closeness is often helpful. Working side by side on a project, sharing in cooking activities, or playing together with a pet can help the Avoidant partner remember that the closeness will be OK.

Communicate your needs clearly with the "why." Using "I" statements, state your needs clearly and describe how what you need helps the connection feel better, safer, or less threatening. For example, I had a client who was a trauma survivor who liked affection from their partner but needed their partner not to be too aggressive when initiating affection. Being able to state clearly what worked and what didn't work around bids for closeness and affection helped make it safe to stay present and respond well, as opposed to withdraw and engage in their deactivating strategies.

If you have significant and persistent Avoidance of connections, and you want to change that, it might be useful to talk to a therapist knowledgeable about Attachment Styles. Our style is driven by powerful (and understandable) emotions that set the stage for how we see ourselves and others and dictate what we do in our relationships. Sometimes, there is psychological work about painful or engulfing early relationships that needs to be addressed with a skilled therapist. Intimacy and closeness are always scary. They are scary for everyone but they don't have to be painful or produce intolerable anxiety. Intimacy and closeness can feel really good and you can still have the boundaries you need.

Summary

Relationships are the most rewarding and challenging aspect of this life we live. Knowing about your Attachment Style can be of immeasurable benefit to you and contribute to more relationship success. The tips above for the Avoidant style can help you make your way toward closer connections and ultimately, can help you shift toward a more Secure style. Remember, these styles are not static. They move as a function of the people we're with and the behaviors we practice. The more you practice presenting yourself to the person you're with, the more likely you are to have that experience go well. As you do this, you're more likely to find space for yourself within your relationship as opposed to outside it.

The goal is to engage in behaviors of a more Secure attachment style. Learning to interact with each other in a Secure manner will produce more security in your relationship and in time, you will both develop a more Secure Attachment Style. Securely attached people have three key qualities: They are available, attentive and responsive. When an Avoidant person is more available, attentive and responsive (as opposed to partially checked out and/or periodically dismissive), the relationship will be more satisfying for both partners. Practicing these qualities and experiencing them from your partner is what helps security and closeness grow.

Pitfalls of the Anxious Style

Except for situations we'll describe below, people with an Anxious style tend to find someone they like and are quickly ready to proceed into a relationship. Their anxiety decreases when they are with their partner and increases when they are apart. This anxiety rises with even non-intentional "misses" such as calling later than promised or worse, not calling until the next day. They are often generous with their time and energy and accommodating to the needs of their partner. Having plans for the next get together is very important and they will feel anxious if their partner hasn't proposed something. They may make sure something gets scheduled or they may feel anxious to propose the next date, fearing they are putting too much pressure on the relationship and then wait anxiously on the other person to contact them. Perhaps one of the most distressing parts of the Anxious person's experience is preoccupation with what I call "relationship review." Once the anxiety begins, rumination about previous conversations, assessments of how the last date(s) went, and worry that the speed at which they hope things will go may drive their partner away. Further, they may forecast catastrophic futures about the relationship, sometimes based only on sketchy evidence. This can be agony for the Anxious person. Do you remember the scene in the movie, "Flashdance," where the dancers were working out at the gym and one of them was obsessing about whether the man she met would call or not? That's what we're talking about.

Remember, the dating pool is weighted with Anxious and Avoidant folks as the Secure people are likely to wade out of the dating pool together. Hence, the chances are high that an Anxious individual will meet someone with an Avoidant style. It's important to remember that these Attachment Styles are the ways our "Attachment System" works. Briefly, the "Attachment System" is thought to be a part of our genetic

heritage, a part of us that is important for the survival of our species. Specifically, it is important that mother and infant have an attachment so that the mother is looking after the child and the child is fearful to be too far away from the mother. Such a bond increases the chances the child will make it to adulthood since human infants and children can't fend for themselves, unlike many other mammals. Out of many variables from our early attachment experiences, we develop a style that stays with us as the "way of the world." When two adults meet for a romantic partnership, their attachment styles interact and their "Attachment System" is activated. Here's where the Anxious person might get into trouble.

The Anxious and Avoidant Meet

When an Anxious person meets an Avoidant person, the distance the Avoidant person tends to maintain can become a gap the Anxious one feels compelled to close. In terms of the Attachment System, the switch gets turned on and they go into full speed, sometimes thinking their preoccupation with closing this gap is indication of true love. In fact, some of those same neurotransmitters are involved in "being in love." However, this is one of the hardest things Anxious people deal with. They think that they wouldn't spend so much psychological energy on someone who isn't "the one" so it must be love. In fact, sometimes it's really an overactive Attachment System, switched into high gear by the Avoidant's distancing.

This phenomenon of anxious preoccupation can be worsened or made better depending on the behavior of the partner. Secure people can handle the anxiety of an Anxious individual in such a way that the Anxious one can feel more at ease and more trusting of the connection. However, an Avoidant partner's need for "space," delivery of mixed messages, and dismissal of the Anxious person's legitimate relationship needs can perpetuate or worsen the preoccupation the Anxious person feels. Not to mention, the pursuit that the Anxious person engages in can contribute to further distancing and the well-known "pursuer-distancer" dance begins. This is the time the Avoidant person may say that the Anxious person is too needy.

Suggestions for the Anxious Individual

Here are some important suggestions if you have an Anxious style and it is interfering with your relationships. First, acknowledge and accept your true relationship needs. Denying your needs and focusing too much on your partner's needs (i.e., "space" or "time" or going slower than is OK for you) doesn't get your needs met and if your needs aren't met, you cannot be happy in a relationship. For example, if you need to interact at least a bit with your partner every day, let them know. It can be very frightening to state directly what you need but the kind of response you get is very important information. Don't fall victim to being told you're too dependent or too needy. Assess people you date more on the compatibility of your relationship needs and less on your ability to change yourself to please and accommodate to them. If you feel you are, in fact, too needy, meaning you feel overly dependent on another person to be able to live your life, that would be an important issue to work on in your own therapy. However, that is different than being told by an Avoidant person that normal needs for connecting are "too needy."

Second, when dating, recognize and rule out Avoidant people early on. Avoidant people tend to have some or all of the following characteristics:

They send mixed messages. For example, they tell you they really want to get together but something is frequently preventing this from happening or, they are very interested in you and only casually seeing someone else. Be careful. If you get too many mixed messages, move on.

They long for an ideal relationship. Remember that popular song by the Atlanta Rhythm Section, "Imaginary Lover?" Looking for the ideal person out there is a great way to discount the goodness in the person right in front of you. Not to mention, there is no "ideal" person out there. We all are less than

perfect with less than perfect matches. Be careful not to think about how you might be able to become that ideal person for them, especially if they give subtle hints you won't be able to. This is an example of adapting to them as opposed to honoring your relationship needs. The person who finds the "perfect match" is more likely a secure person who is overlooking the imperfections in another secure person. They want to meet "The One" but somehow always find some fault in another person or in the circumstances that make commitment impossible. "They're perfect but 'geographically undesirable'" is an example of something an Avoidant person might say. "I like everything about them except that they like opera, and I hate opera!" might be another example. There is no "perfect One" out there. We're all "0.79" or "0.82" or at best probably, "0.91." It's in the rounding up to a "1.0" where the love happens. They disregard your emotional well-being and when confronted about doing that, continue to disregard it. If you reveal your relationship needs and your partner's response is to restate why they can't respond to your needs (as opposed to considering how they might), there's a noticeable problem. They suggest you are too needy, sensitive, or overreacting (thus invalidating your feelings and making you second guess yourself). Don't take this for too long. They ignore the things you say that inconvenience them. If you said, "It would mean a lot to me if you wouldn't answer your phone during dinner" and they continue to answer or text, your needs are less important than they are saying. Also, this is how they are managing their anxiety about the connection with you. This would be one way they can set it up so you are only "so close."

You chronically don't feel heard. If your messages aren't received despite your best efforts to communicate, take a step back and consider whether enough of your needs are being met to keep working. Remember, nobody's perfect and we all wish for a chance to amend our mistakes. But if the list of Avoidant behaviors is too great, it may be best to let the person know and move on.

Third, date in a new way. Be your authentic self and use effective communication. Don't fall into the trap of thinking you're too needy and overly accommodate to your partner's need for distance. Also, don't avoid important conversations because you fear it will drive them away. First, you'll be happier being your authentic self and second, you'll know sooner (rather than later) whether this person is someone you can be in a relationship with. Probably the most "point-at-able" example is someone wishing to start a family sooner rather than later. It would be important for them to interview prospective partners early on to see if they, too, wanted children. If they say they don't or aren't sure, it's best to keep looking. If having children is really important to you, don't waste your time trying to get them to change on such an important issue. You don't have to be harsh or judgmental, you can simply say how important it is to date someone also very interested in starting a family. In a similar situation, I remember talking with a woman who announced to her date that dogs were very, very important to her. If he didn't like dogs, that was OK but there would be no chance of anything moving forward. That's how she felt. Good for her for saying it. And good for him! He loved dogs too. They dated, married, and now they rescue and foster dogs all the time.

Fourth, realize there are plenty of fish in the sea. Give several people a chance without settling on one early on. Remember, Anxious people tend to think their chances are limited so they better grab the next possibility. The dating pool is disproportionately skewed toward Anxious and Avoidants but there are Secure people out there too. Keep looking until you find one.

Fifth, give Secure people a chance. Do you remember what we discussed earlier about the Attachment System? You might feel bored initially because your Attachment System hasn't been turned on high with an Avoidant's distancing. Thus, the familiar excitement and nervousness that puts you at risk for misinterpreting obsession for love isn't happening. That can feel oddly boring. Remember that the Anxious person is at risk for interpreting calmness in a relationship with lack of attraction. The conclusion of the Sex and the City movies notwithstanding, Carrie's anxiety was habitually activated by Mr. Big's avoidance. How many times did they break up in that TV series? It's one thing to keep after

Mr. Big in a sitcom, it is yet another thing to keep after Mr. or Ms. Avoidant in real life. Keep in mind that you may meet a really great person and don't immediately feel that "chemistry."

If You are In a Relationship

If you are in a relationship and find yourself spinning into bouts of anxiety, feeling more insecure than makes sense, you may need to work with yourself about your Anxious attachment style. Most people in this dilemma also have some sense that their anxious behavior puts their relationship at risk. Still, the urgency inside is painfully overwhelming. Here are some suggestions for working with your anxiety.

First, consider the dance. Excessive anxiety will contribute to a pursuer/distancer dance that will be hard for both. The more you pursue, the more they will want to distance. The more they distance, the more you will want to pursue. You may be inadvertently bringing insecurities from "way back then" into the "here and now." If that's the case, it's not only your partner that needs to understand this pattern, you do as well. It isn't necessarily only them causing your distress, your distress may be part of what you bring to the dance and you need some help with your distress.

Take a few minutes and review the steps in your cycle to see if you can 1) identify the secondary emotions (anger, for example) that mask the more vulnerable, primary emotions (insecurity or loneliness, for example) underneath; 2) identify the ideas you come up with about your partner and the relationship; and, 3) identify the associated behaviors you engage in. For example, if they didn't call when they said they would or they cancelled a date, do you get angry and judgmental (secondary emotions) and review how they are "untrustworthy" or "not committed enough" (ideas) and if so, does that lead you to challenge them about "keeping their word" or "being more serious about the relationship" (behaviors)? When a partner hears those types of challenges (as opposed to vulnerable, primary emotional expressions of your insecurity), defensiveness and explanations are often the first response. In the Anxious state of mind, it can seem like confirmation of your ideas and justification of your secondary emotions because your accusations are being responded to, not your fear and insecurity. That can drive a partner toward conflict and away from the relationship—which will cause you both more distress.

Second, get a reality check. Identify the things you tell yourself about your partner and the relationship and compare them to reality. It's common for Anxious people to imagine the worst in a moment when their partner isn't there for some reason. Do your best to catch this "catastrophic thinking" and find ways to reassure yourself, remembering how they were present with you when you were together. Keep a grasp on the bigger picture. Being overly dependent on your partner for reassurance burdens them with something they can't fully do and risks pushing them away. Keeping a journal of the good times and savoring those memories when you're apart can be a good way to keep the inner experience of the connection alive. Also, find ways to nurture yourself outside of contact with your partner. This will help you in many ways. It can reduce the tendency to excessively pursue or ruminate and it can enable you to develop neat things about yourself. Schedule dinner with friends one night a week. Or, for example, take that class you always thought about taking. These things will be beneficial to you as well as the relationship. You'll have new experiences to talk about when you get together, you'll strengthen your support network, and enhance your personal development.

Third, establish some structure. Rather than feeling at the beck and call of your partner's timing for togetherness, negotiate a regular evening for a date or a regular time you can expect to call. Knowing on Sunday that you will talk to them on Wednesday and see them on Friday, for example, can help you better deal with the time between Sunday and Friday. Similarly, establishing a regular "date" night or a routine time when both partners check-in with each other more deeply can help a lot.

Fourth, use the buddy system. If your anxiety is more the issue than your partner's avoidance, designate some close friends whom you call for reassurance. Further, when you are with your partner, focus on how they are present and "with" you, as opposed to focusing on the times you were anxious, complaining to them about their not being there. It's ultimately about sensing, developing and trusting the availability, attentiveness and responsiveness of your partner and if they offer enough of these qualities, focus more on what "is" there rather than what's "not" there. That focus draws a partner toward you while the other risks driving them away and making them feel not good enough.

Lastly, if your Anxious Attachment Style is chronically harming a good relationship, consider talking with a therapist knowledgeable about Attachment Styles. It may not only be your partner's avoidance causing your distress, your insecurity may play a bigger part than you realize of what you bring to the dance and it is valid to get some help. This can help you talk openly and vulnerably about your anxiety with your partner in a way that they can hear and respond to you.

Conclusion

These are some good tips to follow if you have an Anxious Attachment Style. Also, remember that people don't exist in discrete all/nothing categories. Someone may be somewhat Anxious or somewhat Avoidant. If you are both mature enough to know yourselves well and be able to notice and care about the impact your style has on the other person, it's likely it can work out. The goal is for both people to engage in behaviors of a more Secure Attachment Style. And by the way, styles do shift over time as a function of relationships and our behaviors. A troubled, painful relationship will lead a person to become more insecure in their style (either more Anxious or more Avoidant). Learning to interact with each other in a secure manner will produce more security in your relationship and in time, each of you will develop a more Secure Attachment Style. Securely attached people have three key qualities: They are available, responsive, and engaged. Practicing these qualities and experiencing them from your partner is what helps security grow.