

Examining Trust Issues in Romantic Relationships: The Interplay between Anxious and Avoidant Attachment Styles

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Abstract: This essay explores the impact of attachment styles—secure, anxious, and avoidant—on trust in romantic relationships. By examining how early caregiver interactions shape attachment styles, the essay delves into how these styles influence relationship dynamics, particularly trust. It also analyzes the challenges presented by anxious and avoidant attachment in fostering intimacy and emotional connection. Lastly, strategies for evolving toward secure attachment are proposed to enhance trust and relationship satisfaction. Through this exploration, the essay sheds light on the complex interplay between attachment styles and trust in romantic connections.

1. Introduction

Trust is a cornerstone of healthy romantic relationships, which fosters intimacy and connection between partners. However, the interplay between anxious and avoidant attachment styles can complicate the dynamics of trust in such relationships. This essay delves into the intricacies of these attachment styles, exploring their development and impact on trust and proposing strategies for resolution. By understanding the interplay between anxious and avoidant attachment styles, examining underlying causes of trust issues, assessing their implications, and suggesting ways to evolve toward secure attachment, this essay aims to shed light on the complex relationship between attachment styles and trust in romantic connections.

2. Development of attachment styles

Attachment styles, rooted in early caregiver interactions, shape how individuals form emotional bonds. These styles develop based on caregivers' responsiveness and consistency in meeting emotional needs, influencing individuals' perceptions of relationships.

2.1. Secure attachment and its impact on relationships

To be more specific, firstly, securely attached adults exhibit a profound sense of satisfaction within their relationships, primarily influenced by the nurturing experiences they had during childhood. As

children, these individuals benefited from parents who served as a secure base, allowing them to explore the world with confidence and assurance (Firestone, 2013). This early foundation of security and emotional responsiveness fosters a positive internal working model, shaping their expectations in adult relationships. Securely attached individuals bring this sense of security into their romantic partnerships. When their partners encounter moments of distress or vulnerability, securely attached adults naturally provide a stable and supportive presence. Drawing from the emotional security established in their formative years, these individuals offer comfort, understanding, and reassurance during challenging times. This ability to be a reliable source of support stems from the trust and confidence securely attached individuals developed in their caregivers. As children, they experienced consistent responsiveness and unconditional love, laying the groundwork for a healthy emotional give-and-take in their adult relationships (Firestone, 2013). This positive dynamic contributes significantly to relationship satisfaction, as partners feel secure knowing they can rely on each other for support. In addition, securely attached adults tend to navigate conflicts and challenges constructively. Their upbringing has equipped them with practical communication skills and vital emotional intelligence, allowing them to address issues openly and collaboratively. This proactive approach to problem-solving further strengthens the bond between partners and enhances overall relationship satisfaction.^[1-2]

2.2. Anxious attachment style and relationship dynamics

Secondly, for the anxious attachment style, individuals with this attachment style often exhibit a deep desire to foster a profound emotional bond with their partners. They experience a persistent emotional hunger, seeking constant reassurance and affection to satisfy their need for love and connection (Firestone, 2013). Anxious individuals may perceive themselves as incomplete when not in the presence of their partners, viewing the relationship as a means to fill a perceived emotional void within themselves. This longing for emotional fulfillment can lead to a paradoxical behavior pattern. While anxious individuals yearn for their partners to stay close, the fear of rejection or abandonment may drive them to take actions that inadvertently push their partners away. This paradox arises from a delicate balance between the desire for intimacy and the fear of being emotionally overwhelmed or rejected (Firestone, 2013). The actions taken by individuals with anxious attachments to ensure their partners' continued presence can range from constantly seeking reassurance to exhibiting heightened emotional reactions in response to perceived threats to the relationship. These actions, though well-intentioned, may inadvertently create tension and strain within the relationship, as partners may feel overwhelmed or pressured. Additionally, individuals with an anxious attachment may struggle with establishing a sense of individual completeness. They may rely heavily on the relationship to define their self-worth, leading to heightened sensitivity to any perceived threat to the relationship's stability.^[3-4]

2.3. Avoidant attachment style and fear of intimacy

Lastly, for the avoidant attachment styles, the fear of intimacy and the reluctance to allow partners to get too close are characteristic challenges for individuals who harbor fears of abandonment and struggle with intimacy (Firestone, 2013). This fear is deeply rooted in past experiences or emotional wounds that have left lasting impressions on their psyche. For these individuals, the notion of allowing someone to become emotionally close triggers anxiety and a fear of potential hurt or rejection (Firestone, 2013). However, the core of this behavior lies in a paradoxical conflict between the desire for connection and the fear of vulnerability. Individuals with these fears may have experienced abandonment or emotional pain in previous relationships or during their formative years. As a result, they have developed a defense mechanism to shield themselves from potential future

hurts. This defense mechanism manifests as hesitancy or reluctance to allow emotional closeness, as they perceive closeness as a precursor to possible pain. The fear of being abandoned creates a psychological barrier to intimacy as these individuals grapple with trust issues and an underlying belief that closeness leads to vulnerability, making them susceptible to emotional harm (Firestone, 2013). This internal conflict may manifest as a reluctance to share personal thoughts and feelings, maintain emotional distance, or even create barriers to physical closeness.^[5-6] As a result, navigating relationships with individuals who fear intimacy requires a delicate balance of patience, understanding, and open communication. Partners can play a vital role in creating a safe and supportive environment where the individual feels secure enough to lower their emotional defenses gradually. Based on the above discussions, attachment styles, molded by early caregiver interactions, profoundly shape individuals' emotional bonds, with securely attached adults drawing on a positive internal working model from nurturing childhood experiences to offer stable support, enhancing relationship satisfaction. Conversely, anxious attachment may lead to a paradoxical yearning for closeness and actions that inadvertently push partners away. In contrast, avoidant attachment, rooted in fears of vulnerability and abandonment, creates a reluctance to allow emotional closeness, necessitating a delicate balance for partners to foster a secure and fulfilling connection.^[7]

3. The interplay of anxious and avoidant attachment

Individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles may be drawn to each other due to the complementarity of their needs. However, the contrasting desires for closeness and independence create a delicate balance, leading to cycles of pursuit and withdrawal. This interplay manifests in trust-related behaviors and communication patterns, where anxious individuals seek reassurance, and avoidant individuals may exhibit distancing behaviors. As Stevens (2014) discusses, individuals with an avoidant attachment style often employ a coping strategy of avoiding contemplation of their emotions. This deliberate avoidance is a protective mechanism, shielding them from the potential interference of impulsive emotions in their decision-making processes. By sidestepping the active consideration of their feelings, those with an avoidant attachment may find a sense of control, enabling them to navigate situations without being overwhelmed by impulsive, emotional responses. In contrast, individuals characterized by an anxious attachment style exhibit a heightened awareness of their emotions, yet they struggle with regulating impulsive behaviors. The intricate dance between their acute emotional sensitivity and the challenges of managing impulsive actions creates a dynamic where they may feel somewhat out of control. The result is a tendency to engage in behaviors driven by immediate emotional reactions, often leading to a cascade of consequences that contribute to a sense of being overwhelmed. This contrast highlights a crucial distinction in coping mechanisms between avoidant and anxious attachment styles. While avoidant individuals deliberately sidestep emotional reflection to maintain a semblance of control, those with anxious attachment grapple with the challenge of navigating overwhelming emotions without succumbing to impulsive behaviors. Furthermore, the research conducted by Norris and colleagues (2012), highlighted by Gasiorowska and others (2022), delved into the intricacies of attachment styles and materialism. Their two correlational studies elucidated that individuals displaying tendencies of anxious attachment, in contrast to those with avoidant attachment styles, demonstrated a more pronounced connection with heightened materialistic inclinations. The study focused on consumers with edgy attachment styles, revealing that they exhibited a greater propensity for purchasing goods that serve as status signals than individuals characterized by secure attachment styles. This insight underscores the intricate relationship between attachment orientations and consumer behavior, shedding light on the nuanced dynamics of how attachment styles may influence materialistic tendencies in individuals. Both Stevens's (2014) and Gasiorowska et al.'s (2022) ideas explain the push-and-pull dynamic between

anxious and avoidant attachment-style individuals, which is, for example, anxious individuals seek closeness through exaggerated behavior while avoidant partner withdraws more often. In addition, anxious individuals tend to be high-key, and avoidant individuals always keep a low profile; the intermittent reinforcement of connection and distance can intensify the attraction.^[8]

4. Trust Issues and Relationship dynamics

Trust issues frequently trace their origins to a complex interplay of past experiences, familial dynamics, and individual insecurities. A study by Feeney & Noller (1990) found that the avoidant individuals have most severe trust issues, which can result in more emotional withdrawal. A crucial aspect of understanding trust issues involves recognizing the potential for misinterpretation of behaviors and emotional triggers. Individuals with different attachment styles may perceive actions or words through the lens of their attachment patterns, leading to misunderstandings (Overall, 2018). For example, as learned in lecture 7, anxious/avoidant individuals may attribute their partner's behavior to internal factors (They do not love them as they used to) rather than external factors (They are tired today) (1 Nov 2023). These misinterpretations can inadvertently fuel a cycle of mistrust, creating a challenging dynamic within the relationship. Moreover, the distribution of power within a relationship plays a pivotal role in shaping the dynamics of trust. In relationships where power imbalances exist, individuals lacking power may depend more on their partners (Overall, 2018). This dependency can amplify feelings of vulnerability and contribute to heightened sensitivity to trust-related issues. Conversely, individuals with more power in the relationship may influence the dynamics, potentially impacting the trust dynamic through their actions and decisions.^[9]

4.1. Impact of Trust issues on relationship satisfaction

Trust issues significantly impact the quality and stability of romantic relationships. Frequent misunderstandings, conflicts, and breaches of trust erode emotional intimacy and satisfaction. When experiencing a lower level of trust, anxious attachment style individuals would report more jealousy, which can lead to uncontrollable behavior (Rodriguez et al., 2015), such as seeking reassurance, as Evraire et al., (2022) propose; experiencing low trusting relationship will drive anxious individuals to seek reassurance, which may cause frustration and further erode trust over time, but the reassurance behavior from an avoidant partner could impact the relationship positively for the anxious partner because feeling love and needed is precisely what the anxious partner need. However, reassurance behavior is not likely to happen in avoidant individuals. In addition, through the anxious individuals' reassurance from the partner, a negative feedback loop may develop, reinforcing anxious and avoidant attachment patterns, making it imperative to address trust issues for the relationship's well-being (Rodriguez et al., 2015). However, effective communication strategies are essential for partners with anxious and avoidant attachment styles to navigate trust issues. Empathy, active listening, and compromise play pivotal roles in rebuilding trust. Individual and couples therapy can address underlying attachment issues, fostering a secure attachment by creating a safe space for open communication and emotional exploration.^[10]

5. Strategies for Building Trust and Evolving attachment styles

It is known that a person's sense of security can be changed in the experiment through systematic interventions. Still, it has little effect when it comes to long-term change since people's attachment style is based on many encounters and interactions from childhood (Gillath, Selcuk, & Shaver, 2008). However, individuals with anxious and avoidant attachment styles can evolve toward a more secure attachment through self-awareness, personal growth, and intentional efforts (Davila, Burge, &

Hammen, 1997). Building trust and security in relationships requires a commitment to understanding attachment patterns and actively working to overcome insecurities.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the intricate dance between anxious and avoidant attachment styles significantly impacts the dynamics of trust within romantic relationships. Securely attached individuals, drawing from positive childhood experiences, contribute to relationship satisfaction by providing stable support and navigating challenges constructively. Conversely, anxious attachment may lead to a paradoxical yearning for closeness and actions that inadvertently push partners away, while avoidant attachment, rooted in fears of vulnerability, creates a reluctance to allow emotional closeness. The complementarity of anxious and avoidant needs may draw these individuals together, creating cycles of pursuit and withdrawal. Trust issues, often rooted in past experiences and individual insecurities, contribute to the complexity of relationship dynamics. Misinterpretation of behaviors and emotional triggers, influenced by attachment patterns, can fuel a cycle of mistrust. Power imbalances within relationships further shape trust dynamics, impacting vulnerability and sensitivity to trust-related issues. Addressing trust issues is crucial for relationship well-being. Effective communication strategies, such as empathy, active listening, and compromise, play pivotal roles in rebuilding trust. Partners with anxious and avoidant attachment styles can benefit from individual and couples therapy, providing a safe space for open communication and emotional exploration. While attachment styles are deeply ingrained, individuals can evolve toward a more secure attachment through self-awareness, personal growth, and intentional efforts. Although systematic interventions may induce short-term changes, long-term transformations require a commitment to understanding attachment patterns and actively working to overcome insecurities. Building trust and security in relationships is an ongoing process that can lead to a more fulfilling and stable connection between partners.

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