

# Adult attachment, stress, and romantic relationships

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In this article, we discuss theory and research on how individuals who have insecure adult romantic attachment orientations typically think, feel, and behave when they or their romantic partners encounter certain types of chronic or acute stress. We first review basic principles of attachment theory and then discuss how two forms of attachment insecurity — anxiety and avoidance — are associated with unique patterns of emotion regulation in response to certain types of threatening/distressing situations. We then discuss a Diathesis-Stress Process Model that has guided our research, highlighting studies that provide support for certain pathways of the model.

## Addresses

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During evolutionary history, protection from danger by a stronger/wiser figure was essential for the survival of infants and young children. To ensure sufficient care/protection, selection pressures produced an innate system — the attachment system — that motivates vulnerable individuals to seek close physical and emotional proximity to their primary caregivers, especially when they are distressed [1–3]. These behavioral tendencies increased the chances of surviving to reproductive age, which permitted the genes that coded for the attachment system to be passed on to offspring [4••]. This principle is one of the fundamental tenets of attachment theory.

For several years, we and others have investigated how individuals who have different adult romantic attachment orientations think, feel, and behave in different types of stressful situations. Although the attachment system operates more visibly in infants and young children, Bowlby [1,2] maintained that attachment motives affect

how people think, feel, and behave in close relationships ‘from the cradle to the grave’ ([5] p. 129). Following these footsteps, we have conceptualized attachment insecurity as a diathesis that can generate maladaptive interpersonal responses to certain stressful or threatening events [6].

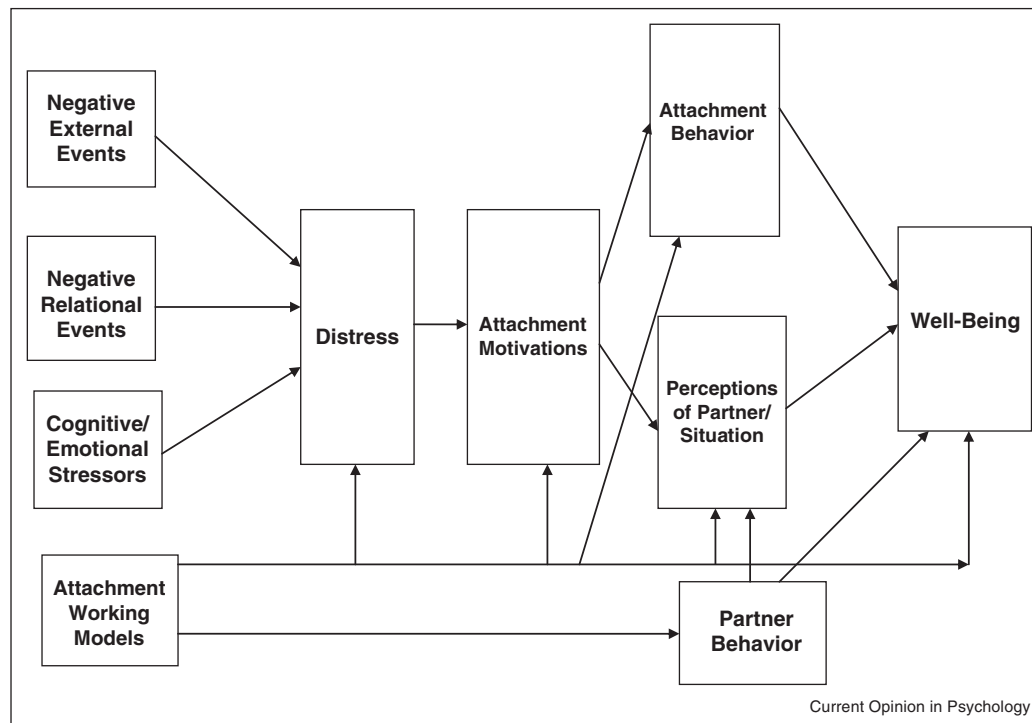
## Principles of attachment theory

The primary purpose of the attachment behavioral system is to increase the likelihood that vulnerable individuals survive the perils of childhood [1]. The attachment system was crafted by natural selection to activate (turn on) when an individual experiences fear, anxiety, or related forms of distress. From an evolutionary standpoint, the system is designed to promote survival by maintaining proximity between parents (or other caregiving figures) and vulnerable infants, children, or adults. From a psychological standpoint, proximity reduces fear, anxiety, and related forms of distress, allowing individuals to engage in other life tasks. The attachment system is terminated (turned off) when individuals experience a sufficient reduction in fear, anxiety, or distress. When sufficient security is not achieved, however, the system remains partially or fully activated.

As individuals develop, they amass a mental record of their success at obtaining sufficient proximity/comfort from their attachment figures, beginning with their parents and continuing with close friends and romantic partners. These mental representations, termed *working models* [1,2], have two components: firstly, a model of significant others (e.g. parents, close friends, romantic partners), which includes their responsiveness to one’s bids for proximity/comfortable in prior interactions, and secondly, a model of the self, which includes information about the self’s ability to get sufficient proximity/comfort and one’s worth as a relationship partner.

Bowlby [1–3] believed that how individuals are treated by significant others across the lifespan — especially during times of stress — shapes the expectations, attitudes, and beliefs they have about future partners and relationships. These expectancies, attitudes, and beliefs operate as ‘if/then’ propositions that guide how people think, feel, and behave, especially when they are upset (e.g. ‘If I am upset, then I can count on my partner to support me’; [7]). Once developed, working models guide how individuals relate to their close partners and the interpersonal world around them, especially in stressful/threatening situations. Working models can, however, change over time in response to new experiences or events that strongly contradict them [2].

Figure 1



The Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model [19\*\*] can be understood from a normative (species-typical) and an individual difference perspective. From a *normative perspective*, three types of negative events can activate the attachment system: **(1)** negative external events (e.g. dangerous or threatening situations), **(2)** negative relational events (e.g. relationship conflict, separation, abandonment), and **(3)** cognitive/emotional stressors (e.g. ruminating about negative events). These events elicit distress in virtually all people. Once aroused, distress triggers species-typical attachment motivations to seek proximity/support/reassurance from attachment figures (e.g. parents, close friends, romantic partners) in most people, even if they do not consciously feel or act on these motivations. These attachment motivations, in turn, instigate attachment behaviors that mitigate and regulate distress and perceptions of the partner and current situation. Perceptions of the partner/situation are also affected by how the partner behaves in the situation. However, the specific attachment behaviors that individuals display and the partner/relationship perceptions they have depend on their working models (see below). These enacted behaviors and perceptions then affect the personal and relational well-being that individuals feel, report, or display in the stressful situation. Attachment working models can impact all stages of the model, as depicted by the lines from attachment working models leading into each model stage. For example, working models can influence how distressed individuals feel (or acknowledge feeling) in response to certain types of negative/stressful events, and they govern the specific types of attachment motivations that are evoked when distress is experienced. Working models can also affect the types of attachment behaviors that individuals display once attachment motivations are triggered, how they perceive their partners in the situation, and how their partners behave. Each of these pathways can impact the quality of personal and relational well-being during or following the stressful event (e.g. relationship satisfaction, depression, relationship quality). From an *individual difference perspective*, the Attachment Diathesis-Stress Process Model suggests that individuals with different attachment orientations should respond very differently when they encounter certain types of distressing situations. When highly anxious individuals face stressful events, they should be keenly aware they are upset and should want immediate assistance from their partners. Given their conflicted working models, however, anxious individuals should be motivated to reduce distress by doing whatever it takes to increase proximity with their partners. This process should be exacerbated by their tendency to use emotion-focused/hyperactivating coping strategies [6,19\*\*], which direct their attention to the source of distress, lead them to ruminate over ‘worse-case’ outcomes, and divert their attention away from how to resolve the stressor, which is keeping their attachment systems activated. The attachment behaviors that highly anxious individuals exhibit, therefore, should involve intense and obsessive proximity/support/reassurance-seeking from their partners, which often may fail to reduce their distress. Because of their working models and use of emotion-focused coping styles, the partners of anxious individuals should tire of having to continually provide reassurance/support, which anxious individuals may perceive as rejection. They should also perceive their partner’s intentions, motives, and actions in less benevolent terms during the stressful situation, underestimating the care/support that their partners have provided or are willing to provide. These negative perceptions, in turn, should generate less personal and relational well-being following stressful events. When dealing with stressful events, highly avoidant individuals may not be fully aware they are upset, and they should neither want nor seek help from their partners. In light of their negative, cynical working models, avoidant individuals should be motivated to reduce or contain any distress they feel by being self-reliant, which allows them to reestablish independence, autonomy, and personal control. This process should be facilitated by their use of avoidant/deactivating coping strategies [6,19\*\*], which defensively suppress conscious awareness of their distress and attachment needs and behaviors, at least in the short-run. Consequently, avoidant individuals should display attachment behaviors that permit some contact with their partners, but at a safe, emotionally comfortable distance and on terms dictated by them. Given both their negative working models and avoidant/deactivating coping tactics, the partners of avoidant individuals should offer them less reassurance/support, which avoidant individuals should prefer but still may interpret as rejection. Avoidant individuals should also perceive their partner’s intentions, motives, and behaviors in the stressful situation in less benevolent ways, leading them to underestimate the care/support their partners have already given them or are willing to provide. These negative perceptions should, in turn, result in less personal and relational

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