

# Attachment Theory and the Kink Lifestyle

Attachment theory derives from psychology research over many decades. It is postulated that the drive to find close partners is a survival advantage built into our genes through evolution.

Rather than being islands and totally responsible for our own feelings, a popular notion of recent self-help gurus, it turns out that our needs for closeness are as critical to our well-being as food, shelter, water and air.

In reality, everyone deserves to be secure in the following areas of Accessibility, Responsiveness, and Engagement.

1. Are you there for me?
2. Do I matter to you?
3. Will you come when I need you, when I call?
4. Do you need me?
5. Can I reach you?
6. Can I rely on you to respond to me emotionally?
7. Do I know you will value me and stay close?

Based on *Hold Me Tight* by Dr. Sue Johnson

The implication is that we all have a responsibility to provide these attachment needs whenever we enter into a relationship, especially poly, D/s, and on-going SM play.

The extent of how we meet these needs will vary according to the depth of the relationship, but the needs will exist no matter how casual the relationship.

It is highly desirable that these needs be discussed and negotiated prior to SM play and certainly prior to any ongoing relationship. These discussions are just as important as SM and sexual likes and limits.

Individuals vary in the intensity and style of their attachment needs, with some people (Anxious Attachment Types) requiring much more than others. Anxious types are also quick to form attachments or fall in love, even in casual situations.

A Dom/Top/Master takes on the responsibility to determine the attachment needs and expectations and to meet them respectfully. The sub/bottom bears the responsibility to ensure that prospective partners are aware of their attachment needs and expectations.

Complete the A.R.E. questionnaire to determine how well a current or previous relationship meets your attachment needs. The questionnaire is also a good guide for Doms to realize what they are getting into. If they aren't prepared to meet these attachment needs to the level required by their partners, they should not be going forward and certainly should not blame their partners for feelings that are genetically wired and predictable.

# Attachment Types

Drawn mainly from *Attached*. By Amir Levine, M.D. and Rachel S.F. Heller, M.A.

According to psychologists, there are four attachment strategies people adopt: secure, anxious, avoidant, and anxious-avoidant.

## **Secure Type:**

People with secure attachment strategies are comfortable displaying interest and affection. They are also comfortable being alone and independent. They're able to correctly prioritize their relationships within their life and tend to draw clear boundaries and stick to them. Secure attachment types obviously make the best romantic partners, family members and even friends. They're capable of accepting rejection and moving on despite the pain, but are also capable of being loyal and sacrificing when necessary. They have little issue trusting people they're close to, and are trustworthy themselves. According to research, over 50% of the population are secure attachment types. Secure attachment is developed in childhood by infants who regularly get their needs met, as well as receive ample quantities of love and affection.

## **Anxious Type:**

Anxious attachment types are often nervous and stressed about their relationships. They need constant reassurance and affection from their partner. They have trouble being alone or single. They'll often succumb to unhealthy or abusive relationships. They have trouble trusting people, even if they're close to them. Their behavior can be irrational, sporadic, and overly-emotional and complain that everyone of the opposite sex are cold and heartless. This is the girl who calls you 36 times in one night wondering why you didn't call her back. Or the guy follows his girlfriend to work to make sure she's not flirting with any other men. Women are more likely to be anxious types than men. Anxious attachment strategies are developed in childhood by infants who receive love and care with unpredictable sufficiency.

## **Avoidant Type:**

Avoidant attachment types are extremely independent, self-directed, and often uncomfortable with intimacy. They're commitment-phobes and experts at rationalizing their way out of any intimate situation. They regularly complain about feeling "crowded" or "suffocated" when people try to get close to them. In every relationship, they always have an exit strategy. Always. And they often construct their lifestyle in such a way to avoid commitment or too much intimate contact. This is the guy who works 80 hours a week and gets annoyed when women he dates want to see him more than once on the weekend. Or the girl who dates dozens of guys over the course of years but tells them all she doesn't want "anything serious" and inevitably ends up ditching them when she gets tired of them. Men are more likely than women to be avoidant types. Avoidant attachment strategy is developed in childhood by infants who only get some of their needs met while the rest are neglected (for instance, he/she gets fed regularly, but is not held enough).

## **Anxious-Avoidant Type:**

Anxious-avoidant attachment types (also known as the “fearful type”) bring together the worst of both worlds. Anxious-avoidants are not only afraid of intimacy and commitment, but they distrust and lash out emotionally at anyone who tries to get close to them. Anxious-avoidants often spend much of their time alone and miserable, or in abusive or dysfunctional relationships. According to studies, only a small percentage of the population qualifies as anxious-avoidant types, and they typically have a multitude of other emotional problems in other areas of their life (i.e., substance abuse, depression, etc.). Anxious-avoidant types develop from abusive or terribly negligent childhoods.

## **THE GOLDEN RULES FOR DECIPHERING ATTACHMENT STYLES**

### **1. Determine whether s/he seeks intimacy and closeness**

This is the number-one question to ask yourself about your partner. All other attachment traits and behaviors stem from this one overriding issue. If the answer is no, you can be pretty sure your partner/date has an avoidant attachment style. If the answer is yes, your partner/date has either a secure or anxious style. When trying to answer this question, let go of preconceptions. There is no one type of personality that is avoidant, nor one that is either secure or anxious. He might be cocky and self-assured and still really crave closeness. On the flip side, she might be nerdy and clumsy and still be averse to intimacy. Ask yourself, what does this particular behavior indicate about his or her attitude toward intimacy and closeness? Are they doing or not doing something because they want to minimize intimacy?

Suppose you are dating someone with children from a previous marriage. She might not want to introduce you to them because she is thinking of their well-being and believes it is too early for them to deal with a new man in her life, which is perfectly legitimate. On the other hand, it could be a way for her to keep you at a distance and maintain her separate life. You have to look at the whole picture and see how this behavior fits in. Depending on how much time has passed and how serious the relationship is, does it still seem right for her to be so protective of the kids? What makes sense in the initial stages of the relationship doesn't make sense after two years. Does she introduce you to other family members and close friends? Has she considered your well-being and explained the situation, allowing you to express your feelings about it? If the answer to any of these questions is no, then this is not just about her children's best interests; it is more about keeping you at bay.

### **2. Assess how preoccupied s/he is with the relationship and how sensitive s/he is to rejection.**

Does he get easily hurt by things you say? Is he worried about your future together or about whether you love him enough to stay faithful? Is he very sensitive to details in the relationship that suggest distancing, such as when you make decisions that don't take him into account? If the answer to these questions is yes, it is likely he has an anxious attachment style.

### **3. Don't rely on one "symptom," look for various signs.**

Looking at one behavior, attitude, or belief is not enough to determine your partner's attachment style. That is why there is no one characteristic that can establish someone's style but rather a combination of behaviors and attitudes that together create a coherent pattern. It is the whole picture that tells the true story. Not being allowed to meet your partner's kids can be very frustrating, but if she is also able to talk

about the subject, listen to your frustration, and find other ways to let you into her life, it doesn't necessarily indicate an inability to be close.

#### **4. Assess his/her reaction to effective communication.**

This is probably one of the most important ways to uncover your partner's attachment style: Don't be afraid to express your needs, thoughts, and feelings to your partner! What often happens when we're dating is that we censor ourselves for different reasons: We don't want to sound too eager or needy or we believe it's too soon to raise a certain topic. However, expressing your needs and true feelings can be a useful litmus test of the other person's capacity to meet your needs. The response, in real time, is usually much more telling than anything he or she could ever reveal of their own accord:

- If s/he's secure, s/he'll understand and do what's best to accommodate your needs.
- If s/he's anxious, you'll serve as a useful role model. He or she welcome the opportunity for greater intimacy and start to become more direct and open.
- If s/he's avoidant, s/he will feel very uncomfortable with the increased intimacy that your emotional disclosure brings and will respond in one of the following ways:
  - "You're too sensitive/demanding/needy."
  - "I don't want to talk about it."
  - "Stop analyzing everything!"
  - "What do you want from me? I didn't do anything wrong."
  - He or she will consider your needs on a certain matter only to disregard them again very soon after.
  - "Geez, I said I was sorry."

#### **5. Listen and look for what he or she is not saying or doing.**

What goes unsaid or undone by your partner can be just as informative as what he or she is doing and saying. Trust your gut feeling. Consider these examples:

At midnight on New Year's Eve, Rob kissed his girlfriend and said, "I'm so glad that I'm with you. I hope that this will be the first of many new years for us together." His girlfriend kissed him back but did not reply. Two months later they separated.

During an argument, Pat told her boyfriend, Jim, that it bothered her that they never made plans ahead of time. She felt more comfortable and secure if she had advance notice and a better sense of their plans. Jim didn't answer; he just changed the subject. He continued calling only at the last minute. She mentioned it again, but again he ignored her. Finally Pat gave up on the relationship.

In these cases, what Rob's girlfriend and Jim didn't say spoke louder than any words.

## CRACKING OTHERS' ATTACHMENT STYLE CHEAT SHEET

<b>Avoidant</b>	<b>Secure</b>	<b>Anxious</b>
Sends mixed signals.	Reliable and consistent.	Wants a lot of closeness in the relationship.
Values his/her independence greatly	Makes decisions with you	Expresses insecurities - worries about rejection.
Devalues you (or previous partners).	Flexible view of relationships	Unhappy when not in a relationship.
Uses distancing strategies—emotional or physical.	Communicates relationship issues well.	Plays games to keep your attention/interest
Emphasizes boundaries in the relationship.	Can reach compromise during arguments.	Has difficulty explaining what's bothering him/her. Expects you to guess.
Has an unrealistically romantic view of how a relationship should be.	Not afraid of commitment or dependency.	Acts out.
Mistrustful—fears being taken advantage of by partner	Doesn't view relationship as hard work.	Has a hard time not making things about him/herself in the relationship.
Has rigid view of relationships and uncompromising rules.	Closeness creates further closeness	Lets you set the tone of. the relationship
During a disagreement needs to get away or "explodes."	Introduces friends and family early on.	Is preoccupied with the relationship
Doesn't make his/her intentions clear	Naturally expresses feeling for you	Fears that small acts will ruin the relationship, believes s/he must work hard to keep your interest.
Has difficulty talking about what's going on between you	Doesn't play games.	Suspicious that you may be unfaithful.

### Golden Rules:

- Determine whether s/he seeks intimacy and closeness.
- Assess how preoccupied s/he is with the relationship and how sensitive s/he is to rejection.
- Don't rely on one "symptom," look for various signs.
- Assess his/her reaction to effective communication.
- Listen and look for what he or she is not saying or doing.

## PATTERNS IN BDSM RELATIONSHIPS

A group of eleven doms/dommes completed the Attachment Type questionnaire for themselves and their most significant submissives.

The scores have a maximum of 7 and a minimum of 1.

	<b>Doms</b>	<b>Subs</b>
Security	4.9	3.7
Fearful	3.0	5.2
Preoccupation	3.1	5.1
Anxious (Fearful + Preoccupation / 2)	3.1	5.2
Dismissive – Avoidant	4.1	2.7

### **Doms:**

Doms are very close regarding security and avoidance. Their avoidant tendencies can get them into trouble with anxious subs. They should know their partner's mix and behave accordingly. Subs can be avoidant and doms can be anxious, which can lead to heartbreak.

### **Subs:**

Subs are overwhelmingly anxious types. They need to communicate their needs and expectations very clearly if they are to avoid disappointment. They also need to determine if the prospective Dom is significantly avoidant and, if so, break off the relationship.

## **ANXIOUS TYPES: THE EMOTIONAL ROLLER COASTER**

Quite soon into the relationship you start to get mixed signals. He (or she) calls, but takes his time about it; he's interested in you, but lets you understand that he's playing the field. You are left guessing. Every time you get mixed messages, your attachment system is activated and you become preoccupied with the relationship. But then he compliments you or makes a romantic gesture that gets your heart racing, and you tell yourself he's interested after all; you're elated. Unfortunately, the bliss is very short-lived. Quickly the positive messages become mixed once again with ambiguous ones and again you find yourself plunging down that roller coaster. You now live in suspense, anticipating that next small remark or gesture that will reassure you. After living like this for a while, you start to do something interesting. You start to equate the anxiety, the preoccupation, the obsession, and those ever-so-short bursts of joy with love. What you're really doing is equating an activated attachment system with passion.

If you've been at it for a while, you become programmed to get attracted to those very individuals who are least likely to make you happy. Having a perpetually activated attachment system is the opposite of what nature had in mind for us in terms of gratifying love. In order to thrive and grow as human beings, we need a secure base from which to derive strength and comfort. For that to happen, our attachment system must be calm and secure.

Remember, an activated attachment system is not passionate love. Next time you date someone and find yourself feeling anxious, insecure, and obsessive—only to feel elated every once in a while—tell yourself this is most likely an activated attachment system and not love! True love, in the evolutionary sense, means peace of mind. "Still waters run deep" is a good way of characterizing it.

**If You're Anxious, You Shouldn't Be Dating Someone Avoidant Because:**

You: want closeness and intimacy.	They: want to maintain some distance, emotional and/or physical.
You are very sensitive to any signs of rejection (vigilant attachment system).	They: send mixed signals that often come across as rejecting.
You find it hard to tell them directly what you need and what's bothering you (effective communication), and use protest behavior instead.	They: are bad at reading your verbal and nonverbal cues and don't think it's their responsibility to do so.
You: need to be reassured and feel loved	They: tend to put you down to create distance as a means to deactivate their attachment system.
You: need to know exactly where you stand in the relationship.	They: prefer to keep things fuzzy. Even if your relationship is very serious, some question marks still remain.

Anyone can have a happy ending like that. It's not entirely up to chance. The trick is not to get hooked on the highs and lows and mistake an activated attachment system for passion or love. Don't let emotional unavailability turn you on.

**If You're Anxious, You Should Be Dating Someone Secure Because:**

You: want closeness and intimacy.	They: are comfortable with closeness and don't try to push you away.
You are very sensitive to any signs of rejection (vigilant attachment system).	They: are very consistent and reliable and won't send mixed messages that will upset you. If you become distressed, they know how to reassure you.
You: find it hard to tell them directly what you need and what's bothering you (effective communication), and use protest behavior instead.	They: see your well-being as a top priority and do their best to read your verbal and nonverbal cues.
You: need to be reassured and feel loved.	They: feel comfortable telling you how they feel, very early on, in a consistent manner.
You need to know exactly where you stand in the relationship.	They: are very stable; they also feel comfortable with commitment.

**Recognize and rule out avoidant prospects early on.**

Recognize and rule out people with an avoidant attachment style early on. This is where the questionnaire for deciphering the style of others comes in handy. But there are also other ways to tell

whether you've met someone avoidant. We like to call any signal or message that is highly indicative of avoidance a smoking gun:

### **SMOKING GUNS THAT INDICATE YOU'RE DATING SOMEONE AVOIDANT**

- Sends mixed messages—about his/her feelings toward you or about his/her commitment to you.
- Longs for an ideal relationship—but gives subtle hints that it will not be with you.
- Desperately wants to meet "the one"—but somehow always finds some fault in the other person or in the circumstances that makes commitment impossible.
- Disregards your emotional well-being—and when confronted, continues to disregard it.
- Suggests that you are "too needy," "sensitive," or "overreacting"—thus invalidating your feelings and making you second-guess yourself.
- Ignores things you say that inconvenience him or her—doesn't respond or changes the topic instead.
- Addresses your concerns as "in a court of law"—responding to the facts without taking your feelings into account.
- Your messages don't get across—despite your best efforts to communicate your needs, he or she doesn't seem to get the message or else ignores it.

Note that it is not specific behaviors that threaten to become smoking guns but rather an emotional stance—an ambiguity about the relationship that goes hand in hand with a strong message that your emotional needs are not so important to him or her. He or she may say the right things at times, but his/her actions tell a different story.

Be your authentic self and use effective communication. The next step is to start expressing your needs. Most anxious people easily fall into the trap that relationship books—and society at large—set for them. They feel that they are too demanding and needy and so they try to accommodate their partner's need for distance and boundaries (if they're involved with someone avoidant). It's simply more socially acceptable to maintain a cool, self-sufficient facade. So they hide their wishes and mask their discontent.

### **Common Anxious Thoughts, Emotions, and Reactions**

#### **Thoughts**

- Mind reading: That's it, I know s/he's leaving me.
- I'll never find anyone else.
- I knew this was too good to last.
- All-or-nothing thinking: I've ruined everything, there's nothing I can do to mend the situation.



- S/he can't treat me this way! I'll show him/her!
- I knew something would go wrong; nothing ever works out right for me.
- I have to talk to or see him/her right now.
- S/he'd better come crawling back to beg my forgiveness, otherwise s/he can forget about me forever.
- Maybe if I look drop-dead gorgeous or act seductive, things will work out.
- S/he is so amazing, why would s/he want to be with me anyway?
- Remembering all the good things your partner ever did and said after calming down from a fight.
- Recalling only the bad things your partner has ever done when you're fighting.

### **Emotions**

- |                 |                 |
|-----------------|-----------------|
| • Sad           | • Self-loathing |
| • Resentful     | • Restless      |
| • Angry         | • Uneasy        |
| • Frustrated    | • Humiliated    |
| • Fearful       | • Hate-filled   |
| • Depressed     | • Uncertain     |
| • Hopeless      | • Agitated      |
| • Despairing    | • Rejected      |
| • Jealous       | • Unloved       |
| • Hostile       | • Guilty        |
| • Vengeful      | • Unappreciated |
| • Lonely        |                 |
| • Misunderstood |                 |

### **Actions**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| • Act out.   | • Try to make him/her feel jealous.   |
| • Attempt to reestablish contact at any cost.          | • Act busy or unapproachable.   |
| • Pick a fight.  | • Withdraw—stop talking to your partner or turn away from him/her physically. |
| • Wait for them to make the first reconciliation move. | • Act manipulatively.   |
| • Threaten to leave.                                   |   |
| • Act hostile—roll your eyes, look disdainful.         |   |

### **Possible Anxious Attachment Principles at Play**

- Protest behavior

- Activating strategies-any thought, feeling, or behavior that will result in an increased desire to reconnect
- Putting your partner on a pedestal
- Feeling small and inferior in comparison to your partner
- Seeing/remembering only the best in your partner after a fight (while forgetting his/her negative side)
- Mistaking an activated attachment system for love
- Living in the danger zone
- Living on an emotional roller coaster—getting addicted to the highs and the lows

## **AVOIDANTS:**

### **DEACTIVATING STRATEGIES—YOUR EVERYDAY TOOLKIT FOR KEEPING YOUR PARTNER AT ARM'S LENGTH (OR MORE)**

A deactivating strategy is any behavior or thought that is used to squelch intimacy. These strategies suppress our attachment system, the biological mechanism in our brains responsible for our desire to seek closeness with a preferred partner. Avoidants have the need for closeness in a relationship but make a concerted effort to repress it. Deactivating strategies are the tools employed to suppress these needs on a day-to-day basis.

Examine the following list of deactivating strategies carefully. The more you use these tools, the more alone you'll feel and the less happy you'll be in your relationship.

#### **Some Common Deactivating Strategies**

- Saying (or thinking) "I'm not ready to commit"—but staying together nonetheless, sometimes for years.
- Focusing on small imperfections in your partner: the way s/he talks, dresses, eats, or (fill in the blank) and allowing it to get in the way of your romantic feelings.
- Pining after an ex-girlfriend/boyfriend-(the "phantom ex").
- Flirting with others-a hurtful way to introduce insecurity into the relationship.
- Not saying "I love you"-while implying that you do have feelings toward the other person.
- Pulling away when things are going well (e.g. not calling for several days after an intimate date).
- Forming relationships with an impossible future, such as with someone who is married.
- "Checking out mentally" when your partner is talking to you.
- Keeping secrets and leaving things foggy—to maintain your feeling of independence.

- Avoiding physical closeness, e.g., not wanting to share the same bed, not wanting to have sex, walking several strides ahead of your partner.

## Common Avoidant Thoughts, Emotions, and Reactions

### Thoughts

- All-or-nothing thinking: I knew s/he wasn't right for me, this proves it!
- Overgeneralizing: I knew I wasn't made to be in a close relationship.
- S/he's taking over my life, I can't take it! Now I have to do everything his/her way; the price is too high.
- I need to get out of here, I feel suffocated.
- If s/he was "the one" this kind of thing wouldn't happen.
- When I was with (phantom X) this wouldn't have happened.
- Malicious intent: S/he's really out to annoy me, it's so obvious.
- S/he just wants to tie me down, this isn't true love.
- Fantasize about having sex with other people.
- I'd be better off on my own.
- Ugh. S/he's so needy! It's pathetic.

### Emotions

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Misunderstood</li> <li>• Withdrawn</li> <li>• Frustrated</li> <li>• Resentful</li> <li>• Angry</li> <li>• Hostile</li> <li>• Pressured</li> <li>• Aloof</li> <li>• Unappreciated</li> <li>• Empty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deceived</li> <li>• Despairing</li> <li>• Tense</li> <li>• Scornful</li> <li>• Hate-filled</li> <li>• Restless</li> <li>• Self-righteous</li> <li>• Distrustful</li> <li>• Contemptuous</li> </ul>
<b>Actions</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Act Out.</li> <li>• Get up and leave.</li> <li>• Belittle your partner.</li> <li>• Act hostile, look disdainful.</li> <li>• Make critical remarks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withdraw mentally or physically.</li> <li>• Minimize physical contact.</li> <li>• Keep emotional sharing to a minimum.</li> <li>• Stop listening to your partner.</li> <li>• Ignore him/her.</li> </ul>

## **Possible Avoidant Attachment Principles at Play**

- Deactivating strategies
- Mistaking self-reliance for independence
- Inflating your own importance and self-esteem while putting your partner down
- Seeing only the negative in your partner and ignoring the positive
- Assuming malicious intent in your partner's actions
- Disregarding your partner's emotional cues
- Yearning for the phantom ex
- Fantasizing about "the one"
- Repressing loving feelings and emotions

## **SECURE ATTACHMENT TYPES**

A secure attachment style doesn't originate from a single source. The equation of a caring and sensitive parent producing a secure-for-life child is too one-dimensional; instead it seems that an entire mosaic of factors comes together to create this attachment pattern: our early connection with our parents, our genes, and also something else—our romantic experiences as adults. On average, about 70 to 75 percent of adults remain consistently in the same attachment category at different points in their lives, while the remaining 25 to 30 percent of the population report a change in their attachment style.

Researchers attribute this change to romantic relationships in adulthood that are so powerful that they actually revise our most basic beliefs and attitudes toward connectedness. And yes, that change can happen in both directions—secure people can become less secure and people who were originally insecure can become increasingly secure. If you are insecure, this piece of information is vital and could be your ticket to happiness in relationships. If you are secure, you should be aware of this finding because you have a lot to lose by becoming less secure.

### **Tapping Into the Secure Mind-set--Creating a Secure Base for Your Partner**

One of the most important roles we play in our partners' lives is providing a secure base: creating the conditions that enable our partners to pursue their interests and explore the world in confidence. Three specific behaviors underlie this broad term. You too can provide a secure base by adopting the following secure behaviors:

- **Be available:** Respond sensitively to their distress, allow them to be dependent on you when they feel the need, check in with them from time to time, and provide comfort when things go wrong.
- **Don't interfere:** Provide behind-the-scenes support for their endeavors. Help in a way that leaves them with the initiative and the feeling of power. Allow them to do their own thing without trying to take over the situation, micromanage, or undermine their confidence and abilities.
- **Encourage:** Provide encouragement and be accepting of their learning and personal growth goals. Boost their self-esteem.
- **Don't play games.**

- View yourself as responsible for your partner's well-being.
- Wear your heart on your sleeve-be courageous and honest in your interactions.
- Maintain focus on the problem at hand.
- Don't make generalizations during conflict.
- Douse the flame before it becomes a forest fire—attend to your partner's upsets before they escalate.