

Building Walls: The Intersection of Attachment Styles and Stonewalling Behavior

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Attachment styles, formed through our earliest bonds with caregivers, shape how we engage with intimacy and seek support. Utilizing attachment theory to transform our relationships is powerful because it enables us to initiate personal changes that can significantly improve our relationship dynamics.

Rather than focusing on changing our partner, channeling that energy into personal growth as both an individual and a partner can be more effective. By reflecting on our own painful experiences and learning how to connect, we can better understand and manage our relationships.

Connection plays a crucial role in relationship change, particularly during times of conflict or rupture. Understanding what soothes us and our partner in difficult moments fosters deeper connection. By working on self-awareness and our relationship with ourselves, we can positively influence the environment of our relationships.

There is extensive scientific literature that explores how emotional attachments to primary caregivers are formed to ensure safety and survival. One of the most well-known studies is the 1969 “Strange Situation” experiment, which identified the four attachment styles we recognize today. In this study, infants and their primary caregivers were observed during moments of separation and reunion, revealing the following attachment styles:

Secure attachment: Infants became upset when their caregiver left but were comforted upon their return.

Anxious attachment: Infants were highly distressed when their caregiver left and struggled to be consoled upon their return.

Avoidant attachment: Infants showed little to no reaction to their caregiver's departure or return.

Disorganized attachment: Infants exhibited erratic or confused behaviors in response to their caregiver leaving or returning, such as freezing or self-harming actions.

These reactions reflect the infant's expectations of how their caregiver attends to their needs, which often carries over into their adult relationships. Securely attached infants, who trust that their caregiver will meet their needs, are comforted by their return. Conversely, infants who learn that their caregivers are inconsistent in meeting their needs become less distressed by their absence and less comforted by their presence, as they have learned not to rely on them.

The Four Attachment Styles

From the Strange Situation experiment (Ainsworth, 1970), researchers have identified four primary attachment styles: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized. While secure attachment represents a healthy foundation, the other three are considered insecure attachment styles. These styles exist on a spectrum, meaning individuals may not align perfectly with just one style or may experience varying intensities in how these patterns shape their relationships.

Understanding these attachment styles is essential for recognizing how they influence adult romantic relationships (Bartholomew, 1991).

Secure Attachment Style

Secure attachment is widely considered the ideal. Infants who form secure attachments with their primary caregivers often grow into adults capable of nurturing healthy relationships and becoming dependable, loving partners.

How does it develop?

Secure attachment arises when caregivers consistently meet

a child's physical and emotional needs. Infants with secure attachments prefer their primary caregivers and find comfort in their presence (Allen JP, 2008).

What does it look like in adult relationships?

Adults with a secure attachment style tend to establish long-term, healthy relationships. They trust their partners and maintain emotional availability, fostering strong, stable connections.

How common is it?

Studies suggest that approximately 58% of adults have a secure attachment style.

Tip for individuals with a secure attachment style:

A secure attachment style provides a strong foundation, but it doesn't guarantee effortless relationships. Dr. Derrig emphasizes, "Even when two securely attached individuals are in a relationship, it takes effort to maintain a healthy connection. All relationships, regardless of attachment style, require work."

Anxious Attachment Style

Also referred to as preoccupied or anxious-ambivalent attachment, this insecure style emerges when a baby's caregiver is inconsistent in meeting their needs. From the child's perspective, the availability of emotional and physical support feels uncertain, leading to a heightened sense of insecurity.

How does it develop?

Anxious attachment forms when caregivers respond inconsistently to a child's needs. This unpredictability teaches the child that comfort and attention cannot be relied upon, making it challenging for them to feel reassured.

What does it look like in adult relationships?

Adults with an anxious attachment style often exhibit behaviors that others may perceive as "clingy" or "needy." They frequently fear abandonment and seek constant

reassurance from their partners to feel secure in the relationship.

How common is it?

Approximately 19% of adults are thought to have an anxious attachment style, according to research.

Tip for those with an anxious attachment style:

This attachment style can lead to behaviors that inadvertently push partners away, reinforcing feelings of insecurity. Creating “rituals of separation,” such as a goodbye hug or a quick message during the day, can help ease fears and provide reassurance, fostering greater confidence in the relationship.

Avoidant Attachment Style

Also known as dismissive or anxious-avoidant attachment, this style is marked by a strong preference for self-reliance and emotional detachment. Adults with this attachment style often avoid discussing emotions and tend to keep their own feelings, as well as those of others, at arm’s length.

How does it develop?

Avoidant attachment typically arises when caregivers fail to provide adequate emotional support. While physical needs may be met, the lack of emotional comfort teaches the child to suppress their emotional needs and avoid relying on others for care.

What does it look like in adult relationships?

Adults with an avoidant attachment style may come across as emotionally distant or self-sufficient. They often have difficulty seeking or providing emotional intimacy in their relationships.

How common is it?

Research estimates that around 23% of adults exhibit an avoidant attachment style.

Tip for individuals with an avoidant attachment style:

People with this attachment style often create emotional

distance as a defense mechanism, anticipating disappointment from others. Developing self-awareness about these patterns, reflecting on emotional responses, and resisting the urge to withdraw are key steps toward fostering deeper and more meaningful connections.

Disorganized Attachment Style

Also referred to as fearful-avoidant attachment, this is the rarest and most extreme attachment style. Individuals with this style often exhibit unpredictable behavior and intense, erratic reactions in their relationships.

How does it develop?

Disorganized attachment typically stems from a chaotic or traumatic upbringing, often involving inconsistent or fear-inducing caregiving. This leads to confusion and fear in the child's relationship with their caregiver, forming the foundation for this attachment style.

What does it look like in adult relationships?

Adults with a disorganized attachment style may face significant challenges in forming healthy relationships. They often experience a conflicting desire for intimacy and a fear of getting too close, leading them to alternate between seeking connection and pushing others away. This pattern is often accompanied by struggles with mental health or personality disorders.

Tip for individuals with a disorganized attachment style:

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), a structured form of talk therapy designed to help manage intense emotions, can be particularly effective for individuals with this attachment style. It provides tools for emotional regulation and building healthier relational patterns.

How Attachment Styles Influence Adult Relationships?

Your attachment style—and how it interacts with your partner's—plays a vital role in shaping your ability to create a healthy, loving relationship. Research highlights that attachment styles influence key aspects of relationships, such

as:

Communication dynamics between partners.

The likelihood of relationship conflict or violence.

The overall satisfaction and quality of a marriage.

Moreover, your attachment style is instrumental in shaping the bond you establish with your children. Gaining insight into your attachment style can help you better understand your triggers, unconscious beliefs, vulnerabilities, and protective behaviours, empowering you to foster healthier connections.

How Anxious Attachment Manifests in Relationships?

Individuals with an anxious attachment style often struggle with feeling unloved (Hazan C., 2017). They crave closeness and affection and seek it through their behaviours. Here are some common behaviours associated with anxious attachment:

1. **Demanding reassurance:** If you have an anxious attachment, you may frequently demand that your partner prove their love for you. This could stem from past experiences where you felt unlovable or had to work hard for affection, often due to inconsistent caregiving. The fear of abandonment leads you to seek constant reassurance, but this fear can also make it difficult to trust the love you receive, creating a cycle of demand and insecurity.
2. **Testing love:** You might find yourself setting up tests to prove that your partner loves you and won't abandon you. However, trusting the love you receive can be challenging, leading you to create increasingly difficult tests to feel secure.
3. **Focusing on the negative:** Those with anxious attachment often look for signs that their partner is angry or might leave, which gives them a sense of control. Focusing on potential negatives is a way to protect themselves by preparing for the worst.

How Avoidant Attachment Appears in a Partner?

1. **Stonewalling:** This involves shutting down and not responding during conflict, often as a result of being overwhelmed. It's a physical response to stress and may not be intentional, but it creates distance in the relationship.
2. **Appeasing:** An avoidant partner might go out of their way to keep you happy to avoid conflict. They believe that as long as their partner is happy, everything will be fine, even if it means suppressing their own needs and emotions.
3. **Imploding:** Avoidant individuals often suppress their anger, fearing that expressing it will lead to more conflict. However, this buried anger can eventually explode, often during a minor conflict, as it feels safer to release it in small bursts rather than letting it build up.

What Does an Anxious-Avoidant Relationship Look Like?

In an anxious-avoidant relationship, the partner with an anxious attachment craves closeness as a sign of love, while the avoidant partner withdraws when overwhelmed. This withdrawal only intensifies the anxious partner's need for closeness, creating a cycle where the anxious partner seeks more love, and the avoidant partner pulls away further.

This dynamic can feel unmanageable, but it doesn't doom the relationship. Despite conflicting attachment styles, you and your partner can still build a strong, healthy relationship with understanding and effort.

The examination of the "Four Horsemen"—criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling—offers a valuable perspective on the communication patterns that, if unchecked, can undermine the very foundation of these attachments (Gottman JM, 1992). Together, these frameworks shed light on the complex interplay between emotional bonds and communication, providing insights into the dynamics that either strengthen or weaken the fabric of our relationships.

The Four Horsemen in relationships

Relationship researcher and author John Gottman has identified four negative behaviors, known as the "Four

Horsemen,” which can be detrimental to relationships. According to Gottman, these behaviours can predict relationship success and can subtly infiltrate any relationship. Reflect on whether you recognize these patterns in your own relationships.

Criticism: The first horseman, criticism, differs from a simple complaint or critique. For instance, if your partner forgets to inform you about working late, a complaint might be, “I’m frustrated because you didn’t let me know ahead of time.” Criticism, however, involves attacking your partner’s character, such as saying, “You always forget about my feelings and never consider them.” Such statements, which involve generalizations like “always” or “never,” can lead to feelings of rejection and hurt, potentially escalating into the next horseman.

Contempt: Contempt is more damaging than criticism and includes behaviors such as mocking, sarcasm, ridicule, name-calling, and disrespectful body language like eye-rolling. This form of communication can make a partner feel despised and inferior, often stemming from long-held negative feelings. Contempt is a strong predictor of divorce.

Defensiveness: Defensiveness often arises in response to criticism. While everyone uses defensiveness occasionally, a consistent pattern indicates that we are not taking our partner’s concerns seriously or owning up to our mistakes. This behaviour tends to escalate conflicts by shifting blame onto the partner rather than addressing the issue.

Stonewalling: Stonewalling typically follows contempt and involves one partner withdrawing or shutting down during conflict. This can manifest as tuning out, turning away, acting busy, or engaging in other distracting behaviours. When someone is physiologically overwhelmed, stonewalling can prevent productive conversation.

Partners who are securely attached avoid these negative patterns by embracing vulnerability. Instead of resorting to criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or stonewalling, they focus on healthy communication. This might involve expressing feelings and fears, staying engaged in tough conversations,

taking breaks to prevent destructive behaviours, and working together to regulate each other's emotions.

Stonewalling as conflict avoidance

Everyone withdraws from a relationship when they're feeling hurt or fearful of saying the wrong thing. This pause allows us to get creative about how to solve the problem. But consistent withdrawal is toxic.

In fact, most romantic partners do not understand the profound impact distancing has on a bond.

A stonewaller might think, "I don't get why they're so pissed with me. I wish I could just shrug off their blaming, but I can't. I need time to recover. Why don't they get that?"

While this person is being honest about their internal world, they neglect to mention one important fact: that they never want to resume the discussion, because the emotions they feel are too overwhelming.

The Still Face Experiment

How can doing nothing be so triggering?

When looking at relationships from an attachment lens, this type of response is seen as a threat to survival.

Psychologist Ed Tronick demonstrated the effect of stonewalling in a landmark study between mothers and infants called The Still Face Experiment. In this experiment, for a set amount of time, the mother responds to her child's cues for attention with only a still, unreactive face.

The baby protests the loss of emotional connection to his mother in a variety of ways. He points. He screams. He aggressively moves around in his chair. When these attempts fail, the baby withdraws by moving his face and body away. After a few moments, he starts to wail in a panic. It's difficult to witness. When the researcher signals the end of the experiment, the mother smiles and comforts the baby, who rapidly regains his emotional balance and happily re-engages her. This Still Face experiment applies to our adult relationships too. Each time a partner turns away from connection, the response is

not dissimilar to the baby shown above(Campbell L, 2005).

Are men or women more likely to stonewall their partner?

Research highlights that, due to certain physiological differences, 85% of stonewallers¹ are men.

Men are flooded with emotions more easily than women and struggle to recover as quickly.

Also, men tend to be more avoidant in their attachment styles, and stonewalling is the ultimate avoidant strategy.

But here's the thing....

Often, stonewalling can come from good intentions.

The stonewaller is trying not to make anything worse, even though their behavior sends the unintended message of disapproval and emotional distance.

The purpose of stonewalling is to self-soothe because they are overwhelmed by negative emotions.

Stonewallers typically have a history of making things worse when trying to solve problems...which is why they have the learned behavior of shutting down.

Demanding and withdrawing

The toxic cycle of criticism and stonewalling is a predictor of divorce.

It goes like this:

The stonewaller feels criticized, so they turn away. The more they turn away, the more their partner attacks.

The stonewaller's heart rate escalates, and they're scared to say anything for fear of making it worse.

The Other Side of the Wall

When your partner is stonewalling you, you may feel judged, or that your partner is cold, detached, and acting superior.

When they are unresponsive, you feel they don't care about your needs or feelings. It's as if they've abandoned you, even though they're in the room.

This is when you may become even more critical and demand emotional connection.

This will push them farther away.

Instead, give them space, and then revisit the issue later when you can be gentle. This should always be the way you start the conflict conversation.

Ask them what they need, so you can talk about it in such a way that will allow them to work with you.

In conclusion, stonewalling behaviours can significantly undermine effective communication and healthy relationships. By shutting down conversations, avoiding engagement, or withdrawing emotionally, individuals hinder problem-solving and create emotional distance, often leading to frustration and unresolved conflicts. Addressing stonewalling requires self-awareness, open communication, and mutual effort to create a supportive environment where both parties feel heard and valued. By fostering trust and empathy, individuals can replace stonewalling with constructive dialogue, promoting stronger and more resilient relationships.

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