Attachment Styles

You learned what connection felt like long before you had words for it.

Austan Sloan • Recover-You

A note before you begin. This guide is about the people who were supposed to keep you safe, and what happens when they were also the source of the danger. It discusses caregiver harm, betrayal by trusted people, and the ways children come to blame themselves in order to preserve a bond they can't survive without. If your relationships are currently unsafe, some of this may land close. Read it at your own pace, and stop if you need to.

Feeling overwhelmed by what you're reading? Support is here. Call or text 988, Canada's 24/7 Suicide Crisis Helpline • In Alberta, call or text 211 for community, social, health, and government services • In Edmonton and area, call the 24/7 Distress Line at 780-482-HELP (4357) • Call 911 in an emergency.

The Foundation: What Attachment Really Means

Attachment theory began with John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who recognized that a child's bond with their caregiver is not simply emotional. It is a biological survival system. Bowlby argued that these early experiences create what he called an Internal Working Model: a mental blueprint that shapes our lifelong expectations of ourselves, of others, and of whether the world is fundamentally safe.

> *At its core, attachment isn't about love. It's about safety.*

It is the body's first education in trust: who shows up, who doesn't, and what happens to you in the space between. This blueprint is built less from grand moments and more from thousands of small ones. The tone of a voice. The reliability of comfort. The quiet experience of being seen before you had words for what that meant.

The child doesn't think their way into this model. They feel their way in. The nervous system learns, through repetition, whether connection offers a secure base to explore the world from, or whether it is a source of confusion, unpredictability, and fear. That learning happens before language. It goes deep.

When care is consistent and attuned, the model that forms sounds like: "I am worthy of care, and I can rely on others to help me regulate." When it's unpredictable, absent, or frightening, the model shifts to survival: "I am on my own, people are unreliable, and connection is a threat."

Because all of this is encoded before language, it lives in us as feeling rather than thought, which is what makes it so hard to recognize in ourselves. You tend to see the blueprint in your behaviour long before you ever hear it in your self-talk.

Those lessons don't stay in childhood. They become embodied templates: fast, automatic, largely unconscious responses that shape how we connect, ask for help, and cope under pressure. When things get hard, we don't fall back on logic. We fall back on the blueprint.

This is why attachment sits at the centre of addiction. If your internal map says people aren't safe, a substance often becomes the only secure base you feel you have left. Not a choice. A conclusion drawn in childhood that nobody ever helped you revise.

If this language is new to you, that's not a gap in you. For those of us born in the 1900s, none of this existed in any mainstream way. No one at the kitchen table was talking about a "secure base," or the idea that your earliest relationships were quietly wiring your nervous system long before you had words for any of it. That conversation lived in research papers and clinical offices, not in ordinary homes. If the whole concept feels unfamiliar, it may be just as unfamiliar to you as it was to me. That's a gap in the era we were handed.

The Biology of Safety and Connection

Before attachment was a psychological theory, it was a biological necessity. Human infants are born neurologically unfinished. Their nervous systems rely on caregivers not just for food and protection, but for regulation. A calm, responsive adult doesn't just comfort a distressed child. They help bring the child's physiology back into balance.

Several systems help drive this process. The HPA axis mobilizes cortisol during threat. Oxytocin participates in bonding and social buffering, but it is not a simple on-off chemical for trust. When a reliable caregiver repeatedly soothes a distressed child, stress responses become easier to regulate. Across thousands of exchanges, the body learns a rule: connection can help bring me back.

When early environments are chaotic, neglectful, or frightening, that learning can break down. Chronic stress can dysregulate the HPA axis, with cortisol patterns that are too high, too low, badly timed, or slow to recover. Research also examines adversity, oxytocin signalling, and epigenetic regulation, but no single receptor change explains a person's capacity to bond.

The result is a nervous system wired to seek connection for survival that simultaneously struggles to feel safe within it. The need for people doesn't disappear. The body's ability to experience closeness as regulating may.

This is the biological foundation of insecure attachment. Not a theory about relationships, but a record of how the brain's stress and bonding systems were trained during the years they were being built.

The Four Attachment Styles

01 — Secure Attachment

Formed when caregivers are reliable, responsive, and emotionally available. These children grow into adults who are comfortable with both intimacy and independence, which sounds almost offensively simple until you realize how rare it actually is. They can say "I need you" without spiraling, and "I need space" without a three-day guilt hangover. They expect relationships to be reciprocal and safe because, early on, they were.

At its core, secure attachment carries one body-level belief: "I'm worthy of care, and other people are generally safe to depend on." In adulthood, this often looks like:

asking for help without it feeling like a personal failure.

trusting that conflict can be repaired, not that it signals the end.

feeling basically at home in close relationships rather than waiting for the other shoe to drop.

02 — Anxious (Preoccupied) Attachment

Born from inconsistency: a caregiver who sometimes showed up with warmth and sometimes simply didn't. The child learns that love is unpredictable and therefore must be constantly monitored, earned, and defended against losing. The nervous system wires around one quiet terror: if you stop working for it, it disappears. So you don't stop working for it. As adults, this can look like:

treating a three-hour delayed text as actionable evidence of impending abandonment.

needing reassurance so frequently that asking for it starts to feel embarrassing.

mistaking emotional intensity and chaos for depth, because calm feels suspiciously like indifference.

Underneath all of it is one simple truth: the fear of being left never fully fades. It just changes strategies.

03 — Avoidant (Dismissive) Attachment

Formed when a child's needs were minimized, mocked, or ignored. The lesson lands early and hard: vulnerability is weakness, needing people is a liability, and self-sufficiency is the only reliable option. So the nervous system stops reaching out and starts shutting down instead. Connection becomes something to manage from a safe distance, not something to relax into. Intimacy gets treated like a slow leak: contained, monitored, and never quite allowed to flood the room. As adults, avoidants often:

dismiss emotional needs with impressive efficiency ("I'm fine, it's not a big deal"), including their own.

feel genuinely smothered by what other people call normal closeness.

disappear when conflict arrives, then genuinely not understand why that's a problem.

What reads as independence is usually a learned self-protection strategy: a way to avoid the specific pain of needing someone who might not show up.

04 — Disorganized (Fearful-Avoidant) Attachment

This one develops when the caregiver was both the source of comfort and the source of fear, a pattern that often overlaps with survival responses. The nervous system tries to solve an equation that has no solution: I want closeness, but closeness is dangerous.

At the level of experience, the attachment system is sending two orders at once: move closer and get away. Threat, reward, memory, and regulation networks all participate; no two brain regions alone explain the conflict. The result is that trapped, disoriented feeling where love registers as both magnetic and menacing. It is not drama. It is two survival demands colliding, with you stuck in the middle wondering why you can't just act normal.

Adults with this pattern may crave connection and panic when it arrives. Idealize a partner one week, find them unbearable the next. Relationships become a tug-of-war between fear of abandonment and fear of engulfment, exhausting for everyone involved, including the person living it.

> *It's a nervous system trying to solve an impossible equation: the person I run to is also the person I have to run from.*

The Loved-One Paradox

There is one additional dynamic absolutely worth naming: sometimes the deepest wound is not only the trauma itself, but the relationship it happens inside of.

Trauma caused by a stranger is horrific. But trauma caused by a parent, caregiver, partner, or trusted loved one carries another kind of injury. The person who should represent safety becomes part of the danger. The person the child may need for comfort, protection, food, shelter, identity, and survival may also be the person creating the fear, or failing to stop it.

This is where attachment becomes brutally complicated. A child cannot simply walk away from the person they depend on. So the nervous system is forced into a contradiction: recognize the danger clearly and risk losing the attachment, or preserve the attachment by minimizing, excusing, compartmentalizing, forgetting, or blaming themselves for what happened.

That does not make the trauma less real. It makes the survival strategy more understandable. The child may accept the apology. They may run back toward the same person who hurt them. They may bury the truth, soften it, explain it away, or turn the blame inward, because attachment is not optional to a child. Attachment is survival.

> **A note on betrayal trauma theory.** Betrayal trauma theory offers one lens for understanding this paradox. I'm not presenting it as a perfect explanation for every survivor's experience. I'm offering it as a useful theory, and a painfully important dynamic to consider: sometimes trauma does not only teach the body that the world is unsafe. It teaches the child that love, danger, comfort, and betrayal can all wear the same face.

Why Your Relationship Patterns Aren't Random

Attachment theory is a map of how your nervous system learned to find safety through, or away from, other people. If closeness felt reliable, you learned to move toward it. If it felt unpredictable, invasive, or absent, your brain adapted. Not because you were broken. Because you were surviving the emotional environment you grew up in.

One pattern is worth knowing about specifically: anxious and avoidant partners tend to lock into a cycle. One pursues, the other withdraws, both convinced the other is the problem, both just reacting to threat in opposite directions. Recognizing that loop is usually the first step to breaking it.

And the most important takeaway of all: a secure relationship can feel boring at first. Not because it lacks depth, but because it lacks danger. For a nervous system trained on chaos, calm registers as wrong. Healing often means learning to tolerate stability you don't quite trust yet.

> *Most people aren't "bad at relationships." They're repeating whatever their nervous system learned was necessary to stay emotionally safe.*

What This Feels Like

Not sure where you fit? Notice which of these land. These aren't test questions and there is no score at the end. They're just prompts.

Anxious attachment. Core fear: abandonment. Substances soothe the panic and chase the closeness.

— Does a three-hour delayed text feel like a five-alarm emergency you need to numb immediately?
— Does your partner's mood determine whether you can stay sober today?
— Do you use to quiet the voice that says you're too much, and about to be left?

Avoidant attachment. Core fear: engulfment. Substances protect distance and restore the illusion of control.

— Does "we need to talk" make you want to disappear, or skip straight to getting high?
— Is using alone the only time a relationship isn't asking something of you?
— Does asking for help in recovery feel like a worse failure than the relapse itself?

Disorganized attachment. Core fear: both. Substances numb the whiplash of come here / go away.

— Do you crave closeness, then feel suffocated the moment it actually arrives?
— Do you use to dull the swing between desperately wanting connection and needing to escape it?
— Do you create the chaos, and then use the chaos as the reason you relapsed?

These patterns are common, well-documented, and, despite how permanent they can feel, highly responsive to the right work.

Attachment and Addiction: Regulating Connection Through Substances

For many of us with disorganized or anxious-avoidant attachment, substances weren't just about numbing pain. They were a way to manage connection itself.

When intimacy felt overwhelming, alcohol or drugs made closeness feel bearable, sometimes, in a twisted way, even safe. When isolation felt unbearable, they filled the gap just enough to quiet the specific ache of being alone without actually having to risk being with someone.

The bottle doesn't judge. The pill doesn't leave. The high creates a sense of control in a nervous system that learned early that emotional connection was chaos. That's not weakness. That's a logical substitution in a system that had run out of better options.

For a long time I didn't understand this about myself. I thought I was using to escape pain. I was, but more specifically, I was using to modulate attachment: to toggle between the two poles my nervous system couldn't navigate any other way. Numbing the anxiety of closeness. Easing the panic of disconnection.

The same wiring follows you into recovery. Wanting support one moment and pushing it away the next. Trusting someone until they get slightly too close, or make one small misstep, and then pulling back completely. It looks like hypocrisy from the outside. From the inside it's a nervous system still trying to find equilibrium in a body that was never taught what safe connection actually feels like. It's not personal. It's not weakness. It's the old program running in new circumstances.

My Reflection: Living as Anxious-Avoidant

If you put the anxious and avoidant styles in a blender, you'd get me. I learned to fear closeness and emptiness at the same time. I wasn't afraid of people so much as I was afraid of needing them, because needing someone had never once felt safe.

I want closeness, but when I get it, something in me tightens. Two equally valid but completely opposing parts fight for control at the same time. I start scanning for what might go wrong. When people pull away, I feel rejected. When they move closer, I usually want to run. There is no winning position. There is only the constant low-grade exhaustion of managing a nervous system that can't decide what it actually wants.

Stating boundaries is especially hard for me. Growing up, I learned to take what I could get. Boundaries weren't options, they were luxuries that risked loss. Asking for space or saying "this doesn't feel right" could mean disconnection, anger, or abandonment. So I adapted instead. I bent. I went quiet. I made myself easier to keep.

That wiring still lives in me. When someone crosses a line, I often freeze, caught between two losing options. If I speak up, there's a voice that warns: you could start a fight the relationship can't survive. If I stay silent, I feel violated and resentful. So I sit in the tension and do nothing, while the pressure builds into something that will eventually find its own exit.

When it does, I convince myself I'm taking control. But really I'm just trying to escape the helplessness: I'll leave you before you hurt me. It's not paradoxical logic. It's not even logic. Because not choosing to act is still making a choice. It's just a choice made from fear instead of safety, and fear is a terrible navigator. For years, that's the moment I'd reach for something to take the edge off. Not to escape the person, but to quiet the alarm in my body.

These patterns are pre-verbal. They live in the body, not the mind. Mine learned early that connection was both vital and volatile, that love meant proximity one moment and disappearance the next, with no reliable signal for which was coming. That unpredictability wired my nervous system to brace for loss before it ever arrived.

Even now, something as ordinary as a partner not replying to a text for a few hours can feel like a siren going off inside me. For most people it's annoying. For me it can trigger the same physiological panic that once followed my parent's absence: the hollow quiet, the uncertainty of when or whether they'd come back. My chest tightens. My stomach drops. My brain floods with old data that says silence equals danger. It's never about the text. It's about the body remembering what abandonment felt like.

What's helped most is recognizing that both parts, the anxious part that craves reassurance and the avoidant part that fears dependence, are trying to protect me. Neither is wrong. They just learned opposite lessons in unsafe conditions. Knowing that doesn't erase the fear. But it gives me something I never had growing up: a map. I can see the pattern now instead of being swallowed by it. That's not nothing. That's actually where everything else starts.

Healing the Attachment–Addiction Loop

Real recovery isn't just abstaining from a substance. It's learning to tolerate connection without anesthesia.

It means teaching your body, slowly, repeatedly, with more patience than feels reasonable, that safety isn't something you have to earn, perform for, or control. That it can arise naturally, inside you and with the right people around you. Your nervous system won't believe this immediately. That's fine. It doesn't have to. It just has to be shown, enough times, that the evidence accumulates.

I'm nowhere near perfect at this. But I'm better than I was, mostly because I finally understand what I'm working with. For years I had no language for any of it, let alone a path forward. Every honest conversation, every boundary voiced and respected, every rupture that gets repaired

rather than abandoned, each one is a small exposure to safety. Enough of them, and the nervous system starts to update its threat assessment. Slowly. Nonlinearly. But actually.

> *Healing isn't about becoming fearless. It's about becoming safe enough inside yourself that fear doesn't get to make the decisions anymore.*

If trauma wired your brain for survival, attachment work rewires it for connection. You can't heal in isolation from the patterns that taught you to fear closeness, because those patterns are running in every relationship you're trying to build your recovery inside of. Building secure attachment, first internally, then externally, is how recovery shifts from white-knuckling sobriety to something that actually feels like freedom. Because until the nervous system feels safe in connection, addiction will always whisper the same lie: you're only safe when you're alone.

> *The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.* — *Dr. Bruce D. Perry*

Codependency Is an Attachment Strategy

For many of us with complex trauma, codependency isn't a character flaw. It's an adaptation. Those raised in unpredictable, chaotic, or emotionally neglectful environments learned to survive by staying hyper-attuned to others and disconnecting from their own needs. What looks like people-pleasing on the surface is often an attachment-driven attempt to secure safety and avoid abandonment.

What struck me most, in Tim Fletcher's work on this, was the reframe: codependency isn't weakness, it's the nervous system's best available solution when love and danger blur together. It helped me understand why boundaries once felt like betrayal, and why focusing on myself felt selfish even when I was drowning.

Healing attachment wounds isn't about cutting people off or finally becoming "independent." It's about learning to connect from a place of authenticity rather than fear. That shift, from survival to genuine connection, is the heart of recovery.

> *When you grow up needing to earn love or prevent chaos, you start confusing control with care. Codependency isn't love gone wrong. It's love learned in survival mode.* — *Tim Fletcher*

Common Patterns in Childhood Adversity Survivors

For people who grew up in chaotic or neglectful environments, disorganized and anxious-avoidant patterns are the most common. They reflect a nervous system caught between two survival imperatives: reach for help, and protect yourself from harm. In adulthood, that wiring can manifest as:

choosing emotionally unavailable partners.

feeling unworthy of stable love.

mistaking intensity for intimacy.

sabotaging safety because it feels unfamiliar (my personal favourite).

But these aren't character flaws. They're survival strategies that outlived their usefulness. Many of them have a clinical name, and a map for getting out.

From Survival to Security: Three Steps

Step 1 — Name the Strategy, Not the "Flaw"

Attachment styles aren't personality defects. They're survival strategies your nervous system designed. Your body didn't default to these patterns because something's wrong with you. It chose them because they kept you safe once. Earned security starts when you can see the loop while you're still inside it.

Anxious: "Closeness = survival. Distance = threat."

Avoidant: "Closeness = loss of self. Space = oxygen."

Disorganized: "I need you desperately, and you terrify me."

The work: catch the reflex before it hijacks the response. Label it as nervous system activation, not a verdict on who you are.

Step 2 — Regulate Before You Relate

Attachment responses aren't merely cognitive errors. They can be rapid threat responses. When danger is detected, deliberate thinking may lose influence and the old script can run before reflection catches up. Security is built by teaching the whole system, repeatedly: this moment is not that moment.

For anxious activation: interrupt the urgency loop before it sends the text. Box breathing (4-4-4-4), 5-4-3-2-1 grounding, self-validate before you reach out, and a ten-minute pause before sending.

For avoidant shutdown: stay in the room without flooding. Name what's happening in your body, take time-bound space ("twenty minutes, then I'm back"), make micro-bids for connection, and orient by naming five things you can see right now.

Regulation isn't repression. It's lowering the volume so you can respond instead of react.

Step 3 — Earned Security Is Built Through Repair

Earned secure attachment doesn't mean you stop getting activated. It means you can come back to connection after the rupture, without abandoning yourself in the process. Security isn't a destination. It's a practice built through repetition, honesty, held boundaries, and repair.

State your need clearly: "This is what I'm feeling. This is what would help."

Hold boundaries without abandonment: "I need to step away, but I'm not leaving you."

Repair quickly and imperfectly: own your impact, clear the misunderstanding, reconnect, even when it's messy. Especially when it's messy.

Do this enough times and something shifts: closeness stops feeling like annihilation, distance stops feeling like death, and your relationships stop being run by reflexes you never chose and were never asked to keep.

> **Going further.** A separate structured guide, Survival → Security, is available at recover-you.ca. It's written specifically for disorganized attachment, the push-pull, come-here / go-away wiring that shows up constantly in trauma and addiction recovery. It assumes a basic

regulation foundation is already in place (breathwork, grounding, stabilization), and is aimed at people ready to move from understanding the pattern to actively doing something about it.

Before You Go

If you read the four styles and couldn't cleanly place yourself in one, that's normal. Most people aren't a single style. They're one thing with a parent, another with a partner, another under stress. The categories are a language, not a filing system.

And if you recognized yourself in the harder ones, notice what that recognition is not: it's not a diagnosis, it's not a life sentence, and it's not evidence that you're bad at being close to people. Every one of these patterns was an intelligent response to what your nervous system was actually facing at the time. The problem was never your capacity for connection. It was the conditions you had to learn it in.

The research on this is genuinely hopeful. Earned security is a real, documented phenomenon: people who did not have safe early attachment can and do build it later, through relationships that stay steady long enough for the body to believe them.

You learned this blueprint before you had any say in it. You get a say in it now.

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Sources & Further Reading

These sources span classic attachment theory, developmental neuroscience, and clinical work on addiction and trauma bonds, grounding the claim that relationship patterns are survival strategies wired into the nervous system rather than fixed personality flaws.

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