

# NAVIGATING THE LABYRINTH OF LOVE

How Attachment Styles Sneak  
Into Adult Relationships



by Dr. Diane Heller

**“As I travel and teach around the world, I feel we are experiencing a global epidemic of loneliness.”**



Once strongly tied together, families or marriages are now often fragmented, disconnected, or slowly growing farther apart. Love relationships seem to be dissolving faster than ever into divorce or separation. We all deserve to experience healthier, more resilient relationships. To do so, we need the skills, tools, and practices to heal our past wounds.

In practical terms, we may need to learn to “re-relate” into resiliency bonding versus trauma or wound bonding. **Resiliency Bonding** is a term I have devised to describe relationships that are based on our original design before it may have been disturbed. These relationships reflect secure, safe attachment within a **Relational Field** of mutual respect, appreciation of differences, acceptance of healthy interactions, and well-defined boundaries. They also include a mostly positive holding environment that allows an easy flow between aloneness and connectedness.

My sincere hope is that relationships with our partners, spouses, parents, children, friends and colleagues can be more enjoyable, fun, sustainable, mature, rewarding and loving. I want us all to have this possibility and share it with our near and dear.

We all grow up in a relational field with our original caregivers—a matrix of sorts that embodies the relational dynamics of the family and thus become “familiar” to us, as in “of the family.” These ingrained patterns may strongly influence how we see and feel in all of our later relationships. They create a “blueprint of expectations” of sorts, built out of our early encounters with others. When we are raised with secure attachment, we tend to find relationships are easier. We expect to be treated well and know that is what we deserve. We treat our partners with respect as well. We trust our partners and others realistically, and have Basic Trust in humanity and the world more or less unconditionally. Even when the chips are down, we still feel a basic optimism.

**We answer “Yes!” to Einstein’s famous question, “Is the Universe friendly?”**

Those of us that are fortunate to begin life in secure attachment typically find it easier to connect, to commit when we find a good potential partner, and to maintain contact. We predominantly feel safe in our relationships and partnerships. We have a sense of humor and playfulness. We can disagree, have different styles, and still respect each other. We make enough pro-relationship choices that are win-wins for each person that our “coupledom” is preserved and rich.

If the original bonding or attachment patterns were too painful, the residue of hurt often influences us from behind the scenes—without us even being aware of it.

If attachment was impaired by too many disruptions in bonding with caregivers, we may later fear that our adult relationships will bring us the same pain. We may unconsciously or consciously react based on past experiences. We may project the past onto the present without realizing that it dooms us to relive our worst moments over and over again.

**“Though we may be in a present-day relationship, we expect to wake up in the living room of Mom and Dad.”**

There we “*know*” we will be confronted with the same controlling attitudes, criticisms, lack of presence or appropriate boundaries, manipulations, or other problems we may have experienced as a child as part of the familiar family scenario. We worry we will not be seen or met or that our very essential nature will be annihilated.

Attachment patterns are so easily transmitted through the generations that it is the human condition to project the past onto our present. Because of this tendency, we may be blind to the love we actually have in our lives now. And if we cannot first sort out what belongs to the past and what is actually happening in the present, **“It is possible that we cannot even believe OUR OWN STORY about what is happening in our current relationships.”**

We may be more in relationship with the old hurtful patterns from our history than in relationship with our partner or friends.

**“How can we change this destiny and live fully and freely in the present?”**

## Attachment Styles: Secure Attachment



Secure Attachment, as illuminated and defined in Dan Siegel’s book on Attachment Theory, *The Developing Mind*, is what we hope to encounter with our original parents. If we have not had this original experience of security, safety, and caring, we need to learn how to find our way back to it later in life. Fortunately, this can happen even after attachment disruptions have occurred in childhood.

“Later we can ‘earn’ or ‘learn’ how to reorient to Secure Attachment through a healthy relationship of any kind—such as therapist, significant other or marriage partner, good friend or even a neighbor or doctor.”

**In childhood, Secure Attachment includes a “healthy holding environment” that occurs with “good enough” parents who are loving, responsive, and attuned.** These caregivers are present, safe, available, and allow for the natural flow or rhythm between connection and aloneness. The child grows up and develops good boundaries, feels secure, has a sense of basic trust in others, and has a strong sense of integrated identity with self-esteem intact. This is the kind of attachment I believe we are designed for.

In secure attachment, adults join children in play. They know how to initiate and repair when misattunements happen. The parent-child dyad knows how to find harmony again. Parents can contain whatever the child is experiencing: from pain, anger, and frustration to joy, bliss, and expansion of the life force.

**“Secure Attachment is there waiting to be excavated from the mire and tar of past hurts. We can rediscover it because it is hard-wired as a ‘bonding blueprint’ into our psycho-physiology. We just need to ‘dust off the diamond’ of our true ‘in-light’-enment.”**



Mary Ainsworth calls this our primary attachment system. The good news? If we were not lucky enough to have had a “healthy holding environment” in the beginning, with the proper support, more often than not, we can find our way home to Secure Attachment later in life. This return to our innate design for health is the basic and predominant focus of my work. I want to help answer the important question, “How do we cross that bridge from any type of attachment disruption back to Secure Attachment and reap the rewards of enjoyment and connection from enduring, stable, fulfilling and loving relationships?”

We are all social beings who need connection. We also need the alone time to connect deeply with ourselves and be in touch with the depth of our own being. **We long for intimacy with others AND intimacy with self.**

Disrupted attachment styles cause us to have an imprint for pain, rather than consistent love, in our relationships—especially our dyadic partner relationships which pull on our attachment histories the most. These patterns are easily imported into our adult relationships consciously or unconsciously. Unresolved early attachment disruptions may wreak havoc later. They often run our relationships into the ground before we and our partners even know what hit us.

When disruptions occur in our early years, the patterns get formed so quickly, and often occur pre-verbally and pre-cognitively. In this way, they become wired into our sensory-motor awareness. For example, a child learns to block their kinesthetic and corresponding muscle movement to reach out if he or she experienced a lack of responsiveness to needs early on. She may later need to resurrect this latent or thwarted impulse.

**“I had a client who had recurring dreams of having their arms chopped off when needs arose for them, due to a history with a troubled parent where having needs was severely punished.”**

These examples reflect one reason why it is often crucial to include body-based therapies in healing early attachment wounds (along with emotional and cognitive work). The

emerging body-oriented therapies help access and lay the groundwork for allowing the original sensory-motor patterns to eventually arise, complete, and prevail. Bringing our awareness back to secure attachment in the body as well as integrating the emotional-cognitive self helps us to heal the old wounds more effectively. This healing frees us from repeating old, destructive patterns.

Unfortunately, attachment disruptions are easily transmitted through the generations. Because this happens so naturally it is best to not focus on blaming our parents or our parents' parents. Many of our parents did not have the opportunity to do therapy and did not know how to self-reflect about this important topic in their lifetime.

**“Blame would have to go back to the caveman and what is the point of that?”**

The culture and the time period deeply influence our experiences as well. Many of us have children of our own now and know how difficult parenting can be. But this is not about being perfect parents or perfect partners.

According to John Gottman's relationship research in *The Seven Keys to Successful Marriage*, **having the empathetic attunement to realize there has been a break in the connection of a relationship and then initiating and/or receiving repair attempts to restore the connection in a more harmonious way is 80 percent of what gives relationships sustainability over long periods of time.**

The art of repair is one of the best predictors of longer, happier, healthy relationships. When people develop and practice their ability to repair, this capacity results in deeper intimacy and well-being in all of our relationships. Given its 80 percent chance of improving our connectedness, this skill is definitely worth investing some time and energy in.

Of course, in all relationships, it helps to recognize that we all have unresolved history homework to do. This includes our partners and friends. Compassion for our own journey and the journeys of others is an invaluable key when exploring this tender territory. Often we need to unlearn attachment disruptions and relearn how to find our way back to Secure Attachment. How do we build and eventually cross this bridge back to Secure Attachment? If our original patterns were not healthy, we need to recognize them internally, heal the original wounding, and then practice specific exercises to help us learn Secure Attachment.

When we do the hard work of discovering the dilemmas we carry within us from childhood, we become freer and more transparent to present-day reality. We can stop watching the same old recurring movie built out of the past that we continue to project onto our lives.

**When we cease calling on the “Central Casting of our Unconscious” that keeps us locked**

into passed down old patterns, we have the opportunity to replace those well-worn relationship blueprints with new designs. We are empowered to write new, fresh scenes to live by.



For most of us, resolving early wounding is possible. I have gathered an array of effective **Corrective Experiences** that help heal specific attachment disruptions.

Exercises include excavating the various elements of Secure Attachment, one by one to specifically target what may have been disturbed when we were younger. Examples include healing the attachment gaze by connecting to kind eyes, the welcome to the world exercise, and initiating bodily or emotional impulses, such as reaching out and trusting others, and several more beyond the scope of this article.

Re-discovering Secure Attachment is NOT done solely through “wound tracking,” emotional catharsis, or talk therapy alone. As therapists, we need to realize how to evoke the original healthy impulses for Secure

Attachment and bonding on an intrinsic level. This means healthy impulses arise naturally in the safe context of therapy or other “safe enough” relationships. We also need to be able to “presence” Secure Attachment ourselves to be effective. Most of us have a mix of disruption styles if we did not imprint a secure style first. Let’s look briefly at the most commonly described disruptions as noted in Dan Siegel’s *The Developing Mind*.

### **Avoidant Attachment Style**

Avoidant attachment results when parents have been extremely unavailable, neglectful, absent, or outright hostile toward a child. This environment teaches the child to regard relationships as unfulfilling because they do not meet their natural needs. The child learns to avoid relationships in order to survive or to diminish pain. Adults with this history often diminish the importance of relationships and focus more on work or hobbies and avoid investing emotional energy in others beyond a superficial level.

**If the original “relationship restaurant” was terrible, adults adapt by minimizing the importance of all relationships and stop “eating out.” In the extreme, they stop looking for “contact nutrition” at all and go on a fast.**

Why keep going back to the same bad restaurant when it is usually closed for dinner, no one is waiting the tables, the food can be toxic, the music too loud, the environment blank, and the atmosphere rejecting?

In Avoidant Attachment, a person adapts to such severe disappointment in relationships from poor bonding by no longer reaching out. They may avoid connection at all costs as it is associated with great pain of abandonment, lack of presence, or fear of rejection. Avoidantly-attached adults may “decide” they are loners and isolate by choice. They may feel that expressing few, if any, needs or dismissing support from others makes them better off, or even superior to, others who are in contact with emotions and real needs. However, this is usually a survival-based adaptation, made by default due to extreme early bonding deficits with caregivers. It’s not a conscious choice.

Avoidantly-attached children, as they move into adulthood, overly rely on themselves and dismiss others as not important. As David Wallin points out in his excellent, clinically-oriented book, *Attachment in Psychotherapy*, this dismissing stance enters into the therapist-client relationship, too. A client might say, “Oh, you are going on vacation for three weeks? No big deal. I don’t need you anyway. Therapy with you doesn’t do anything for me. I prefer to do it myself.” These statements may be—and usually are—far from the truth.

Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty of what helps us and our clients clinically. I suggest specific **Corrective Experiences** that can help break the grip of a wounded past and bring other people back into the Avoidantly-attached person’s life in nourishing ways. These Corrective Experiences include the **Kind Eyes Exercise** that involves a person looking out into the world into the kind, loving eyes of someone looking back at them.

In this exercise, you imagine someone lighting up when they open their door and see you. You take that image and feel “into” your eyes and allow your eyes to reach out to that joy you see in the other person’s eyes. Sounds nice, right? But this exercise requires a tremendous amount of trust and the overcoming of intense fear as an Avoidantly-attached person takes the huge risk of “looking again” after years of blinding themselves to contact, especially in their eyes.

When successful, this exercise helps to restore healthy contact and reduces the defenses and/or disconnection in the eyes. The disconnection or dissociation can become a pattern from meeting too much hostility or vacancy as a child. This exercise accesses the original attachment gaze and gives it support, and perhaps emotional limbic nourishment as well, and exposes the original wound. We work with the attachment gaze to give it time to heal, discharge emotion, over-arousal and the original distress. Often the eyes have stopped “seeing” in terms of actual contact. Safety in contact has to be restored to resurrect the possibility of deeper connection and for the client to literally see anew in a way based on the reality of today.





**Welcome to the World Exercise** is another highly effective Corrective Experience exercise for repairing Avoidant attachment. In this exercise, clients create their version of a perfect, well-celebrated welcome of themselves as a unique being with very special contributions to make to the world.

The fulfilling and “full-feeling” experience communicated by the therapist (or other)

and received by the client (or person) is: **“We are so glad you are here. We have been waiting for you. I celebrate you and your very existence. You have the birthright to exist. I want to be in real contact with you. I welcome you. You belong here. We want you here!”**

This **Welcome to the World Corrective Experience** helps clients regain the sense of their existence being celebrated. Instead of having one foot on the planet and one foot off—as if they have never committed to arriving here in the first place—they can land on their feet in a more connected, embodied, grounded way. Now the life force and brilliancy predominantly residing in their heads, including their often extraordinary intelligence, can more fully inhabit their physicality and beingness.

### **Ambivalent or Anxious Attachment Style**

**The “here today, gone tomorrow” Ambivalent Attachment type of bonding leads to continual frustration and relational insecurity.**

Even if, at times, the parents were authentically loving, **unpredictable caregiving** and **emotional inconsistency** may have manifested in a way that the person feels incapable of ever being truly loved or lovable.

The following story may aptly illustrate part of how Anxious Attachment is installed as a bonding style. In the story, researchers put a pigeon in a cage with a little bar at one end to access food with its foot. At first, every time the pigeon hit the bar a pellet of food came out. For a little while, the pigeon keeps hitting the bar and eating pellets until it is no longer hungry or interested. The pigeon seems to forget about it and just explores the cage. The bird goes back once in a while when it’s hungry.

Then the experimenters only change one thing—to have the pellets come irregularly (intermittent reward). The pigeon then becomes obsessive, continually hitting the bar (like many gamblers in Vegas at the slot machines).

Researchers surmised that intermittent reward was a major cause of obsessive focus. To

up the ante, they electrify the floor underneath the cage where the unpredictable pellets fall out. In order to hit the bar, the pigeon has to stand on the electrified floor. The pigeon does not choose to retreat to safety of the unelectrified side of the cage away from the bar. It chooses to keep pushing the bar to see when the next pellet will arrive—even when it is very painful to do so.

I make this analogy to Anxious or Ambivalent Attachment where love from parents was, in fact, present (like the nutritional value of the pellets), but the child never knew when, why or where, or for how long until it would be gone again. This is a “here today, gone tomorrow” parenting style.

Ironically and understandably, it is often the case that the parents are distracted or preoccupied with their own unresolved relationships histories.

The child cannot figure out what makes the relationship good or bad, so they are constantly trying to rearrange themselves to fit the parents’ changing moods and responses. Or they attempt to manipulate or control the parent to eke out the positive merging, support and/or love.

**The result is the child, and later the adult, becomes obsessively over-focused on the parent or external resources and severely under-focused on themselves. They become habitually unaware of internal sources of satisfaction and fulfillment.**

In adulthood this manifests as obsessive focus on the other in relationships—a bit like gambling. You keep investing more money in the game and never feel like you can win. They try to get the love they need but never feel it is enough.

The Anxiously-attached child or adult can never relax in the relationship. Instead of parents helping with affect modulation, their inconsistent behavior disrupts it. Neither self-soothing nor feeling content in the interactive regulation with another feels satisfying in any kind of sustaining way.

**If they feel loved now, the question always arises, “What about tomorrow?” “Will it last?” “This is too good to be true.” There is the tremendous desire for loving connection entangled with the debilitating fear of losing it.**

**Corrective Experiences** for this attachment style include re-establishing a felt sense of consistency and the ability to receive love and caring when these essential qualities are actually present. **“I want and yearn for love and connection but cannot have it.”** The basic personal identity is formed around that idea —the “parent-patterned” experience

that “I can want, but cannot have”. This can result in yet another dilemma that it is critical for the Anxiously-attached person to realize:

**If and when love actually presents itself, they often need to create distance themselves or dismiss the love in order to keep this original identification intact. They then create their own worst nightmare by never being available to receive the love they so actively seek because, paradoxically and predictably, it has to be rejected or deflected for self-identity to remain intact.**

As therapists, we need to help our clients to see this pattern if it fits and to actively “disorient them towards health.” It entails restructuring the identity to regain its capacity to actually receive love. Healing Exercises include increasing one’s capacity to receive love and nurturing from others without dismissing it. As easy as it sounds on the surface, this is very challenging. The identity of the Anxiously-attached adult is literally based on “I can want, but I cannot have.” Or, “I cannot have without the uncontrollable and unpredictable loss that I am always anxiously awaiting and anticipating.”

Another relevant exercise is to have the client look at all the ways people in their lives try to show them love. The Five Languages of Love is a good reference. Have the person see if they dismiss or minimize others’ love for them. It is helpful to point out how painful it may be for their partners or friends to have the love they offer deflected. I had that happen in my own life when my partner said how much he loved me and how much it hurt him that I could not seem to take it in.



I initially felt insulted and was certain that he was wrong—until I took an honest look at myself and realized I did not feel deserving of love, and was determined to believe that his love could not be true.

Let me share another example of how painful this can be for an Anxiously-attached individual. I once had a friend share with me that when her boyfriend would turn over in his sleep away from her she would experience a terrible sense of abandonment and a severe sense of loss. She would lie in bed weeping even although she knew cognitively that he was simply turning in his sleep and not really leaving her.

It seems that this turning away was enough of a trigger to re-stimulate the intermittent reward patterning of the “here today, gone tomorrow” style of loving from unpredictable parents. This causes the child to be stressed while searching to attach to a moving target, never knowing when the rug will be pulled out from under them—even when the love was real and present for them because they could lose the love at any moment and not

understand why. Instead of the parent's interactions with the child increasing self or interactive regulation, the inconsistency actually increases the relational distress. This terrible unpredictability sets up a hyper-awareness of the "other," and an over-focus on looking for need satisfaction, nurturing, or external love.

Because of this pattern, the Anxiously-attached person remains anxious because they lose contact with themselves, in fact *abandon* themselves, and then try to get themselves back from other people. The obvious trouble lies in the fact that you can't get yourself back from others. You get yourself back by learning to recognize or develop your sense of self and to stay connected to yourself in the first place—when alone and in the presence of others. You include yourself in the relational field rather than all of your attention flowing out into the other.

Anxiously-attached persons want interactive regulation and affect modulation with others and prefer not, or lack the capacity, to self soothe or self-regulate. Avoidantly-attached persons prefer the opposite. In Secure Attachment both can return to having self-regulation as well as interactive regulation and affect modulation in a harmonious way. This opens many more options for well-being.

Another exercise teaches clients how to stay connected to their inner self with greater ease as they learn to keep their sense of self intact when in the presence of others. This requires developing a dual awareness: one that does not eliminate the self but includes the other in the relational field without using manipulation.

**Another paradox is that once you abandon yourself for another, you are in double trouble. When you leave YOU, you are, by definition, disconnected and abandoned. And in abandoning yourself, where are you going to go?**

**You can't, in reality, leave yourself! REALLY, where are you going to go?**



Until we learn to stay connected to ourselves in the presence of others we are doomed to be and feel abandoned. We must recognize this pattern as an internalized map that came from early bonding deficits and repair connection to self and redefine connection to others so we do not continue to see the partner or other as the Source.

It is a perceptual trick. Once you learn to stay connected to your inner core, you will naturally find it a stable, consistent source of nourishment and fulfillment, as well as finding contact nutrition from relationships

outside of the self.

### **Disorganized Attachment Style**

#### **Disorganized Attachment can result when a parent is terrifying or overly chaotic.**

The relationships were so overwhelmingly scary, painful, harmful that the child had no safe holding environment in which to process or cope with this terror and pain. With the original caregivers, there was regular, devastating disruption of the attachment system without the relief of a safe haven. Because of this extreme situation, ANS regulation and Affect Modulation are severely interrupted, thus leaving the child with multiple incoherent models of the self, the other, and the relationship between them. In place of a coherent well integrated sense of self, fragmentation rules.

**The main difficulty in addressing Disorganized Attachment clinically is in the major double bind of conflict between two of our major human psycho-biological drives, 1) the deep need to attach to a safe attachment figure and 2) the strong need to survive.**

Later, adults with the disorganized attachment style become very afraid when they begin to feel close or intimate because closeness is over-associated with fear of the original parents who could not be trusted. They become stuck and mired in an approach-avoidance pattern. For the person to feel safe enough to stay in the relationship and enjoy it in a relaxed and nourishing way, the need for connection and fear for survival must get untangled.

A Corrective Experience may include the **Installation of a Competent Protector** to establish the essential quality of safety missing as resource. Ideally parents model protective sensitivities toward their offspring as most animal species are biologically designed to do. A rabbit runs from predators such as coyotes, fox, hawks, snakes etc., but once it returns safely to the rabbit hole she lavishes her affection on her young. Snuggling happens—not attack from one’s own species.

However, when children are terrified by one or both of their parents, it does not make sense biologically, psychologically, or soulfully. This terror disorganizes the attachment system, designed to operate and facilitate deep bonding in the environment of relative safety.

The need to attach is so strong that we are said to bond with any caregiver no matter what their actual behavior—even if life-threatening. This may require the child to literally override his or her own survival system or warning signals to allow them to walk into danger instead of running away from it or risking fighting back. **They must be provided clarity in communication** to override the original double messages presented to them by parents or caregivers. **The attachment system must have a safe place to land, usually in relationships outside of the family.**

**This can be done in the safe context of therapy, where the defensive responses for self-**

**protection (fight or flight) can be re-directed toward the original threat of one of both of the parents.**

Allan Schore's synthesis of research finds that the best modalities for healing attachment wounds include body-based therapies. In other words, the body needs to feel the return of safe Secure Attachment in a deeply physical way—as well as emotionally—so that the new corrective experiences of healthy relating can eventually override the original negative wounding.

The challenge is that attachment patterning happens so early, beginning in the womb. We need to develop skills to work pre-verbally, nonconceptually, within bottom-up processing for most of the session. But we also use top-down processing, to educate and help integrate the healing at the end of the session. What we need to appreciate with our clients and our relationship partners is that much of our current adult behavior can be considered a reflex from our early attachment patterning. We need to learn how to develop skills to function as securely attached adults (as partners and therapists) even if we had insecure attachment in childhood.



Somatic Experiencing®(SE) developed by Peter Levine and the Dynamic Attachment Repatterning experience (DARe) that I have developed over the past seven years are two such therapies.

I believe that our original design is organized for Secure, safe attachment and that our bodies and brains can rediscover how to embody and live from this foundation.

We can then integrate this felt sense emotionally and cognitively.

This heals the scars and dysregulating impressions of the past left in our brain, autonomic nervous system, and attachment system.

My biggest passion in teaching is to help clients become “unimpressed” by the disturbing elements of their history. They literally discharge the hurtful emotions and fear from the body and brain so that they can risk opening to themselves and others again.

I believe our birthright is to give and receive love open-heartedly, and derive deep satisfaction, fulfillment, and nourishment from nurturing healthy relationships.

We can return to a state of pure transparent beingness—our deep nature and true authentic self—from where we can be truly intimate with ourselves and share intimately with others.

This is our greatest gift to ourselves and to everyone else. It takes great courage to really “show up”. I believe that, in most cases, we can heal in the context of a corrective securely attached relationship in our lives at any time, with anyone, or directly from the “universal field of being” that holds the archetype for all that is true for us as spiritual essential beings.

We are naturally social beings and need a strong relationship both to ourselves and to others. On an Essential level, we have all that we need in just Being. Part of our fulfillment comes from sharing our “beingness” with others. We need our alone time as well, some more than others. Secure Attachment allows for an easy transition between connection and aloneness.

It is this balance of the inner and outer world that gives us wholeness.

**This is the journey home to secure attachment.**

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