

Attachment Trauma: Signs, Causes, & How to Heal

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SUMMARY:

1 **Attachment trauma** occurs when the bond between a child and their caregiver is disrupted due to neglect, abandonment, or abuse, leading to difficulties in forming healthy relationships and managing emotions in adulthood.

2 Attachment trauma can result in three types of *insecure attachments* in adults: **avoidant**, **anxious**, or **disorganized**, impacting how individuals connect with others.

3 Causes of attachment trauma include events like **abandonment**, **abuse**, **neglect**, **parental mental illness**, and **domestic violence**, affecting the parent-child relationship.

4 **Signs of attachment trauma** in adults include difficulties in interpersonal relationships, unstable self-esteem, mental health issues like PTSD, emotional dependency, impulsivity, and trauma blocking behaviors.

5 **Healing** from attachment trauma involves understanding the impact of past experiences, developing healthy connections, practicing honest communication, regulating emotions, challenging negative self-talk, connecting with the body, and considering trauma-focused therapy for support and healing.

Attachment Trauma: Signs, Causes, & How to Heal



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Attachment trauma happens when the bond between a child and their caregiver or parent is disrupted, often due to neglect, abandonment, or abuse. People with attachment trauma may find it hard to form healthy relationships, manage their emotions, and become independent as adults. However, healing is possible. With self-care and therapy, individuals can work through attachment trauma and build a better life.

What Is Attachment Trauma?

According to attachment theory, the [type of attachment](#) an infant develops with their caregiver impacts how the person will connect with others throughout their lives.^{1,2} Children develop a healthy and [secure attachment](#) when caregivers consistently provide warmth and support and soothe them when distressed.³ Attachment trauma occurs when a caregiver does not meet their child's needs for safety, closeness, and support.⁴

A caregiver may be absent due to illness, death, or divorce. In other cases, a present parent may emotionally, physically, or sexually abuse them, thus leaving a child without a stable space to regulate distress. No matter the reason, when a child does not receive the security they need from the caregiver, attachment trauma can occur.

Types of Attachment Trauma in Adults

Not all individuals respond the same to attachment trauma. Some people who experience attachment trauma may suffer from [relationship anxiety](#) as they fear their partner may leave or abandon them.

Others may stay distant and avoid intimacy altogether. More specifically, attachment trauma can cause people to develop three different types of insecure attachments in

adulthood: avoidant, anxious, or disorganized.⁵

The three types of attachment trauma are:

- **Avoidant attachment trauma:** An [avoidant attachment style](#) develops when a child cannot count on a parent to meet their needs. As a result, they become detached and avoid closeness with others to cope.
- **Anxious attachment trauma:** An [anxious attachment style](#) occurs with inconsistent caregivers. The child cannot trust their caregivers to provide for them, thus creating anxiety. People with an anxious attachment often struggle with [separation anxiety as adults](#).
- **Disorganized attachment trauma:** A person may develop a [disorganized attachment style](#) if raised in an unpredictable environment with inconsistent caregivers. These children may grow up in families where abuse and substance use are present.

What Causes Attachment Trauma?

What causes an attachment disorder or trauma can vary depending on the situation and child-parent relationship. Every parent has moments when they become frustrated, angry, or impatient with their children. However, attachment trauma refers to events that disrupt the parent/child relationship, such as a parent abandoning, abusing, or neglecting a child.⁴

- Potential causes of attachment trauma include:⁴
 - Physical, emotional, or [sexual trauma](#)
 - [Childhood emotional neglect](#)
 - Abandonment
 - Divorce
 - Parental mental illness
 - [Death of a parent](#)
 - Domestic violence
 - Parental chronic illness
 - [Intergenerational trauma](#)
 - Poor parental boundaries

Signs of Attachment Trauma in Adults

Experiencing attachment trauma as an infant or child can lead to an [attachment disorder in adulthood](#). A poor parent-child bond can affect the sense of self, relationships, and emotional regulation.

Additionally, adults with histories of attachment trauma may struggle with mental health conditions that impact their ability to function in daily life.

Here are the signs of attachment trauma in adults:⁵

Difficulty in Interpersonal Relationships

Attachment trauma in relationships can impair the ability to establish healthy and supportive connections. Individuals with an anxious attachment style may find themselves constantly worried that partners or friends will leave them, sometimes resulting in clinginess. In contrast, individuals with an avoidant attachment style may take a different approach and remain detached, causing others to view them as cold or distant.

Unstable or Negative Sense of Self

Attachment trauma can also affect self-esteem and self-worth. Individuals who develop an anxious attachment style may struggle with [low self-esteem](#) and a fragile sense of self. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style will have a tendency to be self-reliant. Self-reliance may seem positive, but [hyper-independence because of trauma](#) can be harmful and lead to burnout.

Mental Health Issues

[Post-traumatic stress disorder \(PTSD\)](#) is commonly associated with attachment trauma. Individuals may experience [symptoms of PTSD](#), such as intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks that can interfere with functioning. Dissociative disorders, such as [dissociative identity disorder](#), can also develop as a way for individuals to disconnect

from pain and distress.

Emotional Dysregulation

Attachment trauma can lead to [emotional dysregulation](#). People may experience heightened anger, fear, and sadness due to their trauma, all of which can affect relationships and daily life if left unmanaged.

Emotional Dependency

Dependency can be a common consequence of attachment trauma. Individuals with an anxious attachment style may become overly reliant on others for emotional support, often seeking [reassurance in the relationship](#) and validation to fill the emotional void created by the trauma. This dependence on others can hinder their ability to develop resilience and self-empowerment.

Impulsivity & Self-Sabotage

Impulsivity can also be a response to attachment trauma. People may engage in impulsive behaviors to cope with overwhelming emotions or seek distraction from the pain. Unfortunately, substance abuse, self-harm, or other dangerous activities can further exacerbate the negative consequences of attachment trauma.

Trauma-Blocking Behaviors

Our minds often use techniques that act as “distractions” from our internal distress. Trauma-blocking responses like [dissociation](#), [emotional numbing](#), [avoidance coping](#), and overworking provide some short-term relief from the psychological discomfort that exists from attachment trauma. Behaviors like these are often used in childhood to cope with attachment trauma as it happens and can persist into adulthood in all attachment styles.

Unexplained Chronic Pain

Chronic pain that has no medical explanation is often attributed to psychological distress and is technically called somatization. [Trauma can become stored in the body](#) when a person’s mind translates emotional pain into physical pain in an attempt to release some

of the energy held from this internal distress. People with an avoidant attachment style can develop unexplained chronic pain due to their natural tendency to avoid processing emotional discomfort.

Control Issues

People with an anxious attachment are prone to developing [issues with control](#) in many areas of their lives. Attempting to control others, our environment or things about ourselves can make us feel like the future won't bring any surprises or negative outcomes. These control issues often look like intense organization and planning, rigidity in changing plans, and difficulty accepting unmet expectations.

Hyperarousal

[Hyperarousal](#) is a collection of symptoms that look like an overall increase in energy, such as fidgeting or jitteriness, anxiety, panic attacks, racing thoughts, and increased heart rate. Signs of hyperarousal can be frequent and chronic or can only appear when the person's attachment trauma is triggered. This is a commonly seen symptom cluster across most attachment styles and typically develops from a lack of consistency in early childhood relationships.

How to Heal From Attachment Trauma

While attachment trauma can be painful, [healing from childhood trauma](#) is possible. By caring for yourself and seeking support, you can work through your past experiences and toward self-improvement.

Here are seven tips and some worksheets to help you heal from attachment trauma:

1. Understand the Impact of Your Past

Acknowledging the impact of your past is an essential early step in [processing your trauma](#). Thinking about your early childhood experiences can be painful. However, doing so allows you to shift focus to the present by reflecting on how these events impact you as an adult. Understanding your patterns is one of the first steps toward change.

There are many different ways to make sense of what happened. Going to therapy can help them understand what shaped them. There are also many different YouTube channels, podcasts, and [books on trauma and PTSD](#) that can give you clarity.

2. Develop Connections That Encourage Strength & Resilience

You can approach connections differently once you recognize your relationship patterns and how your past has shaped them. [Leaving toxic relationships](#) behind and learning to [set boundaries](#) with your loved ones is a crucial step to healing from attachment trauma. Focus your energy on the relationships that make you feel happy, confident, and content.

If you are struggling to develop healthy connections, a good therapist can help you create new relationship patterns. You can also consider support groups, [group therapy](#), or recreational activities where you can meet like-minded people. Remember, building relationships is a process that takes time.

3. Get Comfortable With Honest Communication

Communication is an important life skill, and we often follow the examples set by our family and peers. [Assertiveness](#) involves expressing your thoughts, feelings, and beliefs clearly and respectfully. This approach differs from passive communication, where you give in to others, and aggressive communication, where you aggressively demand from others. If you struggle with developing healthy social skills, consider learning more about the topic, practicing, or seeking therapy.

4. Learn to Regulate Your Own Emotions

Attachment trauma can often lead us to feel incapable of [regulating our own emotions](#) without the help of others or outside influences. This can look like dissociation, avoidance, and codependency, which is a continuation of the patterns learned during the traumatic events. Learning to regulate your own emotions will lead to greater [distress tolerance](#) and a sense of independence that will help the healing process.

5. Challenge Your Inner-Critic

A core component of trauma-related disorders is an internalized sense of shame, which typically leads to a chronic pattern of [negative self-talk](#). The process of healing from traumatic experiences requires us to address our feelings of guilt and shame and confront our inner critic. By implementing thought- focused activities (e.g. cognitive behavioral therapies), we can learn to challenge intrusive and self-defeating inner talk. Through this process, we will improve our self-esteem, self-confidence, and our ability to regulate our emotions.

6. Connect With Your Body

Many people cope with attachment trauma through trauma-blocking behaviors, such as dissociation and distraction. These behaviors can cause trauma to become stored in the body. Therefore, reconnecting with your body can help [trauma to be released from the body](#) and enable healing.

[Mindfulness](#) and [meditation for PTSD](#) are the building blocks for reconnecting with your body. Additionally, there is a lot of recent research on the power of [trauma-informed yoga](#) for healing.⁶ If possible, find a teacher specializing in trauma healing.

7. Consider Trauma-Focused Therapy

Therapy can help you explore severe attachment issues and understand their impact on you today. A [trauma-focused therapist](#) can also teach you healthy ways to communicate, set boundaries, and cope with negative feelings. Additionally, developing a relationship with a therapist or counselor that you trust and respect allows you to experience a secure attachment. You can then apply this experience to your life outside of therapy.

When to Seek Professional Support

If you find it difficult to connect with your loved ones or to develop new meaningful relationships, it may be time to seek professional support. There are many different [types of trauma therapy](#) that can address attachment issues.⁷

Signs That You're Healing From Attachment Trauma

Healing from attachment trauma is a complex process that involves working through past experiences, understanding their impacts, and developing new beliefs and behaviors in relationships. Depending on the person, this process can take months or even years. Don't panic if you cannot see immediate results, as healing takes time.

Some signs that you're healing from attachment trauma include:

- You have close and meaningful relationships

- You're able to communicate your feelings to others
- You're able to set healthy boundaries in your relationships
- You have a healthy view of others and understand that people are imperfect
- You accept your past
- You have self-confidence

In My Experience



Emily Guarnotta, PsyD

"Attachment trauma is painful, but healing is possible. This journey can be difficult, but therapy, self-care, healthy communication, and connecting with yourself and others can be helpful. If you are struggling, working with a therapist who specializes in attachment issues can help you work through your past and start the healing process."

Sources Update History

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The Ins and Outs of Attachment Trauma

The Attachment Project. <https://www.attachmentproject.com/>



SUMMARY:

1 Attachment Definition: Attachment refers to the relationship formed with a primary caregiver in childhood, influencing feelings of safety and security based on the caregiver's responses to the child's needs.

2 Attachment Trauma Explanation: Attachment trauma occurs when caregivers fail to meet emotional needs, leading to a severe disruption in the caregiver-child bond, often involving a lack of nurture, care, and reliable caregiving.

3 Common Causes of Attachment Trauma: Causes of attachment trauma can be overt (e.g., abuse, neglect, domestic violence) or covert (e.g., lack of affection, parental unavailability, postpartum difficulties), impacting the bond between caregiver and child.

4 Signs of Attachment Trauma: Signs of attachment trauma differ between adults and children. Children may exhibit avoidant behavior, conflicting behavior, emotional regulation difficulties, developmental delays, friendship challenges, uncooperative/aggressive behaviors, and mental health issues.

5 Healing from Attachment Trauma: Healing from attachment trauma involves therapy to understand and express emotions, forming healthy relationships based on trust and empathy, learning to regulate emotions through relaxation techniques, and seeking support to overcome childhood experiences.

The background of the page features three overlapping band-aids on a teal background. The band-aids are tan with a woven texture and have rounded corners. They are arranged in a way that they appear to be covering different parts of a surface, with some overlapping each other.

The Ins and Outs of Attachment Trauma

As an infant, every time we cry, reach out for our caregivers, or seek comfort from them, we develop an understanding of ourselves, others, and the world. We call this bond “attachment,” and it can have a long-lasting impact on our lives.

We develop a secure or insecure attachment style depending on how our caregiver responds to our attempts for comfort when we need them. If they consistently attune to us, we form a healthy (or “secure”) bond. But if our needs aren’t met reliably, we

But *what is attachment trauma*? What are the signs? And most importantly, how do we heal? In this article, we'll cover the ins and outs of attachment trauma, including:

- What attachment is
- An in-depth explanation of attachment trauma
- Common causes of attachment trauma
- The signs of attachment trauma in adults and children
- How to heal from attachment trauma

Do you know your attachment style?
Take our attachment quiz and find out now - fast, easy, free.

[Start Quiz](#)



What Is Attachment?

Attachment refers to the relationship we form with our primary caregiver as a child. This relationship can take many forms, depending on how our caregiver responds to us when we're in distress. Caregivers who are attuned to and consistently respond to our needs will help us feel safe and secure in the world. As a result, we develop a secure attachment style. However, if our caregiver doesn't consistently respond to our needs or meets us with rejection, neglect, or abuse, we will develop one of three insecure attachment styles:

- Avoidant attachment
- Anxious attachment

What Is Attachment Trauma?

When our caregivers are unable to meet our emotional needs as children, attachment trauma occurs. Attachment trauma is a form of relational trauma involving a severe disruption in the bond between a caregiver and their child. Although this disruption can manifest in different ways, it typically involves the absence of healthy amounts of nurture, care, and reliable caregiving. But it's a little more complicated than this, so let's explore it in detail next.

Common Causes of Attachment Trauma

There is no single cause of attachment trauma—many factors can affect the bond between a caregiver and their child. However, the typical causes tend to fall into two categories: overt or covert.

The most common overt causes of attachment trauma are:

- When the caregiver is a source of fear, abuse, or neglect
- The death of a close family member (i.e., a primary caregiver or sibling)
- Experiencing domestic violence within the home
- A caregiver struggling with substance abuse issues
- The absence of a caregiver due to divorce

Common covert causes of attachment trauma include:

- A general lack of affection from the caregiver toward their child
- When the caregiver is physically or emotionally unavailable (for example, due to a severe physical or mental health condition)
- Postpartum difficulties, such as postpartum depression
- Poor boundaries within the home, including parentification
- When a caregiver manipulates or attempts to control their child by withdrawing affection or evoking shame and guilt.

As you can see, the causes of attachment trauma can vary drastically. As a result, it can be difficult to pin down whether you have attachment trauma. However, we can learn to recognize attachment trauma by looking for common signs.

Attachment Trauma?

Unprocessed attachment trauma can show up in many ways. Yet, the signs of attachment trauma in adults differ from those in children. So, let's look at each in turn.



Signs of Attachment Trauma in Children

The emotional bond between a child and their caregiver is essential for healthy emotional development. When there is a disruption in this relationship, there may be tell-tale signs right from early childhood. These may include, but are not limited to:

Avoidant behavior toward the caregiver

When a child seeks closeness from their caregiver but is met with rejection, they may learn to down-regulate their emotions to maintain closeness. As a result, the child may cry out less for their caregiver, not protest when they are left alone, and use distancing or self-soothing behaviors when their caregiver returns.

When a caregiver doesn't consistently meet their child's emotional needs, the child may become unsure whether their caregiver will be available in times of distress. This can manifest as anxious behaviors, such as clinginess, dependence, and intense emotional outbursts that aren't easy to console.

Conflicting behavior

A child who learns to fear their caregiver may alternate between avoidant and anxious behaviors, avoiding eye contact one minute and acting out for attention the next. They may also act distrustful toward their caregiver, demonstrating the lack of certainty they feel in their caregiver's ability to care for them.

Difficulties regulating emotions

A fundamental feature of a healthy caregiver-child bond is co-regulation; when the caregiver helps their child regulate their emotions through soothing, such as rocking back and forth, using a soothing voice, or providing comforting physical touch. When this occurs, the child learns how to self-soothe and regulate their own emotions. However, when a child experiences attachment trauma, they often miss this important lesson, leading to emotion regulation difficulties as they develop.

Developmental delays

Our brains grow and restructure across the lifespan, but especially so in childhood and adolescence. During this period, we develop many important brain connections relating to safety and security. When a caregiver provides nurturing, supportive, and consistent care, this provides a foundation for their child's healthy development. However, if a child experiences attachment trauma, they may develop at a slower rate.

Friendship difficulties

Studies repeatedly show us that relationship difficulties between the caregiver and child can make friendships more challenging in early childhood and adolescence. Children with attachment issues may find it difficult to make friends, are typically more susceptible to bullying, and may struggle to form healthy romantic relationships as adolescents.

Persistent uncooperative or aggressive behaviors

Children who experience disruptions in their early relationships may be more likely to show externalizing behaviors such as resistance, uncooperativeness, and aggression. Research also shows that babies and young children who experience attachment issues are more at risk of developing behavioral problems such as conduct disorders.

Mental health difficulties

While some children with attachment trauma develop externalizing behaviors, others internalize their difficulties, which often leads to mental health issues such as mood disorders like anxiety and depression.



Signs of Attachment Trauma in Adults

As we progress into adulthood, the symptoms of unprocessed attachment trauma often shift and change. The signs we show may depend on our attachment style, but, typically, relationship difficulties remain.

Below, we explore common signs of attachment trauma in adults for each insecure attachment style.

Avoidant Attachment

Trauma-blocking behaviors are one of the main signs of attachment trauma in avoidant attachers. This may involve avoidance of specific places, situations, or people that evoke triggering memories or avoidance of intimacy and dependence due to beliefs that others are unreliable and untrustworthy. Trauma-blocking behaviors may also manifest as escapism, like working excessively or using distractions.

Another sign of attachment trauma in avoidant attachers is self-sabotage. Research indicates that avoidant attachers are more likely to have difficulties with substance abuse than secure and anxious attachers. Experts suggest that substance abuse may act as another blocking behavior, as the avoidant attacher tries to keep their difficult feelings and memories at bay.

depression than securely attached individuals, partly due to continually suppressing their emotional needs.

Anxious Attachment

Chronic pain is a common sign of attachment trauma in anxious attachers. Anxious attachers are unsure if their caregiver can adequately meet their needs in childhood, which can cause a cumulative build-up of stress over time, as they fear for their survival. As a result, anxious attachers can develop an overactive stress response system, which may result in long-term chronic pain.

An anxious attacher's overactive stress response system is also behind **another sign of attachment trauma in anxious attachers—hypervigilance**. Due to their heightened stress system, anxious attachers are often extremely sensitive to relational cues and their environment. They may be constantly on the lookout for signs of rejection, abandonment, or threats. This can cause problems in romantic relationships, as anxious attachers may become jealous or overly concerned about small details instead of being present in the moment.

Anxious attachers also display self-sabotage as a sign of attachment trauma, but not in the same way as avoidant attachers. Instead of blocking behaviors, self-sabotage typically manifests as reassurance-seeking behaviors, overthinking and overanalyzing situations, acting in ways that conform to their negative self-beliefs, and suppressing their own needs to accommodate others' desires. These behaviors are often driven by a fear of abandonment, which typically develops due to the unreliability of their caregivers when they were a child.

Disorganized Attachment

Disorganized attachers display their attachment trauma through an anxious and avoidant behavioral cycle. Due to their caregiver's unpredictable behaviors, they tend to experience fear of both intimacy and abandonment, which can both feel and appear extremely confusing. As a result, a disorganized attacher may crave intimacy one minute through intense closeness seeking, then push a loved one away when they become too close and activate the disorganized attacher's fear of intimacy.

Like the other insecure attachment styles, **one sign of attachment trauma in disorganized attachers is self-sabotaging behaviors**. In disorganized attachers, this often manifests as substance abuse, impulsive behaviors, sabotaging relationships, isolating themselves, continual self-criticism, and repeating traumatic patterns in romantic relationships.

Another common sign of attachment trauma in disorganized attachers is unpredictable reactions to stress. Although all insecurely attached individuals are usually not taught how to regulate their emotions in effective ways, disorganized attachers appear to struggle with this the most. This may be due to their caregiver's extremely unpredictable behaviors, resulting in stress not only feeling scary but traumatic. Therefore, when a disorganized attacher feels stressed, they may display extreme reactions such as rage, anxiety, or dissociation.

Attachment trauma can have a significant impact on our lives as children, and many of these difficulties progress into adulthood. As a result, we may struggle with several aspects of our lives, such as our friendships, relationships, and mental health. But it's important to know that it's entirely possible to heal attachment trauma and overcome these problems.

#1 Attachment and Trauma Therapy

Therapy can help us address our attachment trauma through assisting us in understanding our experiences and expressing our emotions.

Therapy can also support us in healing attachment trauma through reparenting. Reparenting refers to how your therapist attunes to your unmet emotional needs (much like a primary caregiver), helping you to move on from your past experiences.

Furthermore, the relationship with your therapist will help you identify the important features of a healthy relationship, such as boundaries, empathy, compassion, and non-judgment, which you can then apply to your other relationships.

#2 Form Healthy Relationships

Unhealthy relationships are what attachment trauma stems from. So, one way to overcome attachment trauma is to form healthy relationships in your adult life. This involves building relationships built on trust, empathy, boundaries, and safety. But it also encompasses identifying people that don't fit into this box – are there any people in your adult life that make you feel unsafe? That trigger your attachment trauma? Recognizing this can help you form healthier relationships with these individuals by putting boundaries in place or by removing them from your life.

#3 Learn to Regulate Your Emotions

As we now know, emotional regulation is one lesson many insecure attachers don't learn in childhood. Therefore, to heal from attachment trauma, we need to learn how to understand and regulate our emotions.

Relaxation techniques like meditation, mindfulness, and yoga can help us develop the self-awareness we need to understand our emotions and how they feel in our bodies. Likewise, exercise can help us become more in tune with our bodies and regulate difficult emotions.

Final Word on Attachment Trauma

When a child experiences a disruption in the bond between themselves and their caregiver, attachment trauma occurs. This attachment trauma can manifest in avoidant, anxious, or disorganized behaviors in childhood, which can progress into adulthood. Adults with unprocessed attachment trauma may also show self-sabotaging behaviors relating to their insecure attachment style.

Despite the difficulties attachment trauma may cause, we can overcome our childhood experiences. By seeking support from a therapist, forming healthy relationships, and learning how to regulate our emotions, we can begin to heal from attachment trauma.