



How We Love as Couples

"How can we ever have any hope of a happy future together?" "Will this relationship ever work out?" "It feels like we're living like roommates under the same roof!"

These comments are often made by people struggling with discouragement and disappointment in their marital or couple relationship. What started as a bright future filled with hopes and dreams of building a life together with their partner, has spiralled into days of co-existence with 'the other', perhaps with limited conversation or arguments, reduced to solving issues via email or with text messages.

Understanding the complexities of couple relationships, which includes the exploration of each individual's attachment style, can be an integral and important part of the work of therapists as we provide support to couples in distress.

How we all learn to attach, or to connect, in close and intimate relationships with others, is explained by Attachment Theory.

Attachment theory suggests that a person learns how to develop close emotional connections with others through the bonding experience with their parent or primary care-giver in the first eighteen months of life. As the parent or care-giver adequately responds to their child's needs, comforting and validating his or her experience and emotions, a child feels secure and is likely to develop into an adult who is securely attached and able to securely connect or attach to others.

Understanding how we have developed our "attachment styles" serves to give us insights into how we develop romantic relationships.

But what if our parents were not responsive to our needs as children, did not really know us, were stressed due to divorce, war, abuse, or health-related issues — or simply just did not have the emotional capacity or an early secure attachment themselves to adequately respond? Or what if we lost our parents at a young age or were put into foster care?

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Milan and Kay Yerkovitch (2006) in their book *How We Love* have drawn on both family systems and attachment theories and have identified five love styles or imprints that are used by individuals in relationships who have not experienced secure attachments: Avoider, Pleaser, Vacillator, Controller, and Victim.

- The **Avoider** may have been a child who lacked feedback or had disinterested parents. As an adult, the Avoider may lack emotion or seem disinterested to his or her partner, be self-sufficient and a high task achiever, and happiest when others do not require a lot from him or her.
- The **Pleaser** may have had parents or care-givers who were overly anxious, overprotective, or critical. As a child, the Pleaser would have experienced fear, anxiety, or worry and, as such, worked to reduce it by performing well and working to please others. Now an adult, the Pleaser finds it difficult to ask for and accept help, struggles with fears of rejection or criticism, and may be jealous or resentful at times.

- The **Vacillator** likely had parents who may have sometimes attended to their feelings as a child, while ignoring them at other times. As a result, the child learned to focus on the needs and emotional availability of the parents, while becoming confused and hypervigilant at trying to identify times of connection and availability from them. As an adult, the Vacillator may be very sensitive, easily experience rejection or disappointment, and desire deep emotional connections that may seem unattainable.
- The **Controller** and the **Victim** are described as having chaotic love styles, which may have developed from similar responses or interactions from parents. As children, they may have been disregarded by their parents or perhaps even experienced abuse or neglect. Instead of relieving the stress of their child, the parents become the source of stress. Children in these chaotic families experience confusion, anger, and fear. The Controller dominates to reduce anxiety while the Victim yields. As adults, these individuals continue in these roles with their partners or spouses. They are accustomed to chaos and will continue in these roles until there is some form of therapeutic intervention.

Understanding these love styles and possible combinations can be helpful to pastors, therapists, and counsellors in supporting and working with the couples they see. Identifying the “love style” of each partner, their experiences as a child, and their learned patterns of relating and being, can help individuals learn new patterns of connecting and being with others and so enrich and deepen their relationship.

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For Further Reading:



Yerkovitch, Milan and Kay. *How We Love: A Revolutionary Approach to Deeper Connections in Marriage*. Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2006.

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Luquet, Wade and Theres Hannah, Mo, Eds. *Healing in the Relational Paradigm; The Imago Relationship Therapy Casebook*. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1998.

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