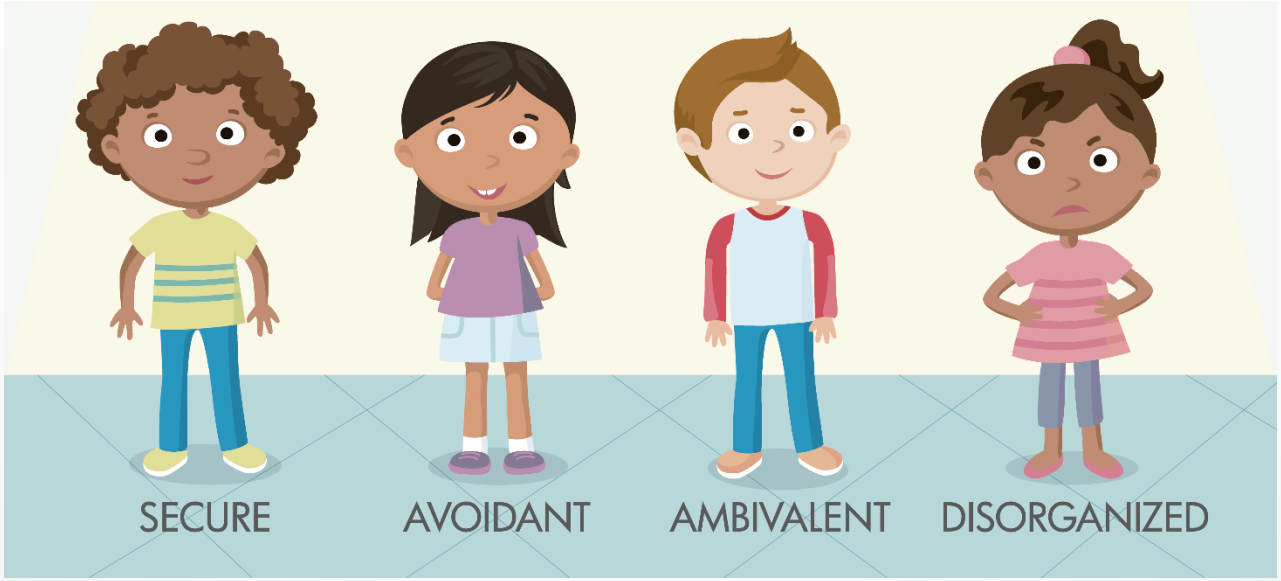
Employees' Attachment Styles at Work

11 August 2021

Aleksandra Gosteva
MHealSc, MEdPsych, MA AT (Clinical), PhD (Psychiatry) candidate,
Registered Psychologist

Understanding Employees' Attachment Styles

Although attachment has been used to explain individual differences in emotional and physical reactions to stress, styles of coping, and thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in a variety of interpersonal relationship situations (Mikulincer & Florian, 1995;Miller, 2007), it has been only recently applied to understanding interpersonal relationships at work (Leiter, Day, & Price, 2015).



Benefits of Understanding Attachment Styles

Having a greater understanding of attachment styles may benefit managers to recognize their own attachment styles to help them perceive social events within their workgroups more accurately.

Managers would also benefit from recognizing that an employees' interpretation of social events may differ from those of other employees and from those of the manager (Leiter, Day, & Price, 2015).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory suggests that individuals are innately predisposed to seek out comfort and safety from an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969).

Ainsworth (1970) identified 3 main attachment styles: **secure**, insecure **avoidant** and insecure **ambivalent/anxious**.

She concluded that these styles were the result of early interactions with the mother.

Mary Main, Ainsworth's student (Main & Solomon, 1990), later identified a fourth style: **disorganised.**

***Rates of secure attachment are quite consistent across studies around the world: 59-65%, although a study in Japan showed 80%.**

Attachment Pathology: What Causes It?

Anxious/preoccupied

- Caregiver repeatedly engages the child to regulate her state of mind
- The child doesn't learn to regulate her own emotions – especially anxiety: often results later in anxiety disorders
- Mary Main studied mothers in their homes and found that these mums were always carrying their children around, multi-tasking, and not attending to the child's internal/emotional state
- Caregiver is forcing the child to go along with what they need, rather than the child's needs

Dismissive/ avoidant

- Absence of physical affection
- Left alone to deal with sickness, injuries
- May have been given 'things', but no emotional needs met (invisible child)

Disorganised

- Caused by frightened and frightening behaviour
- Caregivers are 'in the child's face'; overstimulating them
- In Strange situation they play aggressively, with no notion of how frightened the child is
- Caregiver alternates between aggression and helplessness
- Most of these mothers have unresolved trauma and loss in their backgrounds
- Caregiver is "present-but-not-present" (no interest in child's internal state of mind)

Attachment Styles at Work

Employee Attachment Style and Workplace Behaviour

Anxious

Viewing self and others negatively
Hypersensitive to any signs of rejection
Having a constant need to be close to others
Avoid instigating and participating in conflicts
Constant fear of being rejected by coworkers & manager
Being overly concerned about the approval of others in the workplace

Securely Attached

Viewing self and others positively
Feeling more satisfied with various facets of their jobs
Feeling comfortable in workplace relationships
Feeling self-efficient in dealing with challenges
Relying on colleagues for support
Having fewer psychological, psychosomatic, or physical symptoms of illness

High on anxiety → **Low on anxiety**

High on avoidance → **Low on avoidance**

Avoidant

Viewing self and others negatively
Interpreting others' actions in a hostile manner
Compulsively self-reliant
Low/no trust in others
Keeping a safe emotional distance from colleagues
Prefer to work alone
When stressed avoid seeking colleagues for support
Avoid socializing

Further Characteristics of Individuals High on Avoidance

Employee Attachment Style and Workplace Behaviour

Anxious	**Securely Attached**
Viewing self and others negatively Hypersensitive to any signs of rejection Having a constant need to be close to others Avoid instigating and participating in conflicts Constant fear of being rejected by coworkers & manager Being overly concerned about the approval of others in the workplace	Viewing self and others positively Feeling more satisfied with various facets of their jobs Feeling comfortable in workplace relationships Feeling self-efficient in dealing with challenges Relying on colleagues for support Having fewer psychological, psychosomatic, or physical symptoms of illness
High on anxiety	**Low on anxiety**
High on avoidance	**Low on avoidance**

Avoidant

Viewing self and others negatively
Interpreting others' actions in a hostile manner
Compulsively self-reliant
Low/no trust in others
Keeping a safe emotional distance from colleagues
Prefer to work alone
When stressed avoid seeking colleagues for support
Avoid socializing

Emotional Coldness and Emotional Distancing

- Being emotionally and empathically unplugged
- Little interest or attempt to connect with colleagues/employees
- Perceiving social encounters as energy-intensive labour
- Lacking reciprocity and mutuality

* Leiter, Day and Price (2015) found that an avoidant attachment style at work was negatively correlated with positive social constructs (civility, psychological safety, and trust).

Hypersensitivity

- Hypersensitivity regarding even the smallest things
- Tendency to take everything personally
- Interpreting ambiguous situations to fit their constant hypothesis that they are being offended or that something is personal
- Misperceiving social situations

* These concerns have the potential of inhibiting such employees from effective team participation or clinical responsiveness as their social behaviour might reflect their internal fears rather than responding appropriately to concerns of colleagues, clients, or patients (Leiter et al., 2015).

Durvasula (2019).

Control

- Often attempting to exert tremendous control over their external worlds including workplaces.
- Tendency to control the decision-making and movements of employees (regularly checking employees' calendars, questioning "suspicious" or private appointments).
- Can have an almost obsessive-compulsive feel (e.g., precise type of cleaner has to be used, the light bulbs can't buzz, the gray in the walls can't be too dark).

Durvasula (2019).

How Does All of This Make Others Feel?

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Changes in appetite
- Rumination
- Self-doubt
- Alcohol and drug use
- Emotional eating
- Shopping and other spending
- Social isolation
- Losing pleasure in activities or pursuits that once gave a person pleasure
- **Chronic pain**
- Anger
- Chronic frustration
- Suicidal thoughts
- Loss of confidence
- Loss of self-esteem
- Confusion
- Lack of concentration
- Distractibility
- Hypervigilance (being over-attuned to the surrounding environment and overreacting to triggers in the workplace environment)
- Hyperarousal (being on edge and experiencing arousal symptoms)
- Grief

Durvasula (2015).

Healthy Workplaces

These workplaces are typically characterised by:

- empathy;
- compassion;
- respect;
- reciprocity;
- mutuality,
- being present with your colleagues/employees;
- being able to regulate ourselves;
- being self-aware; and
- treating people from the place of equity.

1. Not Personalising a Person's Behaviour vs. Not Taking It Personally

- Whenever possible, don't personalise (even though even though it feels very personal).
- Remind yourself that their behaviour is not about you. It is about their fragility, their incapacity for intimacy, connection, and closeness and their inability to process emotions.
- Not personalising is a tool to disempower the avoidant person's words and actions.
- The tend to mistreat everyone, it is who they are.
- By making it less personal you create more distance and learn to become impervious and resilient.

2. Practise "Soul Distancing"

- Involves psychologically pulling yourself away and not sharing the most authentic, important, divine and sometime vulnerable parts of you.
- Can be a powerful strategy for protecting yourself and advocating for yourself without creating a conflict.
- Offer short answers, stick to the facts, offer little engagement.
- Build up a network of friends and people who are safe to talk to, and can support you in difficult times.

Durvasula (2015; 2019).

3. Don’t Let their Insecurity Become Yours

- Individuals high on avoidance at their core are insecure, competitive, at times antagonistic, and driven by power and control – and often not by the well-being of the company or institution they are running.
- It can be easy to let their insecurity and incivility get under your skin, but don’t lose your passion because of their interpersonal challenges.

Durvasula (2015; 2019).

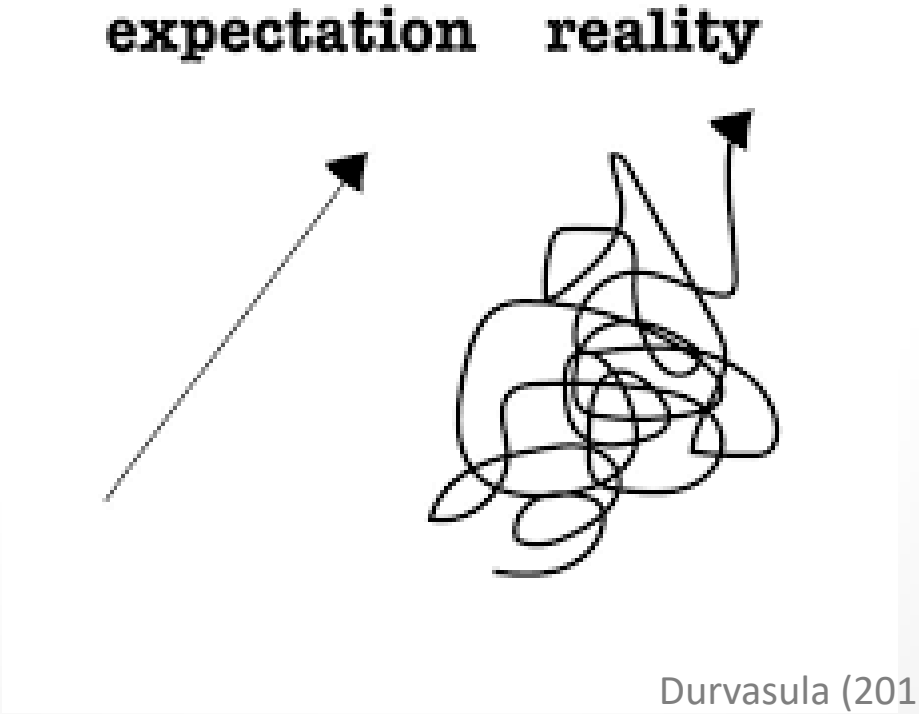
4. Bring Compassion Into the Workplace

- Cultivating an organisational culture that is compassionate.
- Many people view kindness and compassion as weaknesses, especially in men.
- A compassionate and collaborative leader or an employee can draw the most out of others, leaving them feeling supported, committed to the organisation, and willing to go the extra mile out of commitment rather than fear.

Durvasula (2015; 2019).

5. Manage Your Expectations

- Accept that they may never you or build up/support your career.
- Do not waste your career waiting for a moment of recognition or advancement that may never come.
- In many situations your devotion to a toxic manager/colleague/workplace will not be rewarded.



Durvasula (2015; 2019).

6. Take Care of Your Health

- Workplace stress often takes a larger toll on our health than other forms of stress.
- If you cannot remove yourself from the situation quickly, attempt to bring in some form of self-preservation, including therapy/counselling, talking with supportive friends, exercise, hobbies, and time with family.
- Find activities that uplift you and help to restore emotional resources.

Durvasula (2015; 2019).

Questions, Comments, Suggestions?

Selected References

Durvasula, R. S. (2019). "Don't You Know Who I Am?": How to Stay Sane in an Era of Narcissism, Entitlement, and Incivility. Post Hill Press.

Durvasula, R. (2015). Should I Stay or Should I Go: Surviving A Relationship with a Narcissist. Simon and Schuster.

Leiter, M. P., Day, A., & Price, L. (2015). Attachment styles at work: Measurement, collegial relationships, and burnout. Burnout Research, 2(1), 25-35.

Porath, C. L. (2016a). Mastering civility: A manifesto for the workplace. Grand Central Publishers.

Porath, C. L. (2016b). SHRM foundation's effective practice guidelines series. Creating a more human workplace where employees and business thrive. SHRM foundation.

Porath, C. L. (2016c). The hidden toll of workplace incivility. McKinsey Insights. https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-hidden-toll-of-workplace-incivility