What is your attachment style?

Our earliest relationships shape the way we love, our ability to manage emotion and our ability to connect in healthy relationships throughout life. From the moment a baby enters the world, they are neurologically seeking security, safety sustenance and love. As their eyes search for connection with their mother and or father, and their mouths search for food, they are forming the patterns by which they will connect with others and regulate their emotions throughout their life.

Mary Main developed an attachment model that has been adopted by most psychologists. Years later, Mary Ainsworth added onto it and added an additional attachment style as well as creating a system for assessing attachment style called the Adult Attachment Inventory. To this day this model represents the four primary attachment styles: Secure, Dismissive/Avoidant, Anxious/Preoccupied, and Disorganized.

Secure attachment represents the bulk of the population, and is indicative of a positive, caring relationship with one or both parents in the early years of life. Needs during these years were met with warmth and attunement, helping the baby to develop a sense of trust, ability to self soothe and a sense of value and being loved.

Dismissive/Avoidant attachment style is often the result of having had a parent or parents that were dismissive in their own attachment styles. The parents may have been afraid of connection themselves. They become frustrated when the child is seeking reassurance or comfort and as a result the child learns to reject their own emotions in an effort to avoid the pain. These children have lacked parental attunement. Attunement is when a parent is connected “right brain to right brain” with the child, making good eye contact, having appropriate responses to the child, mirroring with soothing comfort a child’s pain, happiness, worry, fear and more. An adult who has this dismissive attachment style may find it difficult to remember their childhood with great detail, or may have a difficult time accessing emotions of any kind.

Anxious/Preoccupied attachment style is what develops when a baby’s parent or parents are unpredictable in their ability to provide safety, security and comfort. One minute they may be loving and warm, and the next minute they may be anxious, angry, or disconnected. The child becomes anxious and insecure, uncertain of the response they will receive from their parent. As adults, people with this attachment style may have a push and pull in their interactions with others. They may be entangled at one moment and letting go at the next. They often lack boundaries and have a more difficult time regulating their own emotions, and may have drastic ranges in their emotions from very upset to very angry to very happy, and often the response to triggers in their lives may seem to elicit disproportionate reactions.

Disorganized is the final attachment style. This extreme style is the result of having a parent early on who has a disorganized state of mind and struggles with emotion regulation. The parent may have unresolved trauma of their own and as a result is in a heightened state of fear and anxiety most of the time and is unable to soothe their child. The baby’s needs are not met and the parent is unable to soothe them. Often the parent’s own state of anxiety is projected onto the child, and the child, who picks up on the parents physical and emotional affect, ends up feeling as though they too are in a constant state of fear and anxiety. In some cases, this style of attaching develops as a result of abuse by the parent, and the child retreats to their inner world, often dissociating or developing other personalities.

In the world of therapy and psychology, therapists treat each of these attachment styles differently in order to repair the damage that may have resulted from those early relationships. This work can impact the way that one connects with others, manages their emotions, and loves oneself. With the help of a qualified therapist, clients can explore those early building blocks of relationship and self and may find the root of many of their challenges. The good news is that it is possible to rebuild and repair the patterns that set hold early on, impacting one’s true understanding of self and other.