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Secure

How to Have a Healthy
Attachment to God



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Secure: How to Have a Healthy Attachment to God

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

What Is Attachment? 5

CHAPTER 1

Unhealthy Attachment Styles
and Behaviors 11

CHAPTER 2

The Truth about God and Yourself 39

CHAPTER 3

Moving to Secure Attachment 65

APPENDIX

Exercises to Grow Your Attachment to God 99

I dedicate this book to my heavenly Father,
whose faithful love carries me.



Introduction

What Is Attachment?

Real security can only be found in that which can never be taken from you—your relationship with God.

RICK WARREN

IN MY WORK AS A TRAUMA AND PASTORAL COUNSELOR, I discovered that when I helped my clients replace a distorted view of God with the truth about who he is, their anxiety, depression, grief, and other mental health disorders diminished. Such an outcome is not surprising, since God created us for connection with him above all else. Jesus reiterated this when he stated

in Matthew 22:37–38, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.”

But Jesus also followed that statement with another one about how we are to relate to others: “And the second [greatest commandment] is like [the first]: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:39). You see, it is only *after* we have established a healthy relationship with God that we can cultivate healthy relationships with others. The problem is, we often tend to reverse this order. We prioritize developing healthy relationships with others over establishing a relationship with God as our foundation. When our

It is only *after* we have established a healthy relationship with God that we can cultivate healthy relationships with others.

attempts fail, which they often do, our emotional state can range from frustration and anxiety to depression, grief, and other mental health disorders.

So why do we skip out on having a healthy relationship with God, or even having a relationship with him in the first place? The answer lies in a word that

carries much influence throughout our childhood and adult lives: *attachment*. In the mental health world, the concept of attachment refers to the bonding relationship between two people. The development of attachment starts from infancy, when a baby forms a bond with his or her primary caregiver, whether that person is a parent, grandparent, stepparent, or foster parent.

The term *attachment theory* emerged in the 1950s and suggested that the nature of early bonds with caregivers can affect future relationships. Through decades of research, mental health professionals have confirmed that the bonds you formed in your childhood influence how you view yourself and how you currently approach relationships with others and with God. So often if we were raised in an environment where our primary caregiver was either emotionally distant or demanding—or both—we're likely to see God as a bigger version of that person.

Suppose that when you were a child and experienced some kind of physical or emotional pain, your caregiver was in the habit of telling you to stop crying instead of helping you feel better. You went through a repetitive cycle of seeking to be soothed and then being shut down. Now as an adult, when you encounter the pain and confusion that is so much

a part of this broken world, you may find yourself repressing your emotions rather than taking healthy steps to seek comfort or help.

It's also interesting to note that the attachment formed with your caregiver is rooted in the reminders and experiences stored in your body's memory, whether

"My people are
being destroyed
because they don't
know me."
(Hosea 4:6 NLT)

healthy or unhealthy. In other words, even before you could speak, your brain was working hard to distinguish between environments that threatened your safety and those that made you feel safe. If your primary caregiver was not in tune with your emotions and

did not offer a safe environment in which to express your feelings without judgment or disregard, you likely viewed your authority figures through a negative lens.

Fast forward to when you were introduced to a relationship with God. If you still had not healed from those childhood experiences, you likely viewed God through the same negative lens, and forming a healthy attachment to him has been a struggle. And while it

is true that people with positive caregiver experiences may also have difficulty forming a healthy attachment to God, those cases are far less common.

This brings us back to attachment theory, which identifies several *attachment styles*—short descriptions of the different ways that people approach bonding with others. In *Secure*, you will learn the characteristics of these styles and develop an understanding of how they influence how a person forms an attachment to God. Stories of individuals who experienced each of the unhealthy attachment styles are included to illustrate how misperceptions of God can develop. Also included are “Your Turn” exercises that will help you do the following:

- Identify your own attachment style.
- Realize how your style has affected your behavior, your view of yourself, and your view of God.
- View yourself and God through the lens of truth.
- Move toward developing and maintaining a secure attachment to God.

As we’ve seen, a misperception of God can undermine not only your relationship with him but also with others, which can ultimately be detrimental to your

mental health. As Hosea 4:6 says, “My people are being destroyed because they don’t know me” (NLT).

My hope is that no matter what your early attachments were like, you will come to know the truth about God’s character and how he sees you. As you do, you will enjoy a close relationship with the one who created the concept of relationships. With a secure attachment to God as your foundation, you will also enjoy the opportunity to experience fulfilling relationships with others.

As you begin your journey, keep in mind the comforting words of Psalm 63:8 (NLT):

I cling to you [God];
your strong right hand holds me securely.

Let’s get started!



Chapter 1

Unhealthy Attachment Styles and Behaviors

*Thank God my salvation does not depend
upon my frail hold on Him, but of His
mighty grasp on me.*

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

AS WE GROW IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERM *attachment*, it's important to recognize that the strength of an attachment depends on the quality of the relationship between the two people sharing a bond. This chapter takes a look at why we can

sometimes have a weak attachment to God, based on our early attachment experiences with caregivers.

You'll learn about three types of *unhealthy attachment styles* that people often experience in their formative years, as well as how these styles may affect your attachment with God in the present. You'll also learn about five common behaviors that may result, because we often resort to unhealthy behaviors in an attempt to survive being stuck in a dysfunctional environment with those we are dependent on.

For each attachment style, you'll explore the following:

- What it means
- How it may have affected you
- A case study illustrating its dynamics
- How it can lead to misperceptions about what God is like

As you read, you'll notice the term *unhealthy parent characteristic*, which refers to unhealthy ways that primary caregivers sometimes relate to children. Feel free to substitute the appropriate word that applies to your upbringing—*stepparent, grandparent, foster parent, aunt, uncle, guardian*, or someone else.

It is also important to note that having a caregiver who displayed some of these characteristics for only brief periods of time does not necessarily mean you developed an unhealthy attachment. It is only when these characteristics are displayed over a long period of time that attachment is negatively affected.



Unhealthy Attachment Styles

1. Avoidant Attachment

According to research, you're more likely to develop an *Avoidant Attachment* style if your parent consistently displayed one or more of the following characteristics.

Unhealthy Parent Characteristic	What It Means	How It Affected You
Emotionally Unavailable	Your parent wasn't available to comfort you when you were in emotional or physical pain.	You felt you weren't worth people's time.
Emotionally Dismissive	Your parent didn't validate your feelings when you felt hurt. In fact, your parent tried to minimize them or claim you were overreacting. You may have gotten in trouble for expressing negative emotions.	You learned to doubt your own feelings. Rather than expressing them, you repressed them, and as a result, you experienced constant inner turmoil.
Overemphasis on Independence	Your parent strongly emphasized that you must become self-reliant, or your parent was annoyed when you needed their help.	You felt that asking for help was wrong and made you look needy.

Case Study: Scott

Scott initially came into therapy for issues related to his marriage and his drinking problem. But as he continued treatment, Scott found out that his main issue ran much deeper: It went back to Scott's dad working two jobs to support the family. When his dad was home, the children were to be quiet and not bother him. "Dad is tired," "Dad had a long day at work," and "Don't bother your dad" were phrases etched in Scott's mind.

Although Scott's mom was present in the home, she was overwhelmed with raising a household of children. Most evenings in Scott's childhood home were chaotic. His mom would be cooking dinner while trying to help his brother with homework; meanwhile, his toddler sister was tugging at his mom for attention. Needless to say, Scott felt it was best to just stay out of her way rather than add one more problem to her plate.

There were instances in seventh grade when Scott told his father he had been bullied in class. Instead of comforting Scott or telling him he would advocate for him at school, Scott's father just shook his head and replied, "If you can't take on a couple of bullies now, how do you plan on making it out in the real world?"

In eighth grade, Scott began to experience anxiety and panic. Having been taught that feeling his emotions meant he wasn't "being a man," he tried his absolute best to repress them. But it seemed the more he did so, the more troubling they became. Scott considered talking to his mom about what he was experiencing, but because she always seemed busy, he decided to keep his thoughts and feelings to himself.

Years later, in an attempt to diffuse conflict in his marriage, Scott started behaving the same way he did when there was conflict in his childhood home. He first tried to avoid it by mimicking the very pattern his father had modeled: working long hours, hoping that if their financial situation improved, his marital issues would disappear. When this didn't pan out, Scott tried hard to ignore his negative emotions because he heard his dad's voice echoing in his mind: *Be a man!* It wasn't long before Scott started drinking alcohol to help numb his feelings.

Scott viewed going to church as an activity to participate in out of tradition. He would take Communion and leave, and he wouldn't think about church again until the following Sunday. Every once in a while, he heard people talk about "walking with God" and "having a relationship with God," but these concepts seemed foreign to him. He didn't understand he could

approach God by faith and share his deepest needs and feelings. He didn't know that through Jesus Christ's death on the cross, the door was open to bridge the gap that separated them, allowing him to become a child of God. As a perfect Father, God wanted to comfort Scott with his peace and help him with his problems. Scott knew God was out there, but to Scott, God certainly had better things to do than attend to him.

Misperception of God

He Is Distant

As in Scott's case, having a primary caregiver who is emotionally absent can lead to an Avoidant Attachment style and a perception that God is *distant*. If you have experienced this attachment style, the words "Jesus loves you" or "God is right there with you" may go in one ear and out the other. Your tangible caregiving example can lead you to the erroneous idea that God is busy overseeing the entire universe, so he has no time or interest in adopting a personal concern for you. You believe that God requires you to handle most things on your own, because he doesn't have time for menial problems when he is busy with major issues like wars, poverty, and destructive hurricanes. In your understanding, you should approach God only in times of crisis, and even then, you should not expect him to care about

your feelings. The result is that you deny your feelings and live in a state of numbness—and before you know it, numbness has turned into depression.

Unhealthy Parent Characteristic	Misperception of God
Emotionally Unavailable	God is out there somewhere, and I'm over here.
Emotionally Dismissive	God would scoff at my emotions. In fact, if I go to him with my feelings, he may even see me as ungrateful or dramatic.
Overemphasis on Independence	God wants me to have it together before I come to him.

2. Anxious Attachment

At the other extreme is the attachment style known as *Anxious Attachment*. According to research, you are more likely to develop this type of attachment if your parent consistently displayed one or more of the following characteristics.

Unhealthy Parent Characteristic	What It Means	How It Affected You
Clinginess (masked as overprotectiveness)	Your parent was intrusive and lacked boundaries. Even as you got older, your parent had difficulty letting go so that you could learn independence.	You lacked individuality or felt guilty for desiring independence. To appease your parent, you either rebelled to obtain independence or succumbed to your parent's wishes.
Overemphasis on Performance	Your parent put a lot of emphasis on your achievement.	You learned that your worth was tied to how well you succeeded.
High Anxiety	Your parent was anxious, and your parent's own fears were often transmitted to you.	Because your parent's anxiety overwhelmed you, you learned to deal with your parent's emotions by shutting down yours. As a result, you never learned how to process your own emotions in a healthy way.