


# Attachment Theory and Treatment Planning with Addicted Clients

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# Disclosures

 I, John O'Neill, do not have any financial interests or relationships to disclose.



# Objectives

- Participants will demonstrate an understanding of the importance of attachment in the treatment of substance use.
- Participants will improve their understanding of the empirical research connecting attachment style effective treatment planning.
- Participants will demonstrate an understanding of how to intervene and develop treatment plans based upon attachment style.



# Attachment Theory





# Attachment Style and Treatment

Fowler et al. (2013) indicated that attachment style often goes undetected in treatment and may directly relate to retention and problems with the therapeutic relationship.

Understanding specific attachment style can facilitate customized treatment strategies (Wedekind et al., 2013).



# Importance in Treatment

While familiar with attachment style, it is often not explored fully in treatment.

Impressive emerging applications of attachment theory, but lack of widespread adoption.

Fletcher, K., Nutton, J., & Brend, D. (2015). Attachment, A matter of substance: The potential of attachment theory in the treatment of addictions. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 43(1), 109-117.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10615-014-0502-5>



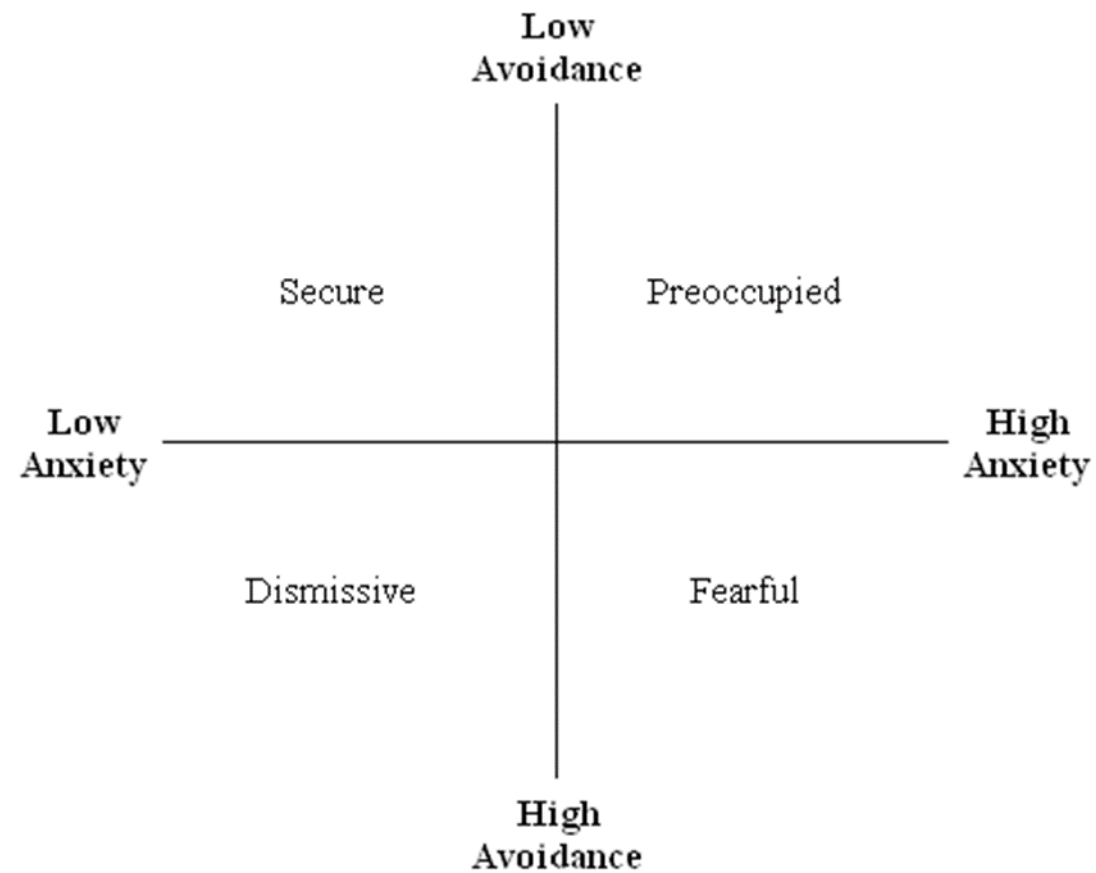
# Attachment Theory

- Attachment theory focuses on the deep enduring bond that connects people over time (Bowlby, 1969).
- Attachment influences many aspects of a person's functioning including coping, stress, psychological well-being, and behavior (Ravitz et al., 2010).





# Bartholomew Model



# Dimensions of Attachment

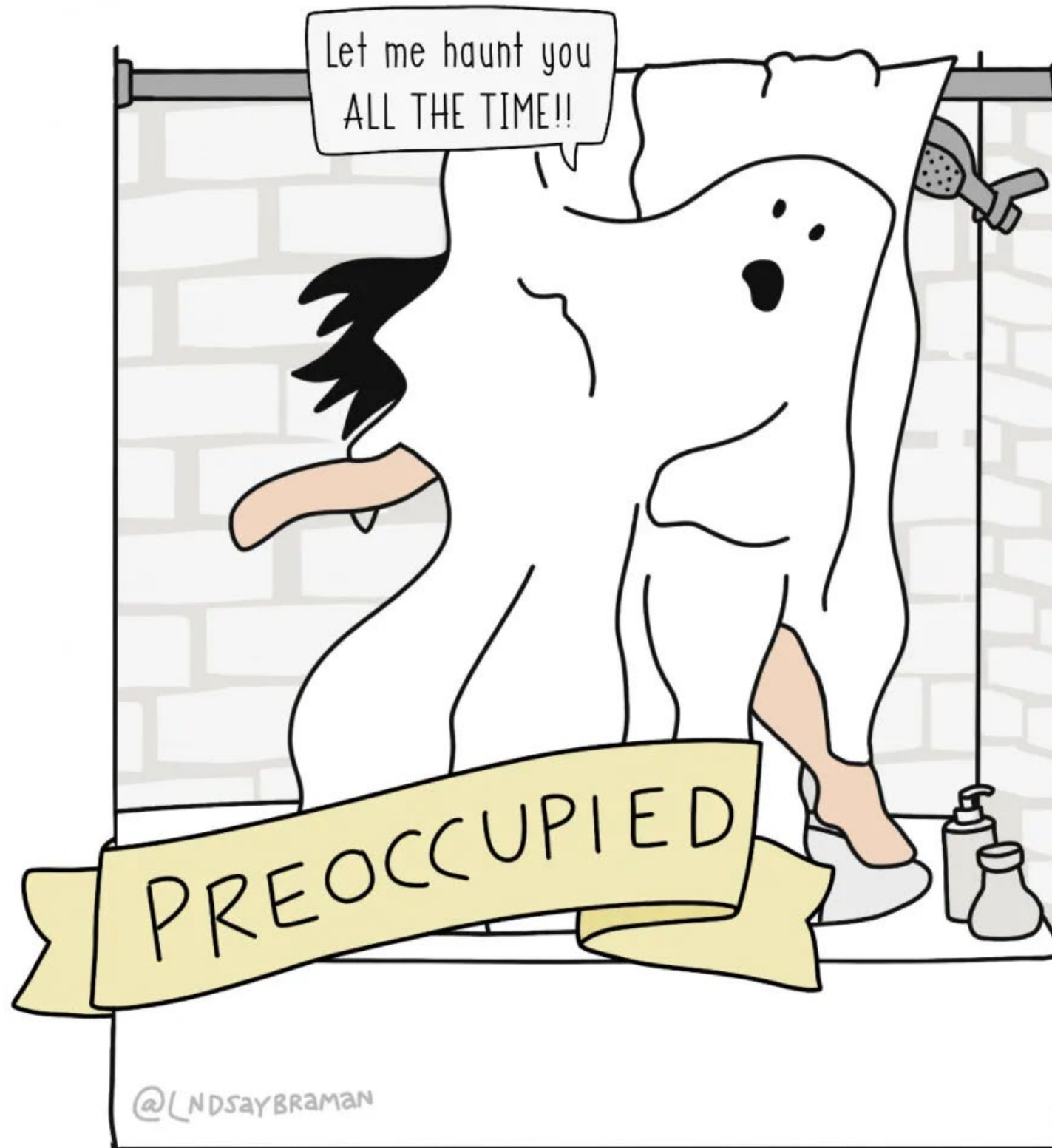
- In the Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) work, each of the four categories related to a combination of models of self (anxiety) and others (avoidance) and were described as dimensions.
- Persons with avoidant attachment develop negative models of others while those who are anxiously attached develop negative models of self (Malik et al., 2015).
- Wood et al. (2012) asserted that a dimensional approach to attachment research could provide an even deeper understanding of attachment in adulthood.



# Attachment Anxiety

- An attachment style dimension described as a pattern of hyperactivation when threatened that leads to an increase in distress and a need for reassurance from others.
- People with attachment anxiety may struggle with developing understanding and articulating the emotions they experience.
- Expects abandonment.
- Linked to several problems with emotion regulation.
- Negative sense of self.





# Attachment Avoidance

- An attachment style dimension described as a devaluation of relationships, self-reliance, avoidance of intimacy, and avoidance of dependency on others.
- Individuals with attachment avoidance often separate their emotions from thoughts and actions.
- Tend to withdrawal.
- Reluctant to trust others or seeks out closeness.
- Increases the risk of treatment dropout.





# Attachment Measures

01

Experiences in Close Relationships-Revised (ECR-R; Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000).

• <http://www.web-research-design.net/cgi-bin/crq/crq.pl>

02

Relationship Questionnaire (RQ; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

03

Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; George, Kaplan, & Main, 1996).



# Substance Use and Attachment

- Substances users demonstrated more insecure attachment than secure attachment.
- Insecure attachment may be a vulnerability factor for substance use and indicate close relationship quality as a promising line of inquiry in research on substance use disorder risk.

■ (Fairbairn et al., 2018)





# Attachment Style Upon Admission

2015 research(O'Neill,  
2015):

- 75% with an insecure attachment style
- 33% fearful prototype (high anxiety and avoidance)
- 28% preoccupied prototype (high anxiety and low avoidance)
- 14% dismissing prototype (high avoidance and low anxiety)
- 25% secure prototype (low avoidance and low anxiety)
- N = 544

Two-thirds of clients entering treatment come in with an insecure attachment style (Horton et al., 2012).



# Clinical Implications



# Tailoring Treatment

■ Knowledge of the patient's attachment style may help the therapist to tailor the treatment to the patient's needs.

■ (Gidhagen & Holmqvist, 2018)



# Recovery Style

- As there are many treatment options relevant to attachment styles and emotion regulation, it is important to understand the patient's attachment style in order to examine recovery style and enhance therapeutic outcomes (Geller & Farber, 2015).



# Focus on Treatment Relationship

- For example, understanding that an individual with attachment anxiety has less access to emotion regulation strategies can assist a clinician with focusing on the therapeutic relationship prior to attempting more threatening interventions.



# Treatment Motivation

■ Treatment motivation in patients with SUD is negatively correlated with avoidant attachment style and positively with anxious attachment style. As mindful attention increases, confidence in treatment increases. Insecure attachment related to the increase in difficulties in emotion regulation, and this was indirectly related to the increase in the treatment motivation.

■ Merve Sevim Tekin, Nurgül Özdemir & Şengül Kocamer Şahin (2021) Effect of attachment styles, emotional regulation difficulty and mindful attention levels on treatment motivation in patients with substance use disorder, Journal of Substance Use, 26:4, 441-448, DOI: [10.1080/14659891.2020.1846807](https://doi.org/10.1080/14659891.2020.1846807)



# Attachment Anxiety Interventions

- Benefit from learning affect regulation skills.
- Focus on treatment interventions that address need for closeness.
- Assist with emotional reactivity.
- Provide support for fear of abandonment.
- Coping skills to assist with emotional reactivity.
- Key: Relaxation skills, cognitive techniques to reduce stress reactivity, and reduction in emotional distress.



# Coping with Abandonment

- Those with attachment anxiety can benefit from learning new affect regulation skills in order to better cope with emotions (Stevens, 2014).
- Developing an understanding of attachment anxiety can assist clinicians with designing new treatment interventions that address the need for closeness, assist with emotional reactivity, and provide support for fear of abandonment.





# Reduce Emotional Distress

- Upon the development of a supportive therapeutic relationship, those with attachment anxiety can benefit from relaxation skills, distraction coping techniques, and the use of cognitive techniques to reduce stress sensitivity and alleviate emotional distress (Ponizovsky et al., (2013).



**TABLE. Emotion-altering actions of addictive drugs**

Drug class	Action
Opiates (eg, oxycodone, heroin, morphine)	Reduce intense feelings of anger, rage, agitation
Depressants (eg, alcohol, benzodiazepines, barbiturates)	
Low to moderate doses	Relax restricted, tense, anxious feelings
High doses	Obliterate distressing emotions
Stimulants (eg, cocaine, amphetamines, methylphenidate)	Activate and energize depressed individuals, augment hypomanic symptoms; calm and improve focus for persons with ADHD
Cannabis	Both stimulating and sedating, depending on the symptoms



# Addressing Avoidance

- Skills that focus on awareness in order to gain better insight into their emotions.
- Strategies that engage the client in a non-threatening manner.
- Unique approach to addressing their need to withdrawal.
- Consider tailored approach to “usual and customary practices.”
- Use of mindfulness training to improve awareness of emotions, which can enhance attachment security.



# Avoidance and Trust

- An individual with attachment avoidance is reluctant to trust others, tends to withdrawal, cannot feel (Marmarosh, 2014), and does not believe that expressing their emotions will result in positive results (Monti & Rudolph, 2014; Silva et al., 2012; Tasca et al., 2011).



# Additional Support

■ Results suggest that individuals high on attachment avoidance may require additional support to move toward psychosocial adaptation.

■ Maras, D., Balfour, L., Lefebvre, M., & Tasca, G. A. (2021). Attachment avoidance and health-related quality of life: Mediating effects of avoidant coping and health self-efficacy in a rehabilitation sample. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 66(4), 618–630. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000398>



# Avoidance and Withdrawal

- Jenkins and Tonigan (2011) found that attachment avoidance was related to less frequent 12-step meeting attendance and fewer 12-step behaviors such as obtaining a sponsor.
- The Jenkins & Tonigan (2011) study provided support for the need to design treatment interventions that factor in the tendency of attachment avoidant individuals to withdrawal from treatment.



# Importance of Mindfulness

- Pepping et al. (2013) and Pepping et al. (2014) encouraged the use of mindfulness training in individuals with attachment difficulties such as awareness as it might lead to an increase in security through enhanced emotion regulation.



# Better Treatment Outcomes

- Developing an understanding of attachment is essential as higher attachment security predicts better therapeutic outcomes (Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013).





# The Super Client

- The client that is engaged, always participates, and is motivated.
- The client that all other are compared to.
- Most likely securely attached and has access to emotion regulation skills.



# Resistance or Attachment?

- Is it resistance or a problem with attachment?
- Refusal to participate in 12-steps.
- Problems with therapeutic relationship.
- Difficulty accessing and expressing feelings.
- Withdrawal from treatment.



# Emotion Regulation Importance

- Difficult to change but can access attachment change through emotion regulation strategies.
- Emotion awareness is key (Monti & Rudolph, 2014).
- Karreman and Vingerhoets (2012) found that differences in attachment anxiety and avoidance lead to different strategies for managing emotions.



# Attachment and Therapy Relationship

- Clinicians need a mindful approach related to insecure attachment. Exploring attachment can assist with understanding resistance or reluctance to engage in therapy.
- Taylor, P. T., Rietzschel, J., Danquah, A., & Berry, K. (2015). The role of attachment style, attachment to therapist, and working alliance in response to psychological therapy. *Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 88(3), 240-253. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/papt.12045>



# Important to Know Style

■ Important to know both the client and your own attachment style and reflect on how this might manifest during the therapy process.

■ Bucci, S., Seymour-Hyde, A., & Berry, K. (2016). Client and therapist attachment styles and working alliance. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 23(2), 155-165. <http://dx.doi.org/10-1002/cpp.1944>



# Cost Effective Treatment

- Goodall (2015) asserted that developing an understanding of the relationship between attachment style and emotions can provide cost-effective treatment interventions focused on explicit teaching of specific coping strategies.



# Treatment Termination

■ Attachment theory offers a road map for understanding how to terminate treatment as endings activate the attachment system and trigger emotion regulation strategies.

■ (Marmarosh, 2017)



# Practice Change

- Future practice should focus on understanding attachment styles as they relate to emotion regulation, as treatment planning may be ineffective without this understanding (Brenning & Braet, 2013).
- Consider adding attachment measures in treatment.
- Appreciate attachment as a factor in treatment engagement.
- Understand that there are different components of emotion regulation.





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