

## **Anxiety in Relationships**

*Overview:* God created Adam & Eve and told them to “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.” (Gen 1:28) We are relational creatures and as we are more restfully connected to others (give and receive in relationships) we move away from anxiety.

Our basic fear that prompts anxiety is separation from God. The more we experience connection and rest with the Lord the more we are at peace with the humans in our life.

- God is love, and the one who remains in love remains in God, and God remains in him. In this, love is made complete with us so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment, because as he is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; instead, perfect love drives out fear, because fear involves punishment. So the one who fears is not complete in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, “I love God,” and yet hates his brother or sister, he is a liar. For the person who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And we have this command from him: The one who loves God must also love his brother and sister. (1 John 4:16-21)

## **Attachment theory**

Attachment theory is a psychological framework attempting to describe how human beings respond when they are hurt by others, become aware of potential harm in relationship or are separated from loved ones. When infants experience trouble they seek out a familiar caregiver looking for protection and emotional support. When a caregiver responds and meets the child's needs a secure attachment is formed. It is believed that infants need to develop a stable relationship with at least one primary caregiver to develop well socially and emotionally. If not, it is believed that that a child will develop unhealthy attachment styles that can negatively impact their conscience, empathy and behavior or lead to distrust of and disconnection from others.

The attachment style we develop provides a general framework for relationships throughout life.

In addition to how a primary caregiver interacted with the child, it is wise to consider that a multiplicity of factors such as the social milieu of the neighborhood, school, extracurricular activities, and how siblings interact with the child contribute to the development of one's attachment style. Often these other social environments are reinforcing and exacerbating the attachment style that is being formed in the home through primary care givers.

## **The Four Attachment Styles**

*Secure attachment style* – A person with a secure attachment style has come to believe they cannot be separated from love – it is in them, with them, pursuing them and will never forsake them.

- Their dignity as a human has been affirmed and nourished and their neediness did not overwhelm their primary caregivers. Thus, such a child has come to believe that being loved fits them and they can find it when they need it and give it when it is needed.

- Experiencing a secure bond helps them to see others as dependable, approachable, and able to meet their needs. If they perceive trouble, they will reach out for an attachment figure with some level of comfort.
- A securely attached person will be more comfortable pouring their heart out to God (positively and negatively including anger) and will be comfortable sharing weaknesses or struggles openly with the Lord without fear of God's rejection or abandonment. Their sense is that God will continue to be a helpful nurturing presence in their life.

A secure attachment combined with the cultivation of competency builds an internal locus of control, the key factor in healthy coping throughout life. Securely attached children learn what makes them feel good; they discover what makes them (and others) feel bad, and they acquire a sense of agency: that their actions can change how they feel and how others respond. Securely attached kids learn the difference between situations they can control and situations where they need help. They learn they can play an active role when faced with difficult situations. (Pg. 115) The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel Van Der Kolk

*Avoidant attachment style* – A person with an avoidant attachment style has a sense that they are worthy of love and can obtain it, but they view others as either unwilling, unavailable or untrustworthy of providing for their emotional needs.

- Assumed neediness as a child was too much for others.
- Neediness not bad it is just that others won't extend themselves to meet their needs.
- Such a child becomes very self-reliant and will often dismiss or minimize their needs and turn to self-nurturing.
- More other-centered contempt and less self-contempt
- Such a person will tend toward a more pharisaical approach and feel close to God without realizing they are going through the motions (older brother).
- They might be unknowingly resentful or angry at God and will lack gratitude and not have a sense of wonder that enhances faith.

*Ambivalent attachment style* - A person with an ambivalent attachment style views themselves as undeserving of love or unable to get the caregivers attention but believe that the caregivers can provide emotional support or safety.

- Assumed wasn't worthy to be cared for.
- Because their neediness is the problem, they may act out to get attention.
- Such a child can become more self-absorbed and feel entitled to meet their needs without recognizing it.
- More self-contempt than other centered contempt.
- This person will often have a hard time regularly experiencing attachment with the Lord and won't feel as conflicted if they don't "follow the rules" (younger brother)
- Have a hard time believing God wants to be good to them and normally have latent resentment/anger at the Lord they need to lament

*Disorganized attachment style* - A person with and disorganized attachment style views themselves as unworthy of love or incompetent to obtain it; and they view others as unwilling, unavailable or untrustworthy to give it.

- No rest because they don't trust themselves or others.
- This type of attachment style can often result from consistently abusive behavior which helps to nurture a sense of chaos that the person may continue to act out over a lifetime. This is a result of having experienced the attachment figure meeting their needs; and at other times, rejecting or abusing them.
- Such a person will be overly emotional and cycle between wanting to be close and avoiding closeness.
- A person with a disorganize attachment style struggles to trust in God's love and providence. Doubts or questions about God or faith will bring guilt or fear that they are betraying God or letting him down. As such they will have a hard time giving to and receiving from the Lord.

*Earned secure attachment style* - This is where a person reconciles child-hood experiences and moves into the future more able to maintain attachment in a way that provides relational and functional thriving.

### **Attachment reminders**

1. Secure attaching impacts rational processes (the brain is a social organism)
2. Grounded faith can help us use redemptive anxiety to take risk, explore and grow. (As iron sharpens iron, so a friend sharpens a friend. Prov 27:17)
3. Redemption at its core involves moving toward a more secure attachment but the flesh will fight against this (submission and resistance)
4. Navigating into a secure attachment style involves transitioning through the tension between given family and Gospel family and living into a restful sense of family.
  - A. Jesus taught that living into your Gospel family will challenge and redeem your sense of given family (Matt 8:21-22, 10:34-39 & 12:46-50). In the U.S. this looks very different than Biblical times. (There is more transition back and forth between the two families today)
  - B. To promote Gospel living family "ought to" provide belonging, support in life purposes & share resources. This is often balanced between the families.
  - C. Emotional time out from given family – we are adopted into God's family – not a quick process. Here we recognize our themes and make movement on them. Gospel family should be much better at helping us make movement on our themes. The church should focus on being a family (worship, togetherness and endurance) instead of on functioning well and moralism.
  - D. Given family & Gospel family can easily preach the law. The freedom to live into God's love through family obligations deepens trust and connection with the Lord and his church.

- E. Both families flourish more when they provide an eschatological vision that affirms your deep longing for oneness with others while helping you wait for God to fully set things right.
- i. If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone. (1 Cor 15:19)
  - ii. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. (1 Cor 13:12)
  - iii. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, "Look, God's home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever." And the one sitting on the throne said, "Look, I am making everything new!" And then he said to me, "Write this down, for what I tell you is trustworthy and true." And he also said, "It is finished! I am the Alpha and the Omega—the Beginning and the End. To all who are thirsty I will give freely from the springs of the water of life. All who are victorious will inherit all these blessings, and I will be their God, and they will be my children. (Rev 21:3-7)

## Questions

1. What causes you to experience anxiety most in relationships?
2. Is your attachment style
  - a. Secure: I don't feel anxiety in my relationships
  - b. Avoidant: I believe others care about me but will not extend themselves to do it
  - c. Ambivalent: I believe I am underserving of love.
3. If you identify with one of the attachment styles in what ways can you think and practice differently that will help reduce anxiety? For instance, someone with an ambivalent attachment style could practice at receiving a gift or compliment and not downplay it. In addition, they could begin to believe that any good love that is given is not earned or deserved it is a gift.
4. Have you thought about the difference between given family and Gospel family?
5. Are you trying too hard to make your given family closer or more attached than they can be? Does this cause unnecessary anxiety?
6. Are there ways you can deepen relationships in your Gospel family that will help those relationships function more like family?