

CHAPTER 1

When the Tiger Comes: Origin of the Attachment System

Every time I attended Harry Reis's class on attachment theory, I was late. That was because the start of Harry's class at the University of Rochester conflicted with the end of a writing class I was teaching at a nearby college, and even if I made all the lights and quickly found a parking space, the soonest I could get there was ten minutes after class began. So I'd enter the amphitheater-style lecture hall quietly through a side door and take a seat in the back.

That turned out to be an advantage, though, because from the back of the room I could see all one hundred or so students, including who was paying attention and who wasn't. That first day, I noticed, in the seats nearby, a young man reading e-mail, a young woman on Facebook, and a young man checking stock quotes.

"This is a damn good theory," Harry was saying as I took my seat that first day. He stood six foot three, had a deep, resonant voice, and spoke with a slow, deliberate cadence. "We think it explains an unbelievable amount of human behavior: about our childhoods, about intimate adult relationships, about nearly all relationships throughout our lives."

When I'd first realized Harry was one of the country's leading relationship researchers *and* that he lived and taught about attachment theory in my hometown of Rochester, New York, I invited him for coffee. Halfway through our meeting, a middle-aged woman sitting at the next table suddenly turned around to us and nearly shouted, "Wow! I'd pay to be at your table! What you're sayin' is so true. Wished I'd known all that when I was younger-it would've saved me a heap of grief!"

Oddly, Harry hadn't seemed surprised by the interruption.

"People hear about this attachment stuff," he told me, "and say, 'Yeah, that's what I want to study. That's what I want to understand.'"

I wanted to understand my own attachment style and how it may have been affecting my relationships and behavior. I'd been through a divorce and then a long-term romance. If knowing more about attachment could help me find a satisfying, stable relationship, that's what I was after. Later, my interests would broaden to include understanding how attachment influences people throughout their lives and throughout society: their relationships with family and friends, how they raise their kids, get along at work, cope with loss, and much more. Could attachment theory be a key to unlocking a deeper understanding of our behavior and everyday lives?

Onto a large screen, Harry projected photos of parents—human and nonhuman—holding and protecting their babies: a mother carried her child on her back; a father held his son on his knee; a cat nursed two kittens; a polar bear sheltered her baby under her body.

"Let's look at this first slide," Harry said. "Notice that in all these different species, there is a physically close, protective bond between an adult caregiver and an infant."

The room was quiet except for the clicking of a hundred students typing on laptops. Taking notes in longhand, I was a visitor from another generation.

Harry's next slide showed a black-and-white photo of a middle-aged British man looking distinguished in a tweed sport coat over a wool sweater.

"In Britain during World War II," Harry began, "fathers were off at war, and during the bombing of London many mothers were killed, so there were a rather large number of children brought to orphanages. And working in the orphanages was a young British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst named John Bowlby."

The red dot of Harry's laser pointed at the image of the distinguished-looking Brit.

"Bowlby was struck by the behavior of these infants," he continued. "What he observed was that even though the orphans were housed in a clean, germ-free environment, were fed well and given good medical care, they didn't thrive. They were underweight. They became depressed. Some died."

The young woman in front of me who had been on Facebook looked up from her laptop.

"And Bowlby observed another thing," said Harry. "He was struck by the way these infants called for, cried for, and watched the door for their mothers, what he called 'searching behaviors.' And he took that to be the human equivalent of what animals do—you know, if you've ever seen a young kitten or a puppy and some scary person walks in the room, what do they do? They run immediately back to their mother for safety."

Monkeys

Harry didn't mention it that day, but at about the same time Bowlby was noting the effects of maternal deprivation on orphaned children, Harry Harlow, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, was observing a related phenomenon in monkeys. His work would later influence Bowlby.

In his most famous experiment, Harlow separated baby rhesus monkeys from their mothers at birth. He then provided them a choice of two surrogate "mothers": one made of wire and holding a bottle of milk, the other also of wire but covered with a soft cloth and without any milk. The result? Most of the time, the infant monkeys clung to the soft-cloth mother—and ran to her whenever they were frightened; they used the wire mothers only for milk.

"These findings are legendary in psychology," Lee Kirkpatrick has written, "as well they should be. They demonstrated convincingly that, at least in rhesus monkeys, infants' interest in their mothers was not

reducible to the need or desire for food or breast; [instead,] they spontaneously sought physical contact and comfort.”

Babies and Their Caregivers

There is no such thing as a baby—meaning that if you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a baby and someone. A baby cannot exist alone but is essentially part of a relationship.

—pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott

Harry Reis took a couple of steps away from the lecturer’s table and faced the class.

“You know,” he said, “horses can run within a day or two of birth.

Human babies have the longest period of vulnerability of any species on earth.

That’s one of their ways of surviving. But we can’t do that. Human babies have the longest period of vulnerability of any species on earth. For seven or eight years of your life, if there isn’t someone taking care of

you, forget it—you’re dead. If a tiger comes, you have no chance of survival.”

Harry paused, scanning the class.

“Okay, so you’re an infant,” he continued, “and there’s a tiger coming. What’s your way of surviving? If you can find a caregiver and keep that caregiver close—someone who’ll provide you food and shelter, and when the tiger comes, take you away from danger—this would be your way of surviving.

“So how do you locate and then keep close to that caregiver?” As he moved toward an answer, I felt the class’s tension rise. “How do you find and hold close to that caregiver?” he repeated.

“You cry!” he shouted. “You cry, meaning, ‘Something’s going on that’s scaring me! I want somebody to protect me!’”

Babies use other “seeking behaviors” too, Harry explained, such as turning their heads, following with their eyes, and reaching with their hands. “Bowlby argued that these behaviors—crying, staying near the caregiver, etc.—were designed to maintain physical closeness because infants who did that were more likely to survive.”

These behaviors of babies, in other words, are not random. They are biologically designed to help a human infant survive by locating and attaching to a competent, reliable caregiver.

Harry again pointed the laser at the photo of the man in the tweed jacket.

“And the profound idea Bowlby came up with,” he continued, “and in retrospect this seems like such a simple idea, is that there is an evolutionary system called the attachment system.

“The attachment system was designed,” he explained, “to do one very simple thing: to create and keep physical closeness between infant and caregiver. Infants who displayed these behaviors and caregivers who responded were the ones whose genes were more likely to survive to the next generation. Infants who didn’t do it, who said, in effect, ‘pretty tiger’ and wanted to go talk to the tiger, or caregivers who were more concerned about themselves and didn’t go to pick up the infant, their genes did not get passed on.

“So it’s a very, very simple, straightforward evolutionary adaptation,” he said. “And you all have it. You don’t have to go to the store to buy the program called Attachment System. It’s hardwired into you. You come with it already installed.”

As Harry said this, a young man next to me, playing Tetris, looked up.

*Attachment Figure: A Secure Base and Safe Haven,
in Close Proximity*

“When we say a child has an ‘attachment figure,’” Professor Reis explained, “we mean a person—and it’s usually the mother—who fulfills three essential functions of the attachment system. The first is called

'proximity maintenance,' which means the caregiver is someone the child keeps close for safety and comfort. The next two are 'secure base' and 'safe haven': children need a secure base from which to explore and a safe haven to come back to when life gets scary."

And true attachment figures, whether for a child or adult, meet two additional criteria: that the threat of separation from the attachment figure causes anxiety, often accompanied by protest (in the case of a child that would be crying), and that the loss of the attachment figure causes grief.

"Okay," Harry continued, "so infants have this attachment system, which acts like a sort of radar. When something threatening happens—tiger, hunger—the radar activates and the infant thinks, 'Is my attachment figure near? Is she attentive, able to interpret my signals of distress, and available to provide the help I need?'"

Typically, children have multiple attachment figures. These may include both parents, maybe a grandparent or two, an older sibling, and regular care providers. From the child's perspective, however, these people are not interchangeable. A hierarchy of attachment figures exists, with one special primary figure (usually the mother) at the top. "If the child were suddenly frightened," notes Lee Kirkpatrick, "and all of his or her attachment figures were lined up in a row, the primary attachment figure is the one to whom the child would run first."

Mental Models

In the first years of life . . . a child extracts patterns from his relationships . . . [and] stores an impression of what love feels like.

—psychiatrist Thomas Lewis and colleagues

"Bowlby believed that as you grow up," Harry continued to the class, "you form beliefs about what you can expect from significant others—that is, you learn, 'This is how powerful, caregiving people are going to

relate to me.' These beliefs stem from our earliest experiences with attachment figures, mostly in the first two years. And these beliefs, once formed, form a 'mental model' in the child—actually create patterns in the brain—that will influence what that individual expects of relationships and how he behaves in relationships, not just in childhood but over the whole of a lifetime, or as Bowlby put it, 'from the cradle to the grave.'"

And it's these mental models, Harry noted, that cause the experiences of the infant to later affect that individual's behavior as an adult. "This points up one place where Bowlby differed with Freud," Harry added. "Freud believed that an awful lot of stuff that went on was in the infant's mind—you know, the infant imagined this libidinal attachment to his or her mother. Bowlby didn't buy that. Instead, Bowlby felt that the *actual interactions* that occur between a mother and child are what's important, and that the mental models formed from those interactions are what transform the infant's early experience into personality traits that last a lifetime.

"These early beliefs are about the self in relation to others," Harry continued. "Am I lovable? Am I someone other people are going to value and care for? How comfortable am I being close, depending on another person, making myself vulnerable to another person? When I need others, will they be there for me?"

*When I need others, will
they be there for me?*

"If the answer is yes," he went on, "the infant experiences a sense of security." Harry took a loudly exaggerated deep breath, imitating a relieved infant whose mother had perhaps just picked them up and run into a cave to protect them from a tiger. "'Okay, no big deal. I'm fine,' which produces a sense of confidence that nothing dangerous is going to happen. The radar gets shut down and everything's okay."

This person, explained Harry, will come out of childhood trusting that others are generally available and responsive, and will think, "I can trust people. I can allow myself to be close to people. I'm not afraid of intimacy."

This is a secure attachment.

“But what if the radar system says no?” asked Harry. “What if the child does *not* feel protected by a competent and reliable attachment figure?”

In that case, there are two defensive responses.

“First,” Harry said, “is when the infant cries and cries, and the caregiver just doesn’t give a damn, doesn’t respond, leaves the infant alone. No proximity, no safe haven, no secure base. This child may think”—and here he channeled the voice of a frightened infant—“‘There is no caregiver available who can take care of me and who will deal with this threat for me. I’m an infant; I can’t even crawl. I’ll stick around this caregiver because what other choice do I have? But I’m not going to get too close and I’m not going to protest too much because I’ve already discovered these things don’t work.’”

“This individual,” Harry continued, “whose caregiver is *pretty much always* unresponsive, learns to shut down and avoid intimacy.”

This is an “insecure avoidant attachment.”

“The other defensive response,” he said, “occurs in infants when the caregiver is *inconsistent*—sometimes responding, sometimes not. The caregiver is sometimes there, sometimes not; sometimes provides a safe haven and secure base, but sometimes does not. This infant says, ‘I can’t figure out how I get my caregiver to come over and take care of me. I don’t know what to do. I’m feeling abandoned, so I better just put all my energy into trying to get that person over here *right now*.’”

“Instead of shutting down,” Harry explained, “this infant protests and cries even more. He clings and does everything possible to signal that he is really, really distressed and, ‘By God, you’re my caregiver and you just gotta take care of me!’”

This is an “insecure anxious attachment.”

Drawing from a large number of studies, among the US population about 55 percent of people tend to be relatively secure, 25 percent relatively avoidant, and 20 percent relatively anxious.

“These are pretty constant results,” Harry said.

They are also pretty consistent universally. Studies show similar breakdowns among attachment styles across the globe, with only

slight variations among Western and non-Western nations, developed and developing societies.

I found Harry's point about mental models neatly summarized by Dr. Kirkpatrick. "In essence," he writes, "mental models represent the child's answer to the question: 'Can I count on my attachment figure to be available and responsive when needed?' The three possible answers are yes (secure), no (avoidant), and maybe (anxious)."

John Bowlby himself had an emotionally difficult childhood. Raised in a typical upper-middle-class English home of the early twentieth century, he and his siblings had little contact with his parents. "Like most upper- and middle-class mothers in the Edwardian time," biographer Suzan van Dijken has written, "John's mother handed over the care of her children to a nanny and some nursemaids."

His mother was self-centered and his father a bully, observes psychologist and author Robert Karen. The parents had a "stiff-upper-lip approach to all things emotional" and set themselves utterly apart from their children, handing over care of John and his siblings to a head nanny, a "somewhat cold creature" but the only stable figure in the children's lives. There was also a series of "undernannies"—young girls, none of whom stayed very long. Sent to boarding school at age eight, John Bowlby later told his wife he "wouldn't send a dog to boarding school at that age."

All of this, in Bowlby's view, had a "lasting negative impact."

To me, Bowlby's early childhood has a familiar ring.

One of my earliest memories, from about age three, is of my father leaving for work in the morning. He and I eat breakfast together—my mother and older brother and sister are upstairs dressing—and then he has to leave. I run to the living room and climb onto a window seat facing the driveway and as he drives off to work I kick and pound against the window, screaming for him not to go.

From the outside, I must have looked like a bendable Gumby stuck with suction cups to the window.

Only when I became a parent myself did I begin to wonder: my mother didn't work outside the house and would have been home, so when Dad left in the morning, why did I have a tantrum?

Between class sessions, Harry Reis and I met for coffee. He wore jeans, a fleece jacket, and hiking boots. Up close, I felt the striking difference between his six-foot-three frame and mine of five eight. I'd wanted to ask him about early childhood memories and their possible connection to a person's attachment history—specifically, mine.

"I have memories of childhood," I confided to him, "that make me wonder about my own attachment style." I explained that I have few memories of my mother, that my dad sometimes cared for me but so did my sister, who was seven years older, and there had been various nannies—just like Bowlby—none of whom I could remember.

"I'm not even sure who my primary attachment figure was," I confessed.

About my father, my memories were mixed. I remembered that when I was little he'd carry me piggyback upstairs to bed. I'd hold on tight and lean in close, pressing my cheek against his and because it was the end of the day, feeling the comforting scratchiness of his beard. But he could also be bullying. He had a sharp tongue, paddled me, and once dragged me by the arm out of the house to nursery school.

"I just don't know if any of that added up to a safe haven or secure base, or what kind of attachment experience I had," I told Harry.

He cautioned that the way we remember our parents and families and even ourselves at the earliest ages can be faulty. Point well taken, I thought. Having by then raised three children, I wouldn't want my kids to characterize their whole childhoods based on a few random incidents.

Still, I found it puzzling that out of all the events that would have occurred in those early years, the ones I seemed to recall suggested a lack of attachment to my mother or any consistent caregiver. And yet I couldn't even be sure the memories were accurate.

Fortunately, I still had a slender thread of a chance to find out. My mother had died six years earlier, but my father was still living. He was ninety-five, and for his age doing very well. Though he moved slowly, with a cane or walker, he lived on his own, drove, and enjoyed meals out with friends. Several times recently he'd fallen but sustained no major injuries. And his mind remained sharp: in recent months he'd read, among other books, a six-hundred-page biography of Lyndon Johnson and a dense history of ancient Carthage. Long retired from the printing business that he and his brother founded during the Depression, Dad soldiered on without complaint, spending long stretches of time alone.

Harry encouraged me to use my remaining time with him wisely. "Given his early caregiving relationship with you," he said, "his eventual loss will be difficult. Make sure you handle this properly."

Properly?

"Be sure whatever you need from him in terms of information, family stories, or emotional connection, you get—or just come to terms with the fact that you're never going to get it."

Soon after, on one of my regular afternoon visits to his apartment, I found Dad in a typical setting: in the corner of his small den, in a white leather reclining chair, TV and reading lamp on, newspaper open on his chest—asleep.

The skin on the backs of his hands and forearms was paper thin and mottled with purple bruises—this due to blood thinners he took for a heart condition. He was bald except around the sides and back of his head where there was a delicate fringe of gray. His heavy eyebrows were white; in each ear he wore a hearing aid. On his chin and cheeks was that familiar five o'clock beard, though most of the stubble was now gray.

I woke him gently, and we chatted about the day.

"Dad," I then said, "I'd like to ask you about some memories I have from when I was little. Would you be okay with that?"

"With what?" he asked. His hearing wasn't so good, but his voice remained deep and strong.

“With me asking you some questions,” I repeated.

“Sure. Shoot.”

I asked him about the time when I stood on the window seat so upset when he left in the morning.

“I remember your tantrums,” he said, his voice steady but without emotion. “You reacted to the fact that I was going to work.”

He said “tantrums” so I guessed it happened more than once.

“But,” I continued, “wasn’t Mother home?”

“What?”

“Mother didn’t work,” I repeated, speaking louder. “She must have been home, right?”

“She was, and I tried to turn you over to her,” he said.

I asked about how long the tantrums went on for, thinking he might say a few days or even weeks.

“I think it went on for a year,” he said.

Oh.

“You have to remember, Mother wasn’t well.”

In her late twenties my mother contracted what was always described as a mild case of polio.

“I was the strong person in the family,” he continued. “I doubled in duties. I put you to bed, got you up, and fed all of you. But I didn’t have much time. I had to get you all to school and get myself to work. That’s why we had various help in the house.

“I used to say to you kids: ‘Someday when I die, they’ll put on my gravestone, *He was not only a father, but a mother too.*’”

Dad and I sat silently for a while, and then he drifted off to sleep. I switched off the reading light and muted the TV. Before I left, I kissed him softly, pressing my cheek to his, feeling the scratchiness.

The “various help” Dad had referred to included two live-in nannies. First was Miss Kelly, who was nearly seventy when Dad hired her. He made a room in the attic for her, and she moved in right after I was born. But just after I turned a year old, she died suddenly of a heart attack. My parents replaced her with another live-in, Mrs. Hepburn.

I have no memory of Miss Kelly or Mrs. Hepburn, but what I do

remember is going at age three with my mother to the office of a child psychologist. The reason for the visit was that I had developed a stutter. In the psychologist's office, I sat in a big chair and tried to answer his questions. Then he had me wait outside while he talked with my mother.

Years later, I asked my mother about that visit. She said the doctor advised her and my father to fire Mrs. Hepburn, which they did.

"Why'd he want you to fire her?" I asked.

"He said I should take care of you myself. He said, 'This child doesn't know who his mother is.'"

When I arrived at Harry's next lecture, a slide on the screen announced an upcoming exam. But he had lightened the mood by including on the slide a drawing of a ghost and the words, "Happy Halloween."

"Next week is one of my favorite holidays," he announced. "Anyone who comes to class suitably attired will be suitably rewarded." He looked down at his notes, paused, then looked back up. "And just saying you're dressed like a college student won't count."

Harry began by reviewing the concept of mental models, noting that once attachment styles are formed, as we get older "they affect our behavior not only in close relationships but in many, many other kinds of situations, as well."

For example, he said, the theory applies "perfectly well" to people's relationship to their pets and to God.

Pets and God?

"There are some people who have relationships to their pets or to God—and I'm not equating God with your pets; I'm just saying there is a process that can be similar. You can be securely attached to God, or you can be anxiously attached: 'I'm worried what God is going to think about me and I'm constantly worried about pleasing God.' Or you can have an avoidant attachment: 'God doesn't care about what happens to me.'"

Harry asked us to do a mental experiment.

“Close your eyes,” he said, “and try to recall an episode when your mother or father, or a romantic partner, behaved in a way that increased the sense of trust you felt toward him or her, and another time that reduced the sense of trust.”

I thought immediately of a time when I was about three. I was trying to dress myself but was unsure which sock went on which foot. My mother was in another room, talking on the phone. I called to her, asking about the socks. She called back, “It doesn’t matter. They can go on either foot.” But I didn’t think she was telling the truth, so I didn’t put on the socks.

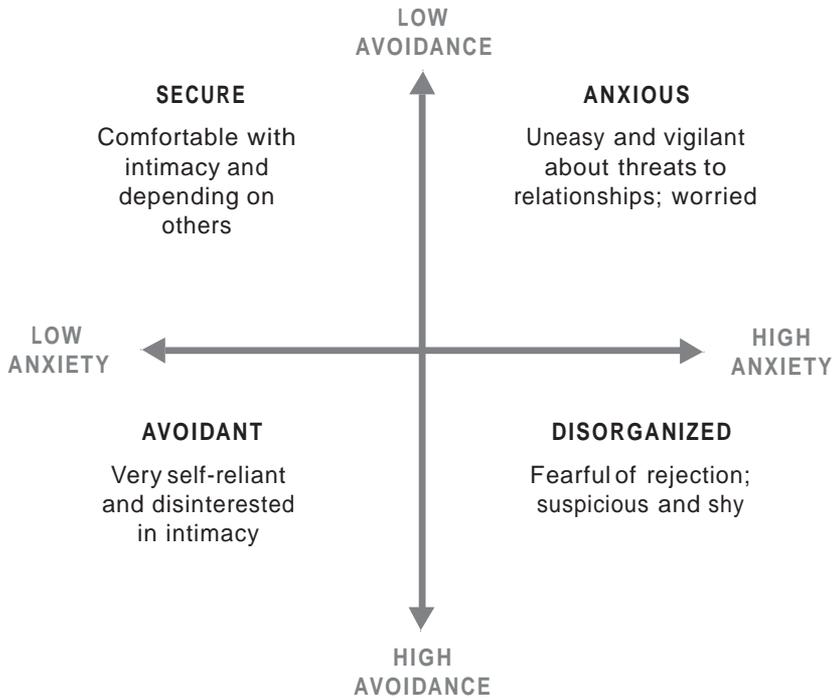
Harry projected a slide with bar graphs showing how in a study, when people were timed to see how fast they came up with each scenario, people with secure attachments recalled positive memories faster than negative ones. But avoidant and anxious people were faster at coming up with negative memories.

“One thing these mental models do is make certain kinds of beliefs and expectations always accessible, always at the top of our minds and easily tapped into,” he explained. “They’re like a computer’s operating system. They take over and don’t let the computer do anything it doesn’t like.”

Next, Harry put up a slide entitled “Attachment Patterns in Adulthood.” The slide showed two axes, one for “avoidance” and the other for “anxiety.”

“We really don’t speak in terms of strict categories anymore,” he said, but of people falling somewhere on these axes, relatively higher in avoidance and lower in anxiety, or low in avoidance but high in anxiety, and those who are low in each we call secure. Some individuals, Harry added, can actually be high in both avoidance and anxiety, in a quadrant labeled “disorganized.” These are often children who have been neglected or maltreated. “This, of course, is the worst place to be,” he said.

Harry, knowing well his college audience, said he would next summarize how attachment styles influence adults in romantic relationships.



Three Attachment Styles

There is a thread connecting life in your mother's arms and life in your lover's arms.

—psychologist Theodore Waters

Secure

People who in early childhood had reliable and competent caregivers—and hence a secure attachment—generally feel comfortable with intimacy, Harry explained. They're willing to trust and allow themselves to be vulnerable. They believe other people are basically good and

assume that others act with good intentions. In romantic relationships, they start with the expectation that their partners will also be loving and responsive. They're able to communicate well about their own needs and to respond to their partners' needs. They are not overly sensitive to rejection and do not fear abandonment. If a relationship doesn't work out, they have high enough self-regard to believe they will find another person to love and who will love them.

They are also better able to manage their emotions in the face of serious threats, such as illness, job loss, death of a loved one, or fears for their own mortality. In the case of illness, for example, secure people will tend to be realistic about their condition, have confidence in their physicians and the prescribed treatment, cope with infirmity, and stay focused on the prospects for recovery.

People fortunate enough to come out of childhood with a secure attachment, Harry concluded, generally make the best partners. "So if you're not secure and you can get yourself a secure partner," he advised, "you're five steps ahead."

Avoidant

The experience of caregivers not responding to an infant and basically saying, "Take care of yourself," Harry said, produces adults who say things like "I'm uncomfortable being close to others. I find it difficult to trust or open up to others and difficult to allow myself to depend on others. Often partners want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being."

"Avoidant people," he continued, "are less invested in relationships; they just care about them less. They say things like, 'This intimacy stuff is a bunch of BS.' They believe strongly in self-reliance, that you should be able to solve all your problems yourself. They also don't like to self-disclose, and disapprove of people who do. In social situations, they can be charming but this is usually in a nonwarm manner, like being

good at entertaining. When avoidant people are in a relationship, they are relatively poor at giving support when their partner needs it, and when conflict occurs, they tend to distance themselves.

In terms of emotion regulation, avoidant people tend to deny their feelings about a threatening situation—be it illness, job loss, or grief—and rather than rely on others to help, they will be inclined to try to fix it themselves.

Anxious

The individual who received inconsistent care as an infant likely craves intimacy as an adult. At the same time, though, he is vigilant about threats to the relationship and worries about what's going to happen. "Anxious people," Harry explained, "say things like, 'I worry my partner won't want to stay with me. I find others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away.'"

He went on, "Much of this stems from the realization, 'When I wanted my mother to comfort me, she didn't, or at least I couldn't count on it, so I must not be very lovable, and so I have to keep tabs on other people.' Anxious people also have a 'come here, go away' thing—a push-pull quality in their desire for closeness, reflecting an intense need to be in relationship but at the same time resentment for feeling so insecure without one. They tend to be hypercritical toward partners, feeling let down or rejected when their partners show the slightest lack of attention. They also tend to think about this stuff more; they're often preoccupied with it.

"It's experiencing these big ups and downs—'This is it! No it's not!'—plus feeling that intense need for connection but at the same time resenting the insecurity, that produces in anxious people what is so characteristic of this attachment style: a general sense of ambivalence."

When faced with existential threats, anxious people tend to have

difficulty regulating their emotions. When faced with the death of a loved one, for example, they will tend to grieve longer and more deeply than others. When ill, they will desperately want someone to “make it better,” while at the same time catastrophizing—that is, imagining the worst possible outcome and finding it difficult to trust their own doctors.

Genetics

The genetic lottery may determine the cards in your deck, but experience deals the hand you can play.

—Thomas Lewis and colleagues

As Harry continued lecturing, he posed a question: “Okay, but isn’t it also possible that this stuff is genetic?”

I was sure that was on a lot of minds.

“It’s a fair question,” he said, “but we think that genetics, while a factor in attachment style, are not controlling.”

He spoke of “cross-fostering” experiments. “You can take a mouse of a genetic strain that is prone to anxiety,” he went on, “and say, ‘Hey, what if this mouse is raised by a secure mother? Does the mouse come out secure like the mother or does the mouse come out anxious like its genes?’”

The “anxious gene,” he explained, is one of the *5HTT* receptors, a gene implicated in anxiety and depression because it regulates uptake of the neurotransmitter serotonin.

“What we find,” he continued, “is that it’s the *combination* of high caregiver anxiety and the anxious gene that produces the most anxious offspring.

“There’s something about the caregiver’s behavior that seems to bring out the anxiety in the child, making the child more anxious,” Harry said. “Look, at birth our brain circuits are plastic—flexible—they’re ready to be wired in whatever way experience wires them, but

not so much later on. So there's stuff that goes on with our caregivers that can either enhance or discourage development of these anxious circuits."

In fact, despite great effort, no definitive connection between genes and attachment has been found. In one study looking at the genomes of more than 2.5 million people, researchers found no significant relation between genes and attachment style.

Insecurity Has Its Advantages

While secure attachment may best enable an individual to find a mate and maintain a long-term, stable relationship, Harry noted, insecure attachment need not be seen as a disorder or as a sentence to a lifetime of relationship hell. If more than half the population is predisposed to insecure attachment, after all, we'd expect it to confer some advantage in evolutionary terms. In fact, during infancy, insecurity is adaptive: for children in a poor relationship environment, it can be protective—for the anxious child, it can help get Mom or another caregiver to pay attention, and for the avoidant child, it can help one avoid being hurt by rejection. In those situations, both options are more effective than just continuing to behave like a secure child.

Moreover, for adults, emerging research suggests that both avoidant and anxious attachments carry benefits that are valuable to both the individual and the community.

Israeli researcher Tsachi Ein-Dor and others, for example, have suggested that in early human settlements, tribal members with anxious attachments—ever vigilant to early signs of a threat—would have functioned as "sentinels," alerting others to danger. And tribal members with avoidant attachments—inclined to be self-reliant and act independently—would have functioned as "rapid responders," taking decisive yet dangerous action to protect the community.

On a personal level, insecure attachment also confers some benefits. Avoidant individuals—self-reliant and able to function without

close proximity to significant others—do especially well at jobs that require solo travel or long hours working independently. And, as noted, it is often anxious individuals—ever sensitive to threats—who act as early warning systems of danger, the so-called “sentinel” function.

Incidentally, anxious people also tend to be highly sensitive to the emotional environment and therefore are likely to be overrepresented among writers, musicians, and others who express the human condition through art. Consider, for example, the opening lyric of John Lennon’s song “Mother”: “You had me / But I never had you.” Still, contrast that lyric with the tribute to a mother’s steadfastness in Paul Simon’s “Loves Me Like a Rock”: “My mama loves, she loves me she gets down on her knees and hugs me.”

Harry was beginning to wrap up.

“So, once you’ve got insecurity are you stuck with it forever?”

The answer, he said, is yes and no.

Yes, because, as Bowlby himself argued, mental models of attachment “tend to remain stable.” The best current estimate of the stability of attachment styles over the life span is 70–75 percent. “This means,” Harry explained, “that if we put people in an attachment category, 70 to 75 percent of them will live their lives in that category without changing.”

Earned Secure Attachment

But as far as people being stuck with insecurity, Harry wanted the class to understand a concept called “earned security.”

A quick glance around showed every student paying attention.

“People are ‘earned secure,’” explained Harry, “if everything in your background suggests you should be insecure yet you are not.”

Earned security comes from one of two things: first, a strong, meaningful relationship with another person—not a caregiver—who somehow substitutes for the caregiver. In childhood or adolescence, that could be an aunt or uncle, a foster parent, schoolteacher, mentor, or

coach. In adulthood, it could be a romantic partner or spouse in a successful, stable marriage or a therapist—“some incredibly influential experience with another person that has a profound impact on you,” Harry explained. Second, earned security can also come from deep reflection and meaningful insight into one’s own experience—often with the aid of a therapist—that convinces oneself, “You know, my early experiences really suck but maybe I can do better.”

Harry said that most often earned security results from the combination of a strong, meaningful relationship plus personal insight. “People with earned security are those who by all rights should be a mess but who, through life experiences, have been able to achieve secure attachments. At some level,” he added, “you’re still anxious or avoidant, but you know how to deal with it.”

Class time was up.

“But a better question to ask than, ‘Can I change?’” Harry said, getting in one last point, “is, ‘Are there ways to live a life given my attachment style that can work around some of the bad things?’ And the answer is yes. You can learn to subvert the process. Even if you can’t change your attachment style, by being aware of its influence, you may be able to change the outcomes, and if you can change the outcomes, then who cares what your attachment style actually is?”

I looked over the students—most of them barely out of their teens—as they pulled on sweatshirts and coats. Along with laptops and backpacks, I now realized each carried an attachment style, the result of experiences in early childhood over which they had no control and about which they had little memory. I thought of all the choices and relationships that would be affected by their attachment history: friendships that would endure while others would not, passion and heartbreak, marriage and perhaps divorce, even their choice of careers. I hoped some of what they had learned in Harry’s class might help smooth their way.

For myself, I realized that I likely carried out of Harry's classroom—and probably had carried for nearly sixty years—an anxious attachment style. Harry said, though, that these categories are a matter of degree. So how anxious was I? And could I take advantage of its good parts while, as Harry suggested, finding ways to work around the bad? While my attachment style had been established decades earlier, my investigation of this central and fascinating aspect of our personalities and lives had only just begun.