



STAY
happily married
.com

How Are You and Your Partner Attached?

This is Stay Happily Married #139, "How Are You and Your Partner Attached?"

Welcome to Stay Happily Married, your source for weekly updates on the latest tips and advice to build a happy and healthy marriage.

Today's episode of Stay Happily Married is brought to you by the Rosen Law Firm. For more information, visit us at Rosen.com.

Lee Rosen:

I'm Lee Rosen and I'm your host today. Welcome to the show. When you look at your relationship, what kind of things do you notice? Are you both -- you and your partner -- secure and comfortable in your relationship? Or are there issues with anxieties or closeness?

I'm here today with Dr. Amir Levine. He's a psychiatrist and neuroscientist who's going to talk to us about *Attached*, a brand new book he coauthored with Rachel Heller about adult attachment theory.

Amir grew up in Israel and Canada. He served as a press liaison in the Israeli army after high school and he's worked with a number of well-known journalists. After his service was completed, he enrolled in medical school, eventually completing his residency at Columbia University and earning all kinds of awards and recognitions along the way, including an American psychoanalytic fellowship. He has his own practice in Manhattan and he's currently at Columbia as a principle investigator on a research project sponsored by the National Institute of Health.

This book, *Attached*, is about to be featured in the upcoming January issue of *Scientific American Mind* magazine and it has already received great feedback.

Amir, welcome to the show.

Amir Levine: Hi, Lee. Thank you for having me.

Lee Rosen: Well, I'm excited. You know, you're quite a name out there in the world, great credentials. And I think this is a really interesting topic and I'm glad we have the chance to talk to you.

I've always talked about and heard about the idea of attachment theory in the context of parents and kids. Is that the same stuff we're talking about here? When you talk about attachment, what are we referring to?

Amir Levine: So, yeah, that's a great point because when people think about attachment, people think about how kids attach to their parents. And that's also how initially attachment theory came to be.

A psychologist by the name of Bowlby, a British psychologist, discovered that kids attach to their parents beyond their needs of food and shelter; that they actually have a need to affiliate to their parents and if they were just given food and shelter, they would not survive. Basically, our need to attach to another person is just like oxygen or food. So that's how it all started.

And then in 1987 there was a seminal work done by Dr. -- actually, by two people in Denver who discovered that actually that can also be seen in adults, that adults also have attachment behavior in romantic relationships.

Lee Rosen: Okay. So what does that mean? How does it work in an adult relationship?

Amir Levine: So the way that -- and that's actually also -- it works very similar to the way that it works also in children. It was discovered by Mary Ainsworth, actually, that people and children have different attachment styles. They have different ways in which they attach to their parents and also adults have different ways, different styles, in which they attach to their significant others.

And it divides to three. There's basically a secure attachment style, an anxious attachment style, and an avoidant attachment style.

Lee Rosen: Okay. What does that mean? You've got your three: secure, anxious, and attachment.

Amir Levine: Right.

Lee Rosen: What are you looking at in each of those?

Amir Levine: So basically it really is -- especially in adults -- it really looks at the way that you feel comfortable with intimacy and closeness. And that's how basically the attachment styles are looked at.

So if you have a secure attachment style, then usually what it means is that you're very warm and loving and you feel very comfortable with closeness and intimacy and you're just great at relationships. We like to call these the super-mates of relationships. They're just really -- they know how to communicate easily; they're very good in easing their partners and taking care of their partners. So that's the secure attachment style.

And then the anxious attachment style -- people who have an anxious attachment style, they also love to be close and they seek closeness and intimacy. But they also -- they're very sensitive to any destruction in that closeness. So they need a lot of reassurance. But if they get that reassurance, then they're calm and they're loving.

And then there's the avoidant attachment style. And people who have an avoidant attachment style, they also want to be in a relationship because, again, we all have -- we're all hardwired to want to be attached to someone, to become attached to something. But something funny happens along the line once they become close to their partner; they don't feel too comfortable with too much intimacy and closeness. So then they start to push their partner away and they kind of keep them close to them but at arm's length. So that's the avoidant attachment style.

Lee Rosen: Okay. That makes a lot of sense. And as you talk about the three styles, I'm sort of classifying the people that I know and it makes a lot of sense. You can sort of start slotting people into different types.

Where does this come from? Are we born with it? Where do you get this attachment style?

Amir Levine: That's a great question. So a lot of people ask that question and I think along the line people discovered that there's no clear answer. I think mostly it's by -- we develop an attachment style according to a lot of the experiences that we've had throughout our lives, growing up, being with different people, and also in our adult life being in different relationships. And actually, that's kind of one of the most hopeful things about understanding adult attachment is that attachment styles are both stable and plastic at the same time.

So people do change their attachment styles. In fact, I think one study showed that in the course of four years 25 percent of people

had changed their attachment styles. And that usually happens, actually, when you --

Let's say if you were anxious or if you're avoidant and if you're in a relationship with someone secure, it's almost like having a built-in relationship coach in the relationship and they really teach you secure techniques. And then you become more secure, even without knowing it. You're less anxious if you're anxious, and then you become less avoidant if you're avoidant. You just -- they pull you towards security. So that's great.

Lee Rosen: Right. Makes sense. Is there a way -- most of the folks I think that listen to this program are already married. But I'm just curious, am I correct in assuming that the ideal relationship would be a secure attachment type coupled with another secure attachment type? I mean, that's sort of the gold standard, right?

Amir Levine: I mean, first of all, another really good piece of information is that the majority of the people are actually secure. And that's I think, like, 54 percent of people have a secure attachment style. So that's great news. So there's plenty of them to be found. And secure will get along with secure very well.

But also avoidant and anxious will get along with secure pretty well because, again, they will learn -- they have a role model in the relationship that will show them and will coach them of how to become more secure. So more often than not, they will also learn to become more secure.

The problem starts when you have an anxious and an avoidant together and they really have a mismatched -- it's a big mismatch because they really tend to exacerbate each other's fearful tendencies. So that's where it actually becomes a little bit trickier.

Lee Rosen: Right. Are the anxious and avoidant styles, are they -- you said 54 percent are the secure style. Is it split evenly among the rest of the population between anxious and avoidant?

Amir Levine: Yeah. It's about 25 percent avoidant and about 20-something percent anxious. So yeah. And the funny thing also -- the interesting thing is that you would think, okay, people who are avoidant, they value their independence; they don't want to get too close; they just think that they should really make it on their own and just have their partner next to them just for fun. So you would think they would be a really good match.

But the research shows that people who are avoidant hardly ever get together with one another. And we were really surprised to find that. It's almost like there's no glue for the relationship so they don't find themselves together.

Lee Rosen: Right. They always end up with a different style. That's very interesting. That's just fascinating stuff.

In the book you talk about the various effects that attachment to another person can have on our lives; not just the emotional stuff, but physical too. What sort of impact do you see physically coming from attachment style?

Amir Levine: Right. So the whole idea is -- and people think that they get attached to someone, they think about the psychological aspects of getting attached. They think about that -- if they're in a good relationship, on a good day that makes them happy. And if they get upset with someone, it makes them very upset.

But they don't realize that actually when you become attached to someone it's not just on the psychological level. What happens is that you really become like one physiological unit because research has shown that our partner starts to regulate our autonomic nervous system. And this is the system that actually is responsible for regulating our heart rate, our blood pressure, how we breath, how we sleep, how hungry we are.

And then we don't have control over the -- we don't have control over our blood pressure, for example. But then what happens is that our relationship with our partner or partners, they start to regulate that system. So we become so intricately intertwined that we become like one physiological unit.

So what this means is that if you're in a good relationship, that's really good news because it can really help you be healthier. Some people have high blood pressure. If they're in a good relationship, their blood pressure will go down when they're near their partner. If you have a cut, it will heal faster. So that's really the good news.

But if you're in a relationship that's not so good, then actually it can have a detrimental effect on your health.

Lee Rosen: Very interesting. I guess it shouldn't surprise me but it does. It makes a lot of sense.

What got you -- you're a science guy. I mean, you're a psychiatrist, you're a neuroscientist. What got you interested in this whole idea of studying attachment in adults?

Amir Levine: So I think the way that it happened, actually, was when I was doing my training in child and adolescent psychiatry I was in the therapeutic nursery. And we were doing attachment treatment with mothers and kids. But it was fascinating stuff and I was just really fascinated by the whole topic.

So I started reading more and then I discovered that also adults in their romantic relationships also behave like heavy attachment-related behaviors. And then I stumbled on these attachment styles and, just like you said before, I started to see it all around me. I started to see all the people that I knew in my family, with my friends, with people that I used to be in relationships with.

And it made so much sense that I thought, this will be great if people would know about it because it can help people have better relationships.

Lee Rosen: Is the book aimed at lay people or is this more of a thing you expect other professionals to be reading?

Amir Levine: So the book is completely geared towards the lay person. What we did was initially we give you a little bit of an introduction to explain to you what is attachment. But then we go straight ahead into teaching you how to identify your own attachment style and that of other people's attachment styles. We actually have a really nice quiz that can help you identify both your own and your partner's. We also have the quiz online in AttachedTheBook.com.

So it's pretty easy, actually, to tell different people's attachment styles. And that's really key to really figuring out -- it gives you like a compass to relationships.

And once you do that, then we actually explain to people in more detail about what each attachment style -- what it entails. And that's actually really -- it's very interesting. You all of a sudden see avoidant behavior in a very different way. So that's another portion of the book.

But then I think the most important part is that we teach people what do the secure people do? People have really successful relationships? How do they do it? What are the different tools that they use in order to -- it's almost like they effortlessly have these

great relationships, but there is really a method to that, sort of like the secure method.

Lee Rosen: So let's say I go to the site or I buy the book and I take the test. And I love that you have the quiz on the site at AttachedTheBook.com. I'll put a link to that in the show notes. But I go and I take the quiz and I find out, oh, my gosh, I am an avoidant and I'm married to an avoidant. Disaster. What do I do now? Where do I start?

Amir Levine: So again, as I said before, if you're someone secure then you probably wouldn't even take the quiz because you're already happy in your relationship and they taught you how to become more secure. But if you don't have someone secure in your relationship, then you have to find a secure role model outside of the relationship. And that is something that can actually work really well.

Like, people -- and actually, in the book we suggest -- the way that we -- first of all, we teach people of what it means to be secure. And then we really encourage them to find secure role models outside of their relationships, people that they can learn from -- whether it's parents or friends -- and see how they behave in different situations.

So let's say you're going to the airport and your wife gets really upset that you're not texting her or letting her know that everything is fine. So you say, well, I have a friend who's secure and what they do is that even before the other person gets upset, they just call them straight from the cab before they even take off. And then they just text them right before the plane takes off. And that's it and there's no problem because the other person doesn't get that anxiety because you can actually really show up for them.

So you learn little things to help to take care of your partner in a more secure way.

Lee Rosen: Yeah. Great advice. So you find -- the book will tell us these things that the secure types are doing and that are working for them and we might very well be able to imitate them. Can we ever change our attachment type deep down? Can we actually stop being an anxious or an avoidant and become a secure?

Amir Levine: So the answer is definitely yes. But also -- but not necessarily when you most desperately want to. I think the way that you can change is that -- I mean, you can change yourself but it's very, very hard to change someone else.

So if you can actually -- and the easiest way to change is you actually -- is if a couple are working at it together, because they can both pull towards more security. And I think with time, if you're in a relationship and you're both moving towards more security, you really do change your attachment style. Maybe deep down inside you're going to be anxious, but if you're in a secure relationship, that's not going to matter anymore because you're going to be -- it really is a very dyadic experience. It's not just about who you are, but it's about what the relationship is looking like.

Lee Rosen: Right. That is -- I find the whole thing just very, very interesting. And I never really sort of looked at it in this framework or this model. And it really does -- just having your eyes opened to the different attachment types or styles really does explain a lot more than I would have imagined.

Are there other tips you can offer, both to people just starting out together and those that are already in long-term relationships, that have come from your work and your research?

Amir Levine: Definitely. I think that -- so people who are just starting out, who are dating, my best advice would be to really learn about these different attachment styles and learn to know yourself from that perspective. And look for the person who's right for you. Look for someone who's secure. Look for someone who can really match your attachment needs because that's very, very important. If you guys agree about the level of intimacy and closeness that you want to have in a relationship, you've done half the work. It's really great.

And then for people who are already in a relationship, I think it's really good -- it's very helpful to know that people can change their attachment styles. And even if they don't have someone to show them exactly how to do it in the relationship, I think they can -- once they learn about the secure mindset, they can really also work towards becoming more secure. And it may take some work; it's not going to happen overnight. But it can happen.

I think especially -- the one thing that we always like to tell people about the way that secure people look at the world -- and it's kind of like their basic stance -- is that they have a really deep understanding that their partner's well-being is their well-being. And it's not just a metaphor; it's an actual truth. Because if you're that connected, if you're one physiological unit, you better make sure that your partner is going to be happy because if they're happy, you will be happy. You will be healthier.

So secure people know that innately. They act in the world knowing this truth. And I think that people with other attachment styles, once they realize that, they can make their relationships much, much better.

Lee Rosen: Boy, that really cuts right to the core. If they're happy, you're going to be happy. And that's the key to a happy relationship. That really resonates. I appreciate it.

Amir Levine: It's your responsibility. Yes.

Lee Rosen: Yep. And you're doing it for them but you're also doing it for you. Everybody wins. That's a great way to look at it.

Amir Levine: Exactly.

Lee Rosen: Well, Amir, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with us today. I appreciate it.

Amir Levine: Thank you very much for having me.

Lee Rosen: Congratulations on the book. You know, *Attached*, you can get a copy. You can order it on Amazon or through any of the major booksellers. And if you want to learn more about it -- and I suggest you go right now and take the quiz -- it's at AttachedTheBook.com. You can go right now and take the quiz and find out which style, which attachment style, you have. And I think you will find that very interesting. So get a copy of the book, *Attached*, and take the quiz at AttachedTheBook.com.

Thank you so much for listening in today. I hope that you will join us again next week. In the meantime, we'd love to hear your feedback about this show or any episode. You can reach us a couple of different ways. You can call our listener comment line at (919) 256-3083; there's a voice mail there. Or you can e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com; we respond to all of your e-mails.

I'm Lee Rosen. Until next time, stay happily married.

Thank you for joining us today on Stay Happily Married. If you'd like more information, please visit us on the Web at stayhappilymarried.com. We would love to hear your feedback or comments. Please e-mail us at comments@stayhappilymarried.com or call us at (919) 256-3083. Until next time, best wishes.