

Expert examines link between attachment styles and life satisfaction

April 8 2022



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Why are some happier flying solo while others want a romantic partner?

Are some people truly better off alone?

Geoff MacDonald, a professor in the department of psychology in the University of Toronto's Faculty of Arts & Science, investigated the topic in a recent study that resulted in the first data to connect "attachment styles" to how happy people are with being single and with their lives overall.

The study, co-authored with U of T alumna and University of California, San Francisco post-doctoral researcher, Yoobin Park, appeared in the journal *Personal Relationships*.

Attachment styles are a combination of personality traits and adult relationship experience. They can fall into three categories: secure, avoidant and anxious. Think of them as individual filters that influence how people experience connections with others, and how they expect their relationships will unfold.

"Understanding your own attachment style will help you understand to what degree a relationship will satisfy your goals," says MacDonald, the acting chair of the psychology department whose lab focuses on issues of social connection and disconnection. "For example, an anxious person wants to be in a relationship to feel better about themselves, but that's not how it works—they end up feeling unhappy anyway—whereas a secure person wants one not as a self-esteem boost, but for companionship."

Securely attached singles—those with low levels of avoidance and anxiety—expect others will be welcoming and comforting, and meet their emotional needs through many relationship types, including friends and family. "Securely attached folks are skilled at managing [negative emotions](#) and, to put it plainly, better at life," says MacDonald. "It's no surprise that we found they're better at singlehood and generally satisfied

with life."

The most interesting findings had to do with avoidantly attached people, who prioritize independence over intimacy and tend to distrust other people. This group reported being satisfied with their single status—but less happy with life overall. As Park puts it: "Despite common belief, there seems to be more to being a happy single than simply not wanting a partner."

MacDonald notes that most of the literature about individuals with higher attachment avoidance examines them in [romantic relationships](#)—an uncomfortable situation for them—and therefore the data may be incomplete.

"For a long time, we thought avoidant people deeply want love, but suppress this desire because they fear the vulnerability that's necessary for building intimate relationships. Turns out that this just may not be what they're interested in. They may be more fulfilled by their [work life](#), for example." Exactly why these avoidants are lower in overall life satisfaction, however, is still an open question that MacDonald's lab is looking to answer.

In contrast to the avoidantly attached, anxiously attached people crave intimacy but fear potential rejection from others. They experience high levels of negative emotion and tend to feel overly dependent on close relationships. People in this group aren't happy about being single, nor with life in general, and strongly desire a partner.

One of the ways anxious people deal with their negative emotions is by relying on others, which is why they are particularly attracted to relationships and yet find themselves struggling to be happy while in them. MacDonald explains that for anxiously attached people to have more success romantically, they need to better manage emotional

distress: "Therapy is one tool that can help. They can learn how to be empowered to choose partners that bring out their best, happiest selves instead of coupling up as a quick fix for stress."

Anxious types can also take the pressure off romantic relationships by placing more value on the connections they have with their friends and family, he added.

"There's a cultural tendency to focus on how people get their emotional needs met solely in the romantic-relationship context. When looking at the experiences of single people as a researcher, you take into consideration all these other relationships that are either supportive resources or the causes of problems for individuals," MacDonald says.

This is one reason why securely attached people are generally happy being single—because they maintain close relationships in other realms, MacDonald explains.

In another study, he and Park examined the determinants of sexual satisfaction for singles. Perhaps not surprisingly, singles who are happier with their sex lives appear happier being single and less interested in a committed, romantic relationship.

Singlehood research has traditionally focused on the role of romantic relationships in single people's lives. Now, labs like MacDonald's are drawing attention to the fact that single people have a lot more going on in their lives than wanting or not wanting a romantic relationship—they have families, friends, careers and hobbies that all help determine how happy they are.

"Stage of life is a factor as well," MacDonald says. "Evidence shows that younger generations are happier with singlehood than older generations, and ultimately that older single people who don't want a [romantic partner](#)

are the happiest single people overall."

More information: Geoff MacDonald et al, Associations of attachment avoidance and anxiety with life satisfaction, satisfaction with singlehood, and desire for a romantic partner, *Personal Relationships* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/per.12416](https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12416)

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Expert examines link between attachment styles and life satisfaction (2022, April 8) retrieved 28 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-expert-link-styles-life-satisfaction.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.