**How Can Abuse Impact Your Relationships?**

If you’ve experienced [trauma or abuse](https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/recognizing-the-effects-of-abuse-related-trauma) in the past, you may view and experience your relationships in a certain way.

Maybe you don't feel safe when there's no need for threat, or maybe you face conflict with hesitation or avoidance. If you experience relationship challenges, know that you aren't alone and that experiencing abuse or trauma happens more than you think.

Experiencing abuse and trauma in the past can certainly change your outlook on trust, love, and the way you relate to others.Even though it feels undoubtedly challenging at times, healing is possible.

**Impact of trauma on adult relationships**

There are endless ways that abuse and trauma can impact the way you experience relationships in the present. While this isn't the case for everyone, it may be the case for some people.

**Attachment styles**

Your early experiences in life can help shape what you believe about yourself, the world, and the people around you.And sometimes, it can be a scary place to be. Sometimes it feels safe and okay, while other times, it can feel unstable or out of balance or somewhere in between.

This is where attachment theory comes into play: the way you relate to other people to establish and deepen intimacy or avoid it entirely. According to this theory, our adult relationships tend to mirror those we first established with primary caregivers.

Based on this theory, there are four main styles of attachment:

**Secure.** Someone with a [secure attachment](https://www.verywellmind.com/attachment-styles-2795344) is open to establishing close and trusting relationships. Being loved and the ability to love other people isn't something they second guess, and they don't avoid intimacy or depend entirely on someone else.

The following three attachment styles are considered to be ‘insecure attachment’ styles:

**Anxious or anxious-preoccupied.** People with [anxious attachment](https://www.attachmentproject.com/blog/anxious-attachment/) may have a fear of abandonment and need to get constant validation in relationships. In times of conflict, they may also feel like their partner doesn't care about them.

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**Dismissive-avoidant.** Someone with a dismissive-avoidant attachment style may have a fear of or shy away from emotional intimacy. This could lead them to avoid getting too close to other people or lack trust in their partners. As a result, they come off as emotionally unavailable.

**Fearful-avoidant.** Someone with this attachment may crave attention and love from their partners, but at the same time, avoid emotional intimacy from their end. They may need to feel loved, but they'll also usually avoid developing close romantic relationships.

If you've identified with any of these last three styles, be patient with yourself as you start to notice these things. Attachment styles aren't something we get to choose day-to-day but are based on our early experiences that weren't in our control.

In a sense, they're your mind and body's way of adapting and surviving to a non-nurturing environment. And with that, they can be worked on and overcome.

**Trust challenges**

It's relatively common to struggle trusting other people if you've had specific early life experiences. You may find it challenging to trust that your partner will be there for you when you need them to be, or trust them when they say they're going to respect your boundaries and needs. At the same time, you may also doubt you’re loved, even if your partner is expressive about it.

Abuse can impact a relationship based on each person's unique experience, but there are also a few typical responses.

**Safety and trust**

Survivors may feel more vulnerable and unclear about what is safe. Building trust may feel more challenging, and the thought of getting close with others can be unappealing. You may be resistant to engage in honest and open relationships for fear of being deceived or harmed. Staying closed off and guarded can make it difficult for others to feel close to you, as you deny yourself the opportunity to form healthy and meaningful bonds.

**Communication styles**

Past abuse can also impact the way you communicate with other people. Your communication style might reflect what was modeled for you as a child or what you grew up with.

**Example:** If you grew up in a home where yelling and screaming were standard, you might reenact these exchanges with your partner today. You also believe this is the only way to address problems and resolve conflict in a relationship.

Some [communication styles](https://life-insight.com/the-5-communication-styles-and-how-they-affect-relationships/) that might be related to how other people communicate with you can include:

* **Passive** communication: indirect or apologetic
* **Passive-aggressive:** may be emotionally dishonest or self-enhancing at the expense of other people
* **Aggressive:** inappropriate blaming, demanding, direct, or attacking

Communication styles are learned and developed over time. In the same way, you can unlearn them and discover how to communicate in healthier ways.

**Difficulty expressing emotions**

You may also find it challenging to express yourself and your feelings verbally.

Many survivors of abuse feel emotionally numb or feel overwhelmed and over active while fearing abandonment at the same time. It can be scary, confusing, and challenging to experience this in a relationship.

In other words, the lack of power over what happened to you in the past can make you feel the need to control other people now. Despite any good intentions, trying to maintain control over your life in this way can make your loved ones feel smothered.

**Withdrawal**

It may also feel natural to isolate yourself completely from others. In efforts to protect yourself, you may end up feeling disconnected, detached, and distant. You may be anxious about being a burden to others with what you've been through. Or, your thoughts and emotions may feel too hard to deal with, so you internalize them.

**Negative beliefs**

If you were a part of a dysfunctional family growing up or have survived abuse in previous relationships, these experiences can shape your beliefs. You may have a fear of rejection or abandonment, which can ultimately deter you from putting yourself out there to find healthy relationships in the present. Or, you may feel misunderstood, only to result in resentment when your partner doesn't read your mind.

**Unhealthy choices**

Abuse and traumatic experiences can lead you to choose harmful partners or stay with them for too long. You may tolerate disrespectful behavior or make excuses for your partner rather than setting boundaries and upholding expectations.

Dysfunctional relationships may seem as if they keep reappearing one after another. The attraction towards abusive or unloving partners is also explained as trauma bonding, making the emotional intensity of a relationship "addicting."

**Trauma bonding**

A history of abuse can often make us more vulnerable to future abuse. We tend to stick to familiar patterns, even if those patterns are toxic or unhealthy. If you've ever questioned whether a relationship was love or abuse, then you may have witnessed the power of a [trauma bond.](https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/trauma-bonding)

As a unique form of manipulation commonly used by narcissistic partners, trauma bonds include a cycle of intense love and excitement, followed by periods of abuse and mistreatment. The repetitive pattern of devaluing someone, only to be rewarded later, creates an unhealthy bond between two people.

Trauma bonds keep us in situations that we would immediately see as toxic if someone else was in them. Anyone in an abusive relationship or experienced traumatic relationships as children may be more prone to these types of bonds. If you're someone who grew up accustomed to chaos, we reject the respectful, honest person for the manipulative, abusive one.

But it's possible to break the cycle. Healing requires turning our attention inward and discovering what a healthy relationship looks like.

Working with a counselor or therapist who understands abuse will help you work through the original traumas and begin building a model for a secure, healthy attachment. This can then translate to the way we perceive ourselves and how we interact with others.

Abuse and trauma leave their legacy through powerful beliefs and behavior patterns that make finding honest, loving, and authentic relationships challenging. By becoming aware of these patterns, you learn to think differently and protect yourself while healing from old, destructive wounds.

**Keywords:** How does abuse affect relationships.

**Sources**

<https://www.attachmentproject.com/blog/anxious-attachment/>

<https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/guides-and-publications/recognizing-the-effects-of-abuse-related-trauma>

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