

# Arlen Keith Leight, Ph.D., LLC



## CLINGY LAP DOG by Arlen Keith Leight, Ph.D.

I can't tell you how many times I have been asked, "how come as soon as I get close to someone they seem to back away?" or "how come so many men I date are so clingy or needy"? The answers to these questions can be varied and complex, but I hope to provide a basic understanding of approach and avoidance in intimate connections.

There has been a tremendous amount of research in field of Attachment Theory over the past 50 years. Dr. Mary Ainsworth, a leader in this work, was doing much groundbreaking at Johns Hopkins when I was there studying psychology in the 1970's. Her work combined with other longitudinal (long term) studies shows that attachment patterns tend to run in families, and watching the interactions of mother and child can reliably predict the type of attachment the child will experience in adult relationships.

Very simply, there are secure and insecure attachments. There are 3 types of insecure attachments. In lay terms, the first type of insecure attachment is characterized by a need to be with the love one, know their whereabouts and feel connected. This is often seen as the clingy or needy partner, and is sometimes referred to as the love pursuant. In childhood, this person's mother was likely anxious about her own relationships and provided considerably more emotional attention than the child required for adequate security and love. The mother's enmeshment with the child modeled a type of attachment that follows into adulthood. The adult is often plagued with conscious fears of abandonment, but underlying this is an unconscious fear of intimacy (emotional vulnerability). There is usually denial about fear of intimacy as this type will insist that a relationship is all he really wants in his life.

The second type of insecure attachment is characterized by detachment and ambivalence. This is the person who gets uncomfortable when someone is getting too close. The so-called love avoidant grew up with a mother whose anxiety about closeness resulted in giving less emotional attention than required for development of trust and love. Often children who are emotionally or physically abandoned or neglected by the mother are subject to this sort of insecurity. The adult deals with somewhat conscious fears of engulfment and intimacy, but often deny adamantly a fear of abandonment. The unconscious fear of abandonment in this adult actually can be greater than for the so-called love pursuant.

The third type of insecure attachment can develop when there is major trauma and/or abuse for the child. I will not get into this type in depth, but these adults can be severely limited in their ability to create or maintain relationships.

A major irony of human connection is that passionate relationships often form between the love pursuant and the love avoidant insecure types. When they occur, it is likely each will blame the other for the struggle as one feels neglected and the other engulfed. Each insecure type has his own way of dealing with the resultant anxiety. The love avoidant may find a multitude of ways to preoccupy and distract himself—computer, phone, TV, or busyness in general. He may attempt to create a sense of distance and autonomy by being secretive or having other sexual encounters. These all have the potential of leaving the love pursuant feeling abandoned. The love pursuant then may attempt connection through physical touch and closeness, heightened conversation and inquiry, initiation of sex, or attempting to increase time together. He also may simply withdraw or close down out of fear of agitating the already distancing partner. The

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result is the love avoidant feels his partner is clingy or needy. Indeed, the love avoidant will often accuse the love pursuant of being insecure, but this is actually an ego projection of his own unconscious feelings of insecurity. Until and unless there is awareness of the dynamic and a desire to get some professional assistance to deal with it, the relationship will be under duress or will collapse.

A love pursuant man recently relates how he and his love avoidant boyfriend of several months were sitting at home with the avoidant's lap dog, Sammy, cuddled between them. The avoidant declared, "I think Sammy is getting too clingy because I haven't been home as much lately". The distancing boyfriend was not talking about his dog—he was talking through his dog. He was sending several simultaneous unconscious messages to his boyfriend: (1) I'm spending a lot of time with you, (2) close feels clingy, (3) clingy is bad, (4) clingy feels uncomfortable (i.e., makes me anxious), (5) don't get too close or it will feel clingy.

Those fortunate enough to have grown up with a mother who was present and able to know how much love and attention to give to satisfy the emotional needs of the child without being overbearing or denying necessary connection, find a secure comfort zone in adult relationships much more easily.

A final word is required regarding addiction and attachment. When there is unresolved addiction in one partner or the other, intimate attachment is not possible. Drugs and alcohol are always the (unconscious) attachment of choice for the addict. This is in part the reason AA recommends a minimum of a year in recovery before attempting intimate dating. The addiction itself may well be the result of having had the need to reduce or deny the anxiety associated with the individual's insecure attachment history.

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