

A Review of the Mechanisms by which Avoidant Attachment Influences Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

In recent years, psychological research has increasingly focused on the impact of avoidant attachment on interpersonal relationships, particularly in relation to emotional expression, social support, and relationship quality. This paper systematically reviews relevant domestic and international studies, outlining the definition and formation mechanisms of avoidant attachment and examining its manifestations in interpersonal contexts. Existing literature suggests that avoidant attachment not only constrains individuals' emotional expression and access to social support but also exerts a lasting influence on the quality of intimate relationships. However, prior research often addresses these effects from isolated perspectives, lacking an integrated analysis of underlying mechanisms. To address this gap, the present review synthesizes findings across studies and analyzes the influence of avoidant attachment from three interrelated dimensions: emotion regulation, cognitive processing, and interpersonal behavior. Based on this synthesis, a mechanism model is proposed, involving emotional deactivation, cognitive avoidance, and interpersonal alienation. In addition, potential intervention pathways, such as enhancing emotion regulation and activating secure attachment, are discussed. This study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of avoidant attachment and provides a theoretical basis for promoting healthier interpersonal relationships and mental well-being.

Keywords

avoidant attachment, intimate relationships, interpersonal relationships, mental health

1. Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are an important part of an individual's social life and have a significant impact on mental health and social adaptation. Interpersonal relationships can be explained by attachment theory. Attachment theory believes that an individual's early interaction experience with caregivers will form a relatively stable attachment pattern and have a lasting impact on subsequent interpersonal relationships. Attachment classifies people's interaction patterns into secure attachment and insecure attachment. Among them, insecure attachment includes avoidant attachment and anxious attachment [1]. In particular, avoidant attachment has attracted increasing attention due to its distinctive influence on emotional and interpersonal functioning. Individuals with avoidant attachment tend to emphasize self-reliance and emotional independence, often suppressing attachment needs and maintaining distance in close relationships. This pattern may lead to difficulties in establishing trust, reduced emotional disclosure, and lower levels of perceived social support in interpersonal interactions. Nowadays, many studies have focused on avoidant attachment, but the relevant

studies are mostly concentrated in a single field and lack a systematic review and comprehensive analysis of the role mechanism of avoidant attachment in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, based on a review of relevant studies at home and abroad, this paper reviews the definition of avoidant attachment, its formation mechanism, and how avoidant attachment affects the quality of intimate relationships through emotion regulation mechanisms, and further explores its possible psychological mechanisms and intervention directions. This paper focuses on: through which psychological mechanisms does avoidant attachment affect the quality of interpersonal relationships?

2. Theoretical Background

John Bowlby's attachment metaphor describes the emotional bond between an infant and his primary caregiver, emphasizing close contact, emotional attachment, and the quality of being tethered [1]. When faced with threats, they seek protection from a trustworthy attachment figure. Bowlby's colleague, Ainsworth, divides attachment styles into secure attachment and insecure attachment. Insecure attachment includes attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. Attachment avoidance reflects an individual's distrust of others, and the individual maintains behavioral independence and emotional distance from others to avoid the loss of being abandoned [2]. From a developmental perspective, this pattern is often understood as a defensive adaptation formed in response to inconsistent or unresponsive caregiving environments, in which individuals learn to suppress attachment needs to minimize potential rejection or distress. As a result, avoidant attachment is not simply a preference for independence, but a regulatory strategy aimed at maintaining psychological stability in the face of perceived relational threats. Regarding avoidance in close relationships, Edelstein suggests in the literature that individuals with avoidant attachment tend to exhibit more distant, unsupportive, or overly self-independent behaviors in certain situations, especially in situations that may trigger attachment-related cognition and emotions, thereby making the individual feel threatened [1]. Regarding avoidance in emotional information processing, Feng believes that individuals with high avoidant attachment tend to show lower emotional responses when facing external stimuli, pay less attention to certain negative information in the environment, and may even selectively ignore these negative signals [3]. Regarding avoidance of emotional expression, Chen suggested that because avoidant individuals are relatively weak in their ability to regulate emotions, they are often more likely to identify and express their own emotions, and therefore more likely to exhibit the characteristics of alexithymia [4]. Taken together, these perspectives indicate that avoidant attachment operates across behavioral, cognitive, and emotional domains, forming a coherent pattern of interpersonal disengagement.

3. Literature Review

Existing studies have explored the performance of avoidant individuals in interpersonal relationships from multiple perspectives. Studies have shown that in terms of interpersonal relationships, avoidant individuals often exhibit obvious alienation tendencies, are more likely to feel pressure from interpersonal relationships, and tend to reduce emotional investment. Edelstein proposed in the literature that avoidant individuals exhibit alienation tendencies in interpersonal relationships under certain conditions: when they are in a safe environment, that is, when they do not feel threatened or stressed, avoidance behavior is not related to the provision of emotional support; while when they are in a high-threat or high-stress environment, avoidance behavior is negatively correlated with the provision of emotional support, that is, they exhibit a certain degree of alienation. The paper used certain examples to support this conclusion. Simpson's study induced individuals' anxiety experiences through experimental situations and found that when the partner's stress was low, highly avoidant individuals may still show some support; but when the partner was in a state of obvious distress, their supportive behavior was significantly reduced. Therefore, for avoidant individuals, when a situation may evoke attachment-related thoughts and emotions and trigger insecurity, they are more likely to cope by reducing support, maintaining distance, or emphasizing independence [1]. Moreover, Song proposed that avoidant individuals often have more concerns about the stability of relationships and the authenticity of others' attitudes in interpersonal communication and intimate relationships, and are therefore more likely to feel pressure from interpersonal relationships during the interaction process [2]. After interpreting Zhang Ailing's *Little Reunion*, Jing concluded that the protagonist Jiuli in the book can represent some people with avoidant attachment - avoidant individuals may have avoidance psychology when facing intimate relationships and tend to reduce emotional investment [5,6]. However, the conclusions of the above three papers were proposed in different

contexts and cannot represent all avoidant individuals. At the emotional level, avoidant individuals usually show a lower level of emotional expression. Chen's research pointed out that insecure individuals (including avoidant individuals) usually have difficulty establishing effective interpersonal connections because their insufficient ability to regulate emotions makes them more prone to alexithymia, that is, individuals have difficulty recognizing, describing and expressing their own emotions [4]. Feng concluded in the experiment that compared with secure individuals, avoidant individuals have a weaker ability to extract key emotional cues in face processing, which in turn affects emotion recognition. This difference may be related to their avoidance of close relationships and reduced experience of interpersonal interaction [3]. In terms of cognitive processing, avoidant individuals also show characteristics such as less cognitive processing of emotional information. Zhao found through experiments that avoidant individuals usually tend to suppress attachment-related emotional reactions and invest less in the processing and recall of emotional information, thereby reducing cognitive processing of emotional information, which may lead to a decrease in their recall in explicit memory tasks [7]. The above literature provides some solutions for interpersonal relationships for avoidant attachment: Edelstein believes that sound therapy and emotion-focused therapy may be effective methods to correct avoidant intimate relationship processing [1]; Song proposed in the literature that researchers believe that improving an individual's emotional regulation ability and reducing excessive mobile phone use can improve the level of secure attachment [2]; Chen concluded through experiments that for individuals with avoidant attachment, they should be allowed to participate in more interactive and non-verbal expression activities to gradually reduce their resistance to emotional expression [3]; Zhao proposed that by activating the secure attachment state, the negative avoidance pattern of individuals with avoidant attachment can be effectively alleviated, and their internal working model can be adjusted, thereby improving their adaptive processing ability of emotional information [6].

4. Discussion & Synthesis

A summary of the above studies reveals that while different scholars have different research perspectives, they share a high degree of consistency on several core conclusions. Firstly, regarding the connection between emotion and interpersonal relationships, most studies indicate that avoidant attachment individuals tend to maintain psychological stability by suppressing emotional reactions. This emotional suppression further weakens their emotional investment and supportive behavior in interpersonal interactions, ultimately manifesting as a certain degree of interpersonal alienation [2,4]. Whether from the perspective of difficulty in emotional expression, alexithymia, or decreased emotional recognition ability, related studies all show that the avoidance tendency in emotional processing of avoidant attachment individuals has a negative impact on the quality of their interpersonal relationships [3,4], essentially reflecting a defensive regulatory strategy characterized by reducing emotional involvement. However, existing research still has some disagreements on certain specific conclusions. For example, is avoidant attachment completely unsupported? Some studies lack the premise and context for the occurrence of apathy and alienation in avoidant personality. Edelstein showed that in low-stress or low-threat situations, avoidant individuals do not necessarily reduce supportive behaviors and may even show a certain degree of positive response; while in high-stress situations or situations where the attachment system is activated, their avoidance tendency will be significantly enhanced [1]. This indicates that avoidant attachment is not simply a lack of support but a defensive regulatory pattern activated in specific situations. On this basis, existing research can be further integrated: avoidant attachment may affect the quality of interpersonal relationships through a continuous process of emotional deactivation—cognitive avoidance—interpersonal alienation. That is, individuals first reduce their experience and expression of attachment-related emotions, then reduce cognitive processing of emotional information, and finally manifest as alienation and low investment in relationships at the behavioral level. Although existing research has provided important evidence for understanding avoidant attachment, there are still some limitations. First, the existing research samples are mostly concentrated among college students or adolescents, and the representativeness of the samples is relatively limited. The extrapolation of the conclusions needs to be further verified [2,4]. Secondly, most studies employ cross-sectional designs, making it difficult to reveal the causal relationship and development process between avoidant attachment and interpersonal relationships, especially their dynamic changes. Furthermore, attachment patterns may differ across cultural backgrounds; for example, their manifestations may vary in collectivist cultures. Therefore, future research needs to further explore sample diversity, research methods, and cross-cultural comparisons to more comprehensively reveal the mechanisms by which avoidant attachment influences interpersonal relationships.

5. Conclusion

In summary, avoidant attachment, as a significant type of insecure attachment, profoundly impacts an individual's interpersonal relationships through multiple pathways, including emotion regulation and cognitive processing. This is particularly evident in the continuous process of emotional deactivation and cognitive avoidance, leading to interpersonal alienation and a decline in relationship quality. Theoretically, this paper systematically reviews avoidant attachment from different research perspectives, examining interpersonal behavior, emotional characteristics, and cognitive processing, contributing to a deeper understanding of its overall mechanisms. Practically, these findings offer insights for psychological interventions, such as improving emotion regulation and promoting secure attachment activation, which can help improve the quality of interpersonal relationships for individuals with avoidant attachment. Future research could further expand sample diversity, strengthen cross-cultural comparisons, and incorporate longitudinal research designs or mechanism testing methods to explore the dynamic changes in the mechanisms of avoidant attachment, thus providing a more comprehensive understanding of its impact pathways.

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Conflicts of Interest

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