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'Commitment-Phobic' Adults Could Have Mom and Dad to Blame

Science Daily, Dec. 10, 2012 — Afraid to commit to a relationship? According to new research from Tel Aviv University, it could be just one more thing to blame on your parents.

A study of the romantic history of 58 adults aged 22-28 found that those who avoid committed romantic relationships are likely a product of unresponsive or over-intrusive parenting, says Dr. Sharon Dekel, a psychologist and researcher at the Bob Shapell School of Social Work.

Dr. Dekel and her fellow researcher, Prof. Barry Farber of Columbia University, found that 22.4 percent of study participants could be categorized as "avoidant" when it came to their relationships, demonstrating anxiety about intimacy, reluctance to commit to or share with their partner, or a belief that their partner was "clingy," for example. Overall, they reported less personal satisfaction in their relationships than participants who were determined to be secure in their relationships.

The goal of the study, published in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, was to address the widespread research debate on "avoidant attachment" -- whether such behavior is due to innate personality traits, such as being more of a loner, or is a delayed reaction to unmet childhood needs. Dr. Dekel and Prof. Farber found that while both secure and avoidant individuals expressed a desire for intimacy in relationships, avoidant individuals are conflicted about this need due to the complicated parent-child dynamics they experienced when young.

Taking lessons from childhood

The premise of their study, says Dr. Dekel, is based on attachment theory, which posits that during times of stress, infants seek proximity to their caregivers for emotional support. However, if the parent is unresponsive or overly intrusive, the child learns to avoid their caregiver.

The researchers believe that adult relationships reflect these earlier experiences. When infantile needs are met in childhood, that person approaches adult relationships with more security, seeking intimacy, sharing, caring, and fun, says Dr. Dekel. The researchers labelled these relationships "two-adult" models, in which participants equally share desires with their partner. Avoidant individuals, however, are more likely to adopt an "infant-mother" intimacy model.

When they enter relationships, there is an attempt to satisfy their unmet childhood needs, Dr. Dekel explains. "Avoidant individuals are looking for somebody to alidate them, accept them as they are, can consistently meet their needs and remain calm -- including not making a fuss about anything or getting caught up in their own personal issues."

The tendency to avoid dependence on a partner is a defense mechanism rather than an avoidance of intimacy, she adds.

Hope for the commitment-phobic?

It's important to study this group further because beyond their severely diminished ability to conduct satisfying romantic relationships, they are also less happy in their lives and are more likely to suffer illnesses than their secure counterparts, notes Dr. Dekel. Psychologists need a better understanding of what these insecure individuals need, perhaps through more sophisticated neurological studies, she suggests.

There is also the question of whether or not these attachment styles are permanent. Dr. Dekel believes that there are some experiences which can help people develop more secure relationship styles.

There are hints that after experiencing a traumatic event, survivors show a greater ability and desire to form closer relationships, Dr. Dekel observed in a previous study in the *Journal of Psychological Trauma*, completed during her post-doctoral work with Prof. Zahava Solomon. As an expert in the field of trauma recovery and post-traumatic growth who has worked with patients in Israel and abroad to overcome traumatic events, she is beginning to study this phenomenon in greater depth.

Journal Reference: Sharon Dekel, Barry A. Farber. **Models of Intimacy of Securely and Avoidantly Attached Young Adults.** *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 2012; 200 (2): 156 DOI: [10.1097/NMD.0b013e3182439702](https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0b013e3182439702)

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