

Mentors, Attachment Disorders, and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

When I was 15 years old, I spent a year living with my family in Bangkok, Thailand. We lived in a small apartment tower with about twelve other families. One day, I went down to the lobby of the apartment before going to school and there was a small puppy that had come in off the street. I did not know exactly where the puppy came from, but I did recognize that the guards in the building were not being all that nice to the puppy. The puppy was obviously a street dog, and it appeared to be alone, without another dog or any person to take care of it.

I took the puppy up to our apartment and gave it some milk. The puppy seemed incredibly happy that I was helping it and despite being very hungry, it spent just as much time kissing me to show its appreciation as it did eating. After it had finished its milk, I took the puppy back down to the street. The puppy was very, very sad—I could tell.

When I came home from school that day, the puppy was waiting outside the gate of the apartment building for me and ran up to me. I took the puppy back upstairs and repeated the process. For the next week or so, I continued this routine with the puppy.

Eventually, the puppy did something wrong, like go to the bathroom on our carpet or something, and I was prohibited from bringing the puppy into the apartment anymore. Then, over the next few weeks as the puppy grew, the guards and apartment managers no longer felt it was appropriate to have a stray puppy around our building. My parents would not let me adopt the puppy. Soon, I was not taking care of the puppy anymore.

Within three or four weeks of my no longer helping the puppy, it stopped coming up to me and I stopped seeing it very often. So that the puppy would stop forming an attachment with me, I started simply walking by it without giving it too much attention when I saw it. If it ran up to me on the street, I no longer petted it. I knew that the dog had to learn to fend for itself and survive on its own. I hoped that the puppy would find someone else to take care of it. At the time, I remember rejecting this dog was very hard for me psychologically. Almost instinctively, I knew that the results would not be good for the puppy. I doubted the puppy would find someone else to take care of it and love it.

Since I lived in a relatively small neighborhood within the city, sometime later I saw the puppy—the dog had become very mangy and now seemed quite angry. It snarled at people and other dogs. It was a mean dog and no longer the sweet puppy it had once been. When it saw me, it no longer ran up to me.

I really felt that the fact I had not bonded with the puppy more closely, and instead had rejected it at such a young age, had a devastating impact on its life. Even today, I feel sad writing about and thinking about this dog. What could have been a happy and social animal, ended up being a mean and unhappy street dog. If only I had been able to care for the puppy and provide it the psychological bond it needed, everything would have been far different for the puppy.

During World War II in England, many small children were orphaned or temporarily separated from their parents. Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby developed what he called “attachment theory” as a result of reviewing the different sorts of emotional attachments that occurred with children and their caregivers. The main tenet of attachment theory is that in order for a child’s social and emotional development to occur normally, the child needs to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver and that the child’s further relationships will build on the patterns developed during those first relationships.

Children have a need for safety, security, and protection. Children attach to caregivers when babies, for the psychological aim of security (and biological aim of survival). Children generally form consistent attachments with a parent.

When children have a close relationship with a parent during their first formative years, they become very confident that if they send a signal, it will be received. If the child smiles at his or her mother, for example, the mother will smile back. The parent will generally be extremely in tune with the child’s needs. When a child starts crawling and walking, the child can use the parent as a secure base to explore from and return to. A child’s sense of security is also strengthened if he or she knows the parent will always return. The child, who develops in a healthy manner, has a sense of security related to these relationship with his or her caregiver.

Having this sense of security provides children with a “base” and, later in life these children feel more secure going out and exploring the world. Children who feel a sense of security in their relationship with their parents later tend to have more friends when they are in school. They even tend to have much higher graduation rates in high school.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota, for example, looked at attachment patterns of children at the age of 42 months and were able to predict with 77% accuracy who would graduate from high school. Children who develop secure attachment patterns early in life later tend to feel less need to lie and exaggerate their behavior in others’ eyes. A child’s early relationship with his or her caregiver ultimately creates a system of beliefs, memories, expectations, and emotions that the child has about himself or herself and others.

Bowlby’s attachment theory was further developed in the studies of Mary Ainsworth. Ainsworth hypothesized three different types of attachment:

- Mainly secure attachment
- Ambivalent-insecure attachment
- Avoidant-insecure attachment

If children have a secure relationship with their caregiver, they will not feel insecure or threatened when the parent leaves for a short time. There is a relationship of trust between the children and the caregiver, and the children know the parent will return. Trust is developed because when the children feel distressed, the parent will reassure them when they need this

reassurance.

If children have ambivalent and insecure attachments, they may be periodically neglected when they are distressed and may not feel like they can trust the parent. The children may be preoccupied with the caregiver's availability and seek contact, but actually be angry when it is achieved. With an inconsistent ability to trust the parent, some sort of insecurity will develop.

In the case of avoidant-insecure attachment, children may actually avoid their parents because they do not receive the comfort and assurance that they need. The children may actually feel they are being rejected by their parents. For example, if a child falls down and gets hurt and runs to her parents for comfort, the parent may scold her instead of comforting her by telling the child, for example, that if she had listened to the parent and not done something, she would not have gotten hurt. If this sort of thing occurs with any regularity, children will realize that they cannot depend on the parents when they are experiencing any sort of distress. Accordingly, these children may avoid the parents because they do not receive the sort of assurance and comfort they need.

If children have an avoidant-insecure attachment, they can experience problems as adults. For example, if a child has had his feelings rejected by his parents at a young age, he may become very sensitive to such criticism from others when he grows older. He may have low self-esteem and avoid situations (including social interaction) where he feels he may be criticized. Those with an avoidant-insecure attachment may:

- Mistrust others
- Avoid occupational activities where they feel they may be criticized
- Avoid social activities where they feel they may be criticized
- Be extremely sensitive to criticism
- Be extremely sensitive to any form of social rejection

The mirroring, approval, and sense of connection we have with our parents when we are growing up can have a major impact on what happens throughout the course of our lives and careers. Something that I have noticed time and time again is that people who are extremely intelligent and have gone to good schools and done well academically do not necessarily have fulfilling lives or careers.

Since my earliest days as a recruiter, I have seen some people whose careers on paper do not make sense. They have gone to the best colleges and law schools and may even have gotten the **best jobs** very quickly. However, once they got into the work world, they experienced a consistent set of failures that ultimately permanently derailed their careers.

As in the example above, many of these people had a very difficult time with criticism and any sort of social rejection. As a consequence, they tended to isolate themselves in their jobs in areas where they felt they would not be criticized. (Alternatively, they might work much harder than they need to in order to avoid criticism.) Being isolated from their coworkers, they might not receive access to information in the workplace necessary for them to thrive in the workplace. When criticized, such people might start looking for a new job or leave their profession completely.

The traits that make someone look good at first glance on paper cannot necessarily be taught in a school or picked up by a test. Having the ability to build trusting relationships, to be responsive to criticism, and to participate in social networks are all things that allow people to succeed at work and thrive.

According to two researchers, approximately 65% of children in the general population can be classified as having mainly secure attachments and the other 35% have various insecure classifications. (Prior V, Glaser D, *Understanding Attachment and Attachment Disorders: Theory, Evidence, and Practice*. Child and Adolescent Mental Health, RCPRTU. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006). Given this statistic, it seems fair to say that a significant portion of the population has various attachment-related disorders from childhood that are impacting the work that they do.

What is so significant about this is that your career and the success you have had may be the product of unconscious ways that you have developed for dealing with work. Your ability to deal with supervisors, coworkers, and others may all come from the sense of "grounding" that you received from your main caregiver when you were younger. More contemporaneously—and something I have not seen examined in the academic literature—your current success at work may come from the "grounding" you have received from mentors, supervisors, and others. Just as early attachment disorders can affect our success and failure at work, so too can attachments we develop with mentors, supervisors, and others during our early career.

Something I have noticed is that many of the most successful people in all lines of business have a mentor that they consult for **career advice**. Mentors are usually older and have experienced many of the same issues in their career at an earlier time. One trait I have seen among successful attorneys, for example, is that they often have a parent who was an attorney at one time, whom they call for advice and counsel. Similarly, I have noticed that many successful businesspeople, academics, and others have people they turn to for counsel in their careers. Other people see coaches who may assist them in their careers. Still others are taken under the wing of elder people at work.

In order to reach your full potential in your career, it is extremely important that you are "grounded" in terms of your relationship to your job and coworkers. While you cannot change your childhood and how you were raised early on, you can seek out a mentor—or someone who will provide you the sort of grounding you need in your career. It is extremely important for us to receive assurance in our jobs. Most corporate environments are somewhat impersonal and competitive and are not set up to provide us this sort of assurance. We need to feel grounded in our careers in order to succeed. Having someone there to listen to us and guide us will help us to go forward with more confidence in our jobs and makes us far more likely to succeed.

Most people whom I have seen "crash and burn" in their careers do not have mentors or people they can count on. Most people I have seen reach great heights and who were happy doing so, have had mentors. From a socioeconomic perspective, people who come out of lower-class backgrounds or are minorities may have a much more difficult time finding mentors in their workplace than those who do not (if there are not a lot of other minorities in their workplace). It is for this reason, I believe, that despite years of trying to create opportunity for various minorities in partnerships in law firms, for example, minorities still lag in terms of the number of those who are made partners. The issue with this is that people from a different race and/or socioeconomic group may have a more difficult time finding people who will identify with them and take them under their wing.

On another level, there are people who are desperately seeking approval and go to massive lengths to do this. These people

may be extremely flashy with their accomplishments and lord them over others. They may be extremely competitive with others and always feel the need to be number one in everything they do. Some of this is healthy, but for many people it can reach a dangerous extreme and result in something that outsiders perceived as an unhealthy narcissism. Here, people may actually be seeking to be “seen” and “acknowledged”—in the same way a child cries for his or her parents. This sort of seeking behavior is often the sign of someone who is not grounded emotionally and is still struggling for approval and may suffer from an attachment-related disorder.

The reason I believe all of this is so significant is that I believe attachments control our relationship with our job and ultimately our success. If we are not grounded, we may end up in careers where we are isolated and operating beneath our potential. On another level, we may struggle manically for approval and acknowledgment our entire careers—always trying to be the best at this, the best at that, and basing our happiness on the approval of superiors and others. How many people do you know like that?

Ultimately, we do not have any control over who our parents were and how we were raised as infants and young children. What we can control, though, is how we function in the here and now. As an extension of attachment theory, I believe that one of the most important things you can do in your career (and something that may determine your ultimate success or failure) is to seek out and find a mentor. If you cannot find a mentor, then find a career coach, a therapist, or someone who will listen to you, talk about your career, and be there. Even the most psychologically healthy person with the greatest childhood experience can benefit from having a mentor. A good mentor or coach will give you the psychological fortitude and grounding to accomplish anything.

THE LESSON

While your relationship with your parents shapes the future course of your life, you do not have control over the events of your childhood. Find a mentor, someone to listen to and guide you going forward will give you confidence going forward and enhance your chances of success. A good mentor will give you the psychological grounding and confidence to achieve anything.

Read More About Your Career With a Given Employer May Depend on Having a Good Mentor There:

- [The Importance of and How to Find a Mentor](#)