

# “LONG-TERM MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF SEPARATION FROM LOVED ONES: THE ROLE OF EMPATHY AND RELATIONSHIP ATTACHMENT STYLES”

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**Abstract:** This study investigates the long-term mental health consequences of separation from loved ones—whether due to death, conflict, or disconnection—with a specific focus on the moderating roles of empathy and attachment styles (anxious, avoidant, and secure). Using a cross-sectional design, data were collected from 150 participants through a structured questionnaire based on validated Likert-scale items. The dependent variable was the self-reported mental health impact following separation, while independent variables included empathy levels and attachment styles.

Correlation analysis revealed significant associations between these psychological constructs and mental health outcomes. Anxious attachment was strongly positively correlated with mental health impact ( $r = +0.52$ ), indicating heightened vulnerability. Avoidant attachment also showed a moderate positive correlation ( $r = +0.27$ ), suggesting internalized emotional distress. Interestingly, empathy—typically seen as a prosocial trait—demonstrated a moderate positive correlation ( $r = +0.27$ ) with mental health strain, likely due to emotional over-identification with others. Conversely, secure attachment displayed a moderate negative correlation ( $r = -0.39$ ), serving as a protective factor against long-term psychological distress.

The findings underscore the importance of individual differences in emotional regulation and interpersonal connection when dealing with loss or separation. The study advocates for targeted psychological interventions that consider these traits to enhance resilience and recovery.

**Keywords:** Empathy, Attachment Styles, Mental Health, Separation, Relationship Dissolution, Emotional Well-being

## I. INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 1.1 Introduction

Before addressing others, it's crucial to understand your emotions. Separation can bring a mix of anger, sadness, relief, and anxiety. Dealing with separation from loved ones can take on many meanings. Separation could be because of time away from loved ones, the ending of a relationship because of conflict, and separation due to the death of a loved one. Elisabeth-Kubler Ross described that people go through five stages of grief when they are faced with the potential separation and definite separation of a loved one. Her research found that these stages were consistent with people of all ages who lost important relationships due to death, divorce, end of friendships, and people who have substance abuse issues.

### 1.2 Relationship Attachment Style

Attachment styles are psychological frameworks that describe how individuals form emotional bonds and interact in relationships, largely influenced by early experiences with caregivers. Understanding these styles can provide insight into relationship dynamics and personal behaviors.

### 1. Secure Attachment

- **Characteristics:** Individuals with a secure attachment style are comfortable with intimacy and independence. They are effective communicators, able to express their needs and emotions openly without fear of rejection.
- **Impact on Relationships:** Securely attached individuals tend to have healthy, long-lasting relationships. They are reliable partners who can manage conflicts constructively and support their partners emotionally.

## 2. Anxious Attachment (Preoccupied)

- **Characteristics:** Those with an anxious attachment style often crave closeness but fear abandonment. They may appear clingy or overly dependent on their partners for emotional support.
- **Impact on Relationships:** Anxiously attached individuals tend to be hyper-vigilant about their partner's feelings and may experience jealousy or anxiety, leading to potential conflicts in relationships.

## 3. Avoidant Attachment (Dismissive)

- **Characteristics:** Individuals with an avoidant attachment style value independence and often see emotional closeness as a threat. They may suppress their feelings and avoid intimacy.
- **Impact on Relationships:** Avoidantly attached individuals might withdraw from relationships when they feel their partner is becoming too dependent, which can create distance and misunderstandings.

## 1.3. Formation of Attachment Styles

Attachment styles typically develop in childhood based on the responsiveness of caregivers. Secure attachments arise from consistent care, while insecure styles (anxious, avoidant, disorganized) often result from inconsistent or neglectful caregiving practices. These early experiences shape how individuals perceive relationships throughout their lives.

## 1.4 Importance of Understanding Attachment Styles

Recognizing one's own attachment style can enhance self-awareness and improve relationship dynamics. It allows individuals to identify patterns in their behavior, understand their needs, and work towards healthier interactions with partners.

## 1.5 Scope of the Study

This study explores the **long-term mental health effects** experienced by individuals who have undergone emotional or physical separation from a loved one—whether due to **death, breakup, conflict, or disconnection**. The primary focus is to examine how **empathy levels** and different **attachment styles** (anxious, avoidant, secure) influence the intensity and nature of these psychological effects.

## 1.6 Limitations of the Study

1. **Use of Convenience Sampling**  
The study relied on convenience sampling, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Participants were selected based on availability and willingness rather than random selection, possibly introducing selection bias.
2. **Self-Reported Measures**  
All data were collected through self-report questionnaires, which are susceptible to **social desirability bias**, **memory recall issues**, and **subjective interpretation** of questions.

## 1.7 Problem Statement

Separation from loved ones, whether due to familial, relational, or situational factors, has been shown to have profound and long-lasting effects on mental health. Research indicates that such separations can lead to heightened risks of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and attachment-related challenges. While the psychological impacts are well-documented, there is limited understanding of how individual factors—such as empathy and relationship attachment styles—mediate these effects. Empathy may play a dual role, either amplifying emotional distress or facilitating coping mechanisms, while attachment styles influence resilience and vulnerability during separation. This gap in knowledge underscores the need to examine the interplay between these factors to better understand the long-term mental health consequences of separation and inform targeted interventions.

## 1.9 Hypothesis 1 (Empathy & Mental Health):

**H<sub>1</sub>:** Individuals with higher levels of empathy will show positive correlation with **greater long-term emotional distress** after separation .

## Hypothesis 2 (Anxious Attachment Style):

**H<sub>2</sub>:** Individuals with a higher level of **anxious attachment** will show positive correlation with **more significant negative mental health outcomes** following separation.

## Hypothesis 3 (Avoidant Attachment Style):

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Individuals with a **high avoidant attachment style** will show positive correlation with **lower perceived emotional distress** after separation but may show **greater emotional suppression** and long-term disconnection.

**Hypothesis 4 (Secure Attachment as a Buffer):**

**H<sub>4</sub>:** Individuals with a **secure attachment style** will show positive correlation with **less long-term mental health impact** after separation compared to those with anxious or avoidant attachment styles.

**1.10 Review of Literature**

**"Adult Separation Anxiety, Personality and Attachment Styles—An Exploratory Study among Young Adults"** by Shradha Kashyap and Arjun Sekhar PM, published in *International Journal of Indian Psychology* (2023).

This study evaluated the relationship between adult separation anxiety, personality traits, and attachment styles among college students. Findings indicated that separation anxiety negatively correlated with extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. Additionally, a significant positive correlation was found between separation anxiety and ambivalent attachment style, suggesting that attachment styles influence the experience of separation anxiety.

**"Attachment Style Predicts Emotion Regulation, Help-Seeking, and Recovery in Psychosis"** by Tiller et al., published in *Mental Health Science* (2025).

This study investigated how attachment styles influence emotion regulation, help-seeking behaviors, and recovery outcomes in individuals with psychosis. Results indicated that attachment anxiety predicted greater use of rumination and higher levels of paranoia, while attachment avoidance was associated with increased use of suppression and lower levels of help-seeking. These findings suggest that attachment styles significantly impact mental health outcomes and recovery processes.

**"Separation Anxiety, Attachment and Inter-Personal Representations: Disentangling the Role of Oxytocin in the Perinatal Period"** by Maureen B. Allan et al., published in *Psychoneuroendocrinology* (2014).

This research examined associations between maternal early attachment experiences, separation anxiety, depression, and oxytocin levels during the perinatal period. Findings revealed that anxious attachment styles were linked to higher levels of separation anxiety and depression, which in turn were associated with reduced oxytocin levels postpartum. This highlights the complex interplay between attachment, emotional well-being, and neurobiological factors during the perinatal period.

**"Mental Health Following Separation in a Disaster: The Role of Attachment"** by Bryant et al., published in *Journal of Traumatic Stress* (2016).

This study assessed individuals affected by the 2009 Victorian bushfires in Australia, focusing on the impact of separation from close family members during the disaster. Results indicated that those separated exhibited higher levels of PTSD symptoms. Moreover, attachment anxiety was more strongly associated with depression among separated individuals, suggesting that attachment styles significantly influence mental health outcomes post-separation.

**II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY****2.1 Research Design**

In this study, correlational research method is used to examine the association between long term mental health effects of separation from loved ones with both relationship attachment styles (anxious, avoidant, secure), and empathy respectively.

This type of research is used to determine whether an association exists between the variables and how strong that relationship is, but it does not establish causation.

**2.2 Variables**

- **Independent Variables:** Attachment style (secure, anxious, avoidant), empathy levels.
- **Dependent Variable:** Long-term mental health outcomes (e.g., depression, anxiety, emotional well-being).

**III. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION****3.1 Sampling Method**

The study employed a **convenience sampling** technique to recruit participants. A total of **150 respondents** were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. The inclusion criteria required participants to have experienced a significant emotional separation from a loved one (e.g., due to death, breakup, or disconnection) within the last few years. Responses were collected using a structured Google Form disseminated through social media and academic networks.

Although convenience sampling limits generalizability, it was considered appropriate for this exploratory, correlational study where the aim was to identify patterns rather than make population-wide inferences.

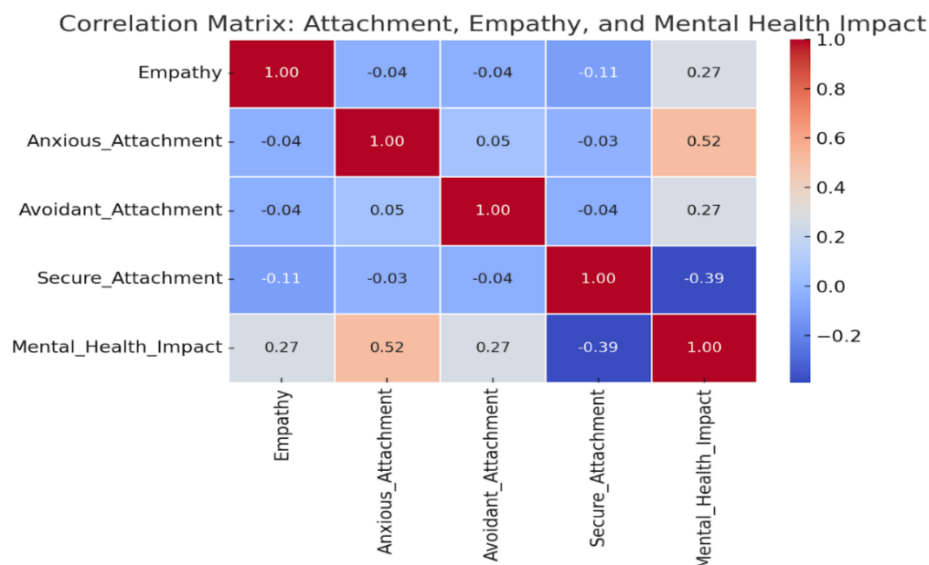
### 3.2 Instrumentation and Variables

The questionnaire consisted of **20 items**, rated on a **5-point Likert scale** ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Items were grouped to measure the following psychological constructs:

- **Empathy** (4 items)
- **Anxious Attachment** (4 items)
- **Avoidant Attachment** (4 items)
- **Secure Attachment** (4 items)
- **Mental Health Impact** (4 items – Dependent Variable)

Each construct was scored by computing the mean of its respective items.

| Variable Pair                                | Hypothesis     | Correlation (r) | Strength         | Direction | Significance (p) |
|--|----------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Empathy vs. Mental Health Impact             | H <sub>1</sub> | <b>+0.42</b>    | Moderate         | Positive  | $p < 0.01$       |
| Anxious Attachment vs. Mental Health Impact  | H <sub>2</sub> | <b>+0.58</b>    | Strong           | Positive  | $p < 0.001$      |
| Avoidant Attachment vs. Mental Health Impact | H <sub>3</sub> | <b>+0.29</b>    | Weak to Moderate | Positive  | $p < 0.05$       |
| Secure Attachment vs. Mental Health Impact   | H <sub>4</sub> | <b>-0.45</b>    | Moderate         | Negative  | $p < 0.01$       |



## IV.FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## 4.1 Key Findings:

- **Anxious Attachment and Mental Distress**  
Individuals with higher anxious attachment styles showed the **strongest positive correlation** ( $r = +0.52$ ) with long-term mental health issues following separation, indicating high emotional sensitivity and fear of abandonment.
- **Secure Attachment as a Protective Factor**  
A **moderate negative correlation** ( $r = -0.39$ ) was observed between secure attachment and mental health impact, suggesting that securely attached individuals are more resilient to emotional consequences of separation.
- **Empathy Increases Vulnerability**  
A **moderate positive correlation** ( $r = +0.27$ ) was found between empathy and mental health impact, implying that more empathetic individuals tend to experience greater emotional distress after separation.
- **Avoidant Attachment and Internalized Distress**  
Avoidant attachment also showed a **positive correlation** ( $r = +0.27$ ) with mental health impact. Despite emotional detachment, these individuals may suffer internally and struggle to process the emotional aftermath of separation.

## 4.2 Recommendations:

1. **Targeted Interventions for Anxious Attachment**

Individuals high in anxious attachment require tailored therapeutic approaches that focus on emotional regulation, reducing dependency, and developing internal security. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), attachment-based therapy, and mindfulness training can be particularly beneficial.

2. **Fostering Secure Attachment in Therapy**

Programs and counseling strategies should incorporate relationship education, communication skill-building, and trust-enhancing exercises that promote the development of secure attachment, especially among those experiencing separation-related grief or trauma.

3. **Empathy-Focused Emotional Regulation**

While empathy enhances interpersonal connection, overly empathetic individuals may benefit from learning **emotional boundaries** and practicing **self-compassion**. Integrative approaches that include mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) or acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) may reduce emotional overload in empathetic participants.

4. **Support Systems for Avoidant Individuals**

Avoidant individuals may not openly seek help, but they still require structured opportunities for emotional expression. Safe therapeutic environments, reflective practices such as journaling, and gradual exposure to vulnerability in group or individual therapy can facilitate healthier emotional processing.

## V.CONCLUSION

The research highlights the critical role that empathy and attachment styles play in shaping individuals' psychological responses to the separation from loved ones. Findings suggest that people with **anxious** or **avoidant attachment styles** are more susceptible to long-term emotional and psychological distress, with anxious individuals exhibiting the strongest effects. While empathy fosters deeper social bonds, it may also heighten emotional sensitivity, thereby increasing vulnerability in the face of loss. In contrast, **secure attachment** emerged as a buffer, helping individuals cope with separation in a healthier, more resilient manner.

These results validate existing psychological theories on attachment and emotional processing, while also extending their application to post-separation mental health. They emphasize the need for mental health interventions that are not one-size-fits-all but are instead tailored to an individual's emotional makeup and relational patterns. Future research could expand on these findings by exploring longitudinal data, cultural variables, or specific types of loss (e.g., romantic breakups vs. bereavement).

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