



# Avoiding affection, avoiding altruism: Why is avoidant attachment related to less helping?



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## ABSTRACT

Avoidantly, compared to securely, attached people help less often and perceive the costs of helping as more severe. Helping relates to empathy and closeness, which may cause avoidantly attached people discomfort. We tested the hypothesis that reducing the potential for emotional closeness for avoidantly attached people would offset their unhelpfulness with one correlational and one experimental study. In Study 1, amongst a sample of 234 people on Mechanical Turk, avoidant attachment related to donating less money to human- and animal-related charities, but not a charity that did not foster emotional closeness. This relationship was mediated by empathy. In Study 2, amongst a sample of 193 college students, avoidantly attached people who believed that their emotions were temporarily unchangeable helped as much as people low in avoidant attachment. Reducing the potential emotional cost of helping increases helping amongst people who are avoidantly attached.

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## 1. Introduction

It is a chilly December evening, just before Christmas. Henry walks down a snowy street after getting a cup of hot chocolate. He is avoidantly attached: he prizes his autonomy, experiences discomfort getting close to others, and shudders at the thought of socializing at the holiday parties to which he was invited. As he walks to his car, he spies a bell-ringing Salvation Army volunteer requesting donations. He considers donating. Then he and the volunteer make eye contact. The volunteer smiles, trying to establish an emotional connection. Henry's heart rate spikes, his palms sweat, and he picks up his pace. Wanting to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of empathy, Henry hops into his car and drives off.

Why didn't Henry help? This scenario illustrates several factors known to decrease helping, including low empathy (Batson et al., 1991) and being avoidantly attached (Gillath et al., 2005; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005). What remains unknown are the boundary conditions of the relationship between avoidant attachment and unhelpfulness. The current investigation tests the hypothesis that avoidantly attached people become unhelpful because helping situations involve emotional closeness,

which they find threatening. By reducing the potential for emotional closeness, we predicted that it would be possible to offset the association between avoidant attachment and unhelpfulness.

### 1.1. Avoidant attachment and prosocial behavior

Henry's level of comfort getting close to others affected his thoughts, feelings, and behavior. This profile forms the backbone of attachment theory, which argues that the attachment system colors nearly all human activities across the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969, 1973). People who are avoidantly attached (e.g. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), like Henry, show a heightened discomfort getting close to others and regulate their attachment needs by distancing themselves from others. They avoid, ignore, or deny the emotional needs, dependence, and intimacy of others in their relationships with them (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). In contrast, anxiously attached people crave opportunities for acceptance and remain vigilant regarding overtures that may signal rejection (e.g. Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005; Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Finally, securely attached people are low in both anxiety and avoidance; they feel accepted by and comfortable getting close to others (e.g. Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

While research on attachment style is mainly focused on how it affects relationship outcomes (e.g. Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2004; DeWall et al., 2011; Feeney & Noller, 1990; Schmitt, 2005), recently researchers have examined whether it moderates other behaviors.

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In the past decade, there has been much research studying how attachment style affects prosocial behavior. This research indicates that avoidant attachment relates to lower levels of helpfulness (Gillath et al., 2005; Mikulincer et al., 2005). A series of studies using multiple methods, participants from multiple countries, and several indicators of real and imagined helping yielded a consistent conclusion: avoidant attachment related to lower helping. Specifically, in the U.S., Netherlands, and Israel, people higher in avoidant attachment were less likely to participate in a variety of different volunteering activities as well as to volunteer for value- and understanding-related reasons, compared to people of other attachment styles (Gillath et al., 2005). Additionally, being higher in avoidant attachment was associated with lower self-rated compassion toward and rated and actual willingness to help a woman in distress (Mikulincer et al., 2005). This result held across helping situations both real and imagined and when the person in need of help was either a family member or a stranger. Anxious attachment was not reliably associated with helping or compassion in these studies. Thus, avoidant attachment is consistently associated with a behavioral profile of unhelpfulness.

### 1.2. Why might avoidant attachment predict decreased prosocial behavior?

Despite the relationship between avoidant attachment and unhelpfulness, it remains unclear why it exists. One possibility is that avoidantly attached people help less because they feel insecure about caring for others. Avoidantly attached people want connections, but fear being rejected (MacDonald, 2009; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). They thus tend to have lower expectations for a connection as a self-protection mechanism (e.g. Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, & Baratta, 2012). Helping situations expose avoidantly attached people to factors that can threaten their feelings of security because such situations often involve the expectation of emotional connection. Prior research indicates that avoidantly attached people feel less empathy when asked to respond to helping situations (Mikulincer et al., 2001). Such empathy avoidance is a phenomenon that occurs when, before exposure to a person in need, people are aware that they will be asked to help and that helping will be costly (Shaw, Batson, & Matthew, 1994). Given their aversion to emotional closeness, likely stemming from their fear of rejection, avoidantly attached people may engage in empathy avoidance in helping situations to protect themselves against this uncomfortable possibility.

To identify the mechanism behind why avoidantly attached people are less helpful, we sought to alter the helping situation in ways that would reduce the potential for emotional closeness. We devised two methods to accomplish this goal. First, we manipulated whether the participant could feel emotionally close to the target of a charitable organization. Specifically, participants could donate to charities that support people, animals, or the environment. We predicted that avoidant attachment would predict lower helping toward people and animals (targets people could feel close to), but would not relate to helping the environment. To ensure that our effects were due to emotional closeness, we examined empathy as a mediator of this relationship. Empathy is the ability to share the emotional experiences of others (e.g. Beeney, Franklin, Levy, & Adams, 2011). Research shows similarity between empathy and emotional closeness. For example, empathic concern is associated with greater comfort with closeness (Joireman, Needham, & Cummings, 2001). Additionally, feeling empathy toward a relationship partner in pain increases people's own pain response and this relationship is modulated by interpersonal closeness (Beeney et al., 2011). Finally, the effects of empathy on prosocial behavior are fully explained by closeness. That is, the effect of empathy on prosocial behavior becomes non-significant after controlling for

interpersonal closeness (e.g. Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; Maner et al., 2002). Because of the similarities between these two constructs, we tested the mediating effects of empathy on the relationship between type of charity and likelihood of donation.

Our second experiment adapted the mood-freezing procedure developed by Manucia, Baumann, and Cialdini (1984), in which some participants believed that their mood was unchangeable prior to entering a helping situation. Considerable evidence suggests that blunting anticipated emotional responses in this way could profoundly shape judgments and behaviors (e.g. Bushman, Baumeister, & Phillips, 2001; Tice, Bratslavsky, & Baumeister, 2001). We hypothesized that removing the anticipated possibility for discomfort that avoidantly attached people associate with interpersonal situations like helping would reduce the fear of emotional closeness. We predicted that avoidant attachment would relate to lower helping under normal circumstances, but not if participants believed the helping situation could not change their emotional state.

## 2. Study 1

Study 1 tested the hypothesis that avoidantly attached people would help just as much as others when donating to an environment-related charity, but not when donating to a person- or animal-related charity. It also tested the mediating role of empathy in the relationship between charity type and likelihood of donation.

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 234 U.S. residents (139 female) ages 18–63 ( $M = 32.01$ ,  $SD = 11.5$ ). They completed our study online, through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). Participants received \$0.50 for participating.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Attachment style

Participants completed the 12-item Experiences in Close Relationships scale to assess attachment style (ECR-S; Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007). The ECR-S measures avoidant (e.g. "I get uncomfortable when a romantic partner wants to be very close") and anxious attachment (e.g. "I need a lot of reassurance that I am loved by my partner"). Reliabilities for this measure were  $\alpha = .55$  for avoidant attachment and  $\alpha = .80$  for anxious attachment. On average, participants scored 3.11 ( $SD = .82$ ) on avoidant attachment and 3.84 ( $SD = 1.30$ ) on anxious attachment.

#### 2.2.2. Empathic concern

Participants completed the empathic concern subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index to assess individual differences in people's feelings of concern for unfortunate others (IRI; Davis, 1983). It contains items such as "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me." Reliability for this measure was  $\alpha = .87$ . On average, participants scored 2.74 ( $SD = .82$ ) on the empathic concern scale.

### 2.3. Procedure

Participants completed the attachment and empathic concern measures. Next, they rated three charities in terms of how likely they would be to donate to them on a scale from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). We selected one animal-related (American Society for the Protection of Cruelty against Animals;

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