

Attachment Security and Coping with Existential Concerns: Studying Security Dynamics in
Dyadic, Group, Sociopolitical, and Spiritual/Religious Relationships

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Attachment theory has become one of the most influential theories in psychology, generating an explosion of empirical research and myriad clinical and educational applications. At the heart of attachment theory is a conception of what we are calling *security dynamics*, a set of psychological processes involved in the search for social sources of security in the context of threats and challenges, and the consequences of security attainment for emotional stability and personal growth. Stated simply, actual or anticipated dangers, threats, and challenges motivate us to seek the proximity and support of competent and benevolent others and rely on them for renewing or sustaining a sense of attachment security. Being well cared for by these figures, a person feels loved, appreciated, protected, secure and relaxed, and able to return confidently and optimistically to other pursuits. Failure to attain felt security leaves distress or worry unresolved and interferes with effective emotion regulation and healthy development. In the proposed lecture and chapter we focus on the role security dynamics play in shaping the ways we think, experience, and cope with existential concerns of uncertainty, mortality, and meaninglessness. In addition, we present ideas and evidence that people cope with existential concerns by seeking proximity not only to relationship partners but also to the social groups and organizations they belong and interact with, and to God and its earthly representatives. In this way, we expand and extend the core components of attachment theory to explain human behavior in a wide variety of relational and social contexts.

Overview of Adult Attachment Theory

The Search for Social Sources of Protection and Support

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), human beings are born with a biologically evolved psychobiological system (*attachment behavioral system*) that motivates them to seek proximity to supportive others in times of need as a way of reducing anxiety and

obtaining protection from threats. Bowlby (1982) referred to these sought-after and supportive others as *attachment figures*, special individuals who are perceived as strong, wise, and benevolent and to whom a person turns when protection and support are needed. According to Ainsworth (1991), people turn to attachment figures for two main provisions: a physical and emotional *safe haven* (i.e., which alleviates fears and distress) and a *secure base* from which to explore, learn, and thrive in a confident and relaxed manner. In her view, the goal of proximity seeking is twofold – to feel appreciated, protected, and comforted by an attachment figure when threatened and to feel that one’s strivings for competence and autonomy are approved, supported, and empowered by this figure.

Having a safe haven and secure base over time creates, in a child, a sense of *attachment security*, including feelings of being loved and cared for, helps with emotion regulation, and provides support in the pursuit of goals, including exploration, learning, and the development of social skills. The *sense of attachment security* is not just a momentary feeling or the absence of a feeling (e.g., the lack of fear, threat, or insecurity). Although it can be, but does not have to be “felt” consciously (as an emotional state), it is partially a matter of cognition (expectations, assumptions, beliefs) and action tendencies, many of which are automatic and not fully conscious. The sense of attachment security shares with related constructs of personal security, safety, and predictability the belief that the world is safe, but it goes beyond these constructs by emphasizing the importance of a warm and inviting social source of protection and support that sustains hope, courage, and optimism even in distressing circumstances: “There is always someone I can trust and rely on in times of need who values, loves, and appreciates me and is able to help me cope with threats and challenges.”

Bowlby (1982, 1988) believed that the search for a safe haven and secure base, which is critical for survival during infancy and early childhood, continues to operate throughout life, as indicated by adults' needs for affection, comfort, and support when facing threats or challenges (Zeifman & Hazan, 2016). However, proximity-seeking bids may operate somewhat differently at different ages despite the need for a safe haven and a secure base being important across the lifespan. For example, the identity and type of targeted attachment figures tend to change with development. During infancy, primary caregivers (usually parents or parent substitutes) typically occupy the role of attachment figures (Ainsworth, 1991). However, during adolescence and adulthood, there is extensive evidence that additional relationship partners also become potential attachment figures, including close friends and romantic partners (see Zeifman & Hazan, 2016, for a review).

Beyond these relationship partners, a wide variety of people can occupy the role of strong and wise caregiver in particular contexts. These figures include teachers, coaches, and mentors in educational and recreational settings, managers in work settings, officers in the military, therapists in clinical settings, health-workers in medical settings, clergy in religion-related settings, and leaders in social and political organizations. Research indicates that any of these people, depending on circumstances, can be perceived as a potential source, in context, of a safe haven and secure base (e.g., Mallinckrodt et al., 2009; Mayseless & Popper, 2019; Sabol & Pianta, 2012). There is also evidence that other figures and social entities can be recruited as potential attachment figures, such as groups, social institutions, and God (e.g., Granqvist, 2020; Mayseless & Popper, 2007; Smith et al., 1999).

The tactics people use for obtaining a safe haven and secure base tend to differ at different ages. In infancy, the tactics are largely innate (e.g., crying when frightened, reaching

out to be picked up and held). As a child develops and enters more complex social relationships, proximity seeking for the sake of safety and security becomes increasingly flexible, context-sensitive, and skillful (i.e., communicating needs and feelings coherently, regulating proximity and need-expression in line with the preferences and role demands of an attachment figure). In adolescence and adulthood, these tactics are expanded to include many other methods of establishing contact with close relationship partners and asking for protection and support (e.g., phoning or FaceTiming an attachment figure, sending an e-mail or text message). They also include calling upon soothing, encouraging mental representations of attachment figures (e.g., memories, visual and auditory images) and restoring symbolic proximity to these sources of felt security.

At the cognitive level, proximity seeking also includes a wide variety of cognitive tactics aimed at increasing feelings of emotional connection and relatedness with the targeted attachment figure (e.g., relationship partner, group, social institution, God). For example, people can increase their identification with the attachment figure (e.g., self-other overlap, group identification, social identification), emphasize consensus with others in opinions and attitudes, or use plural pronouns (e.g., we, us) rather than single pronouns (I, he/she) when describing the relationship. In this way, others' strengths and resources are experienced, to some extent, as one's own (a process that Aron et al., 1991, called *inclusion of the other in the self*), thereby strengthening confidence that one can count on these resources and strengths for attaining a safe haven and secure base.

Attachment-Figure Responsiveness, Felt Security, and Insecure Forms of Attachment

Bowlby (1973) also discussed important individual differences in the extent to which a person possesses a stable sense of attachment security. In his view, these individual differences

are rooted in reactions of attachment figures, over extended periods of time, to one's bids for protection and support in times of need, and in the incorporation of these reactions into mental representations of self and others (*internal working models*). Interactions with attachment figures who are sensitive and responsive to one's bids for protection and support promote felt security and contribute to positive working models of self and others. When a person's attachment figures are not reliably available and supportive, however, his or her sense of lovability and worth is shaky or absent, others' benevolence and reliable support are in doubt, and the person becomes less confident in dealing with threats and challenges (Bowlby, 1973).

Pursuing these theoretical ideas in adulthood, many researchers have focused on a person's *attachment orientation* or *style*, a systematic pattern of relational expectations, emotions, and behaviors that results from a particular history of interactions with attachment figures (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). These orientations can be conceptualized as regions in a continuous two-dimensional space (e.g., Brennan et al., 1998). One dimension, *attachment-related avoidance*, reflects the extent to which a person distrusts others' benevolence and defensively strives to maintain independence and emotional distance from relationship partners. The other dimension, *attachment anxiety*, reflects the extent to which a person worries that others will not be responsive in times of need, which increases the tendency to be preoccupied with, and intrusive in, close relationships. People who score low on both dimensions of attachment insecurity are said to be secure, or secure with respect to attachment. The two dimensions can be measured with reliable and valid self-report scales and are associated in theoretically predictable ways with many aspects of personal well-being and relationship quality (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016, for a review).

We have proposed that a person's location in the two-dimensional space defined by attachment anxiety and avoidance reflects both the person's sense of attachment security and the ways in which he or she deals with threats and stressors (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). People who score low on these dimensions are generally secure and tend to employ constructive and effective affect-regulation strategies. In contrast, people who score high on either attachment anxiety or avoidance, or both (a condition called fearful avoidance), suffer from attachment insecurities. Insecure people tend to use secondary attachment strategies that we, following Cassidy and Kobak (1988), characterize as "hyperactivating" or "deactivating" the attachment behavioral system in an effort to cope with threats.

People who score high on attachment anxiety rely on hyperactivating strategies – energetic attempts to achieve proximity, support, and love combined with a lack of confidence that these resources will be provided and with feelings of sadness or anger when they are in fact not provided. These reactions occur in relationships in which an attachment figure is sometimes responsive but unreliably so, placing the needy person on a partial reinforcement schedule that rewards exaggeration and persistence in proximity-seeking attempts because these efforts sometimes succeed (Ainsworth et al., 1978). In contrast, people who score high on avoidant attachment tend to use deactivating strategies: trying not to seek proximity to others when threatened, denying attachment needs, and avoiding closeness and interdependence in relationships. These strategies develop in relationships with attachment figures who disapprove of and punish frequent bids for closeness and expressions of need (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

In short, each attachment strategy has a major regulatory goal (insisting on proximity to an attachment figure or on self-reliance), which goes along with particular cognitive and affective processes that facilitate goal attainment. These strategies affect the formation and

maintenance of close relationships as well as the experience, regulation, and expression of negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, or sadness (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Moreover, the strategies affect the ways in which people experience and cope with threatening events, including existential threats – the focus of the following sections of this chapter.

Attachment Orientations and Coping with Existential Concerns

We propose that the attachment system was “designed,” or selected, by evolution as a regulatory device for dealing with all kinds of stressors and threats, including existential concerns about annihilation or death, which Bowlby (1982) discussed in relation to the threat of predation in early humans’ environment of adaptation. According to several social psychology theories, life events or circumstances that remind us about the fragility of our existence, our biological finitude, or our inability to predict and control the course of one’s life is a major source of existential anxiety (about death, uncertainty, or lack of control) and a powerful trigger of psychological defenses (e.g., Fritzsche et al., 2013; Hogg, 2007; Pyszczynski et al., 2019). From an attachment perspective, these existential concerns might automatically activate the attachment system and energizes a person’s attempts to attain care, protection, and safety. This means that a sense of attachment security should be an effective psychological defense against existential concerns that restores a person’s sense of value and continuity, rendering other symbolic defenses less necessary. In contrast, lack of available, responsive, and sensitive attachment figures may cause people to rely on other forms of defense against existential concerns.

Existential Concerns and the Search for Social Sources of Protection and Support

In a study of the mental accessibility of attachment-related representations, Mikulincer et al. (2000) found that even preconscious reminders of death can automatically activate the

attachment system. They (Mikulincer et al., 2000, Study 3) subliminally exposed participants to the word “death” or a neutral word for 22 milliseconds in each of several trials and found that words related to attachment security (e.g., love, hug, closeness) became more available for processing (as indicated by faster reaction times in a lexical decision task) following the death prime. The word “death” had no effect on the mental availability of attachment-unrelated positive or neutral words.

There is also evidence that conscious death reminders cause a person to think of seeking proximity to a close other. For example, as compared to a neutral condition, experimentally heightened mortality salience led to increased preference for sitting close to other people in a group discussion rather than sitting alone (Wisman & Koole, 2003) and increased desire for affectionate touch (Koole et al., 2014). Also, experimentally induced death reminders strengthens the tendency to overestimate the extent to which one’s beliefs are shared by others – false consensus effect (McGregor et al., 2005). In the next pages, we review evidence showing that this tendency to heighten proximity to protective others when facing existential threats is targeted not only to friends, romantic partners, and spouses but also to social groups, sociopolitical entities (e.g., government), and spiritual figures (e.g. God).

Dyadic relationships. Terror management studies revealed that the anxiety aroused by thinking about one’s death heightens proximity seeking to close relationship partners (see Mikulincer et al., 2003; Plusnin et al., 2018, for reviews). In a pioneering study, Florian et al. (2002) randomly assigned participants to write about either their own death (the mortality salience condition) or a neutral topic (watching TV) and then assessed participants’ *personal* commitment to their romantic partner (e.g., “I am completely devoted to my partner”) as well as their *moral* commitment to the institution of marriage (e.g., “Marriages are supposed to last

forever”). As compared to the neutral condition, mortality salience increased personal commitment to a romantic partner but had no effect on moral commitment to the institution of marriage. Florian et al. (2002) concluded that death reminders increase the desire to stay close to a romantic partner in the present but not the adherence to cultural norms concerning marriage.

Subsequent studies have extended this line of research to other relational motives, cognitions, and behaviors. In general, their findings indicate that people facing existential threats express more interest in initiating a romantic relationship and heightened desire for intimacy in such a relationship (e.g., Hoppe et al., 2018; Silveira et al., 2014). Moreover, as compared to participants in a control condition, participants exposed to death reminders are more likely to make compromises in their mate selection criteria in order to secure a long-term mate (e.g., Hirschberger et al., 2002). Research also indicates that death reminders increase participants’ desire for emotional intimacy with a romantic partner even after this partner has disapproved of or criticized them, implying that death awareness makes people willing to pay the price of diminished self-esteem to maintain relational closeness (Hirschberger et al., 2003).

Group relationships. When facing existential threats, people can turn for protection and support to the social group they belong (in-group). This defensive proximity seeking can be manifested in heightened emotional connection to, and identification with, the group, and the resulting tendencies of accepting, valuing, and endorsing the goals, beliefs, values, and prototypical traits and behaviors of the group. These kinds of proximity-seeking bids might also result in positive attitudes toward other group members and preference for in-group over out-group members, group loyalty, and wearing or using objects (e.g., clothes, flags) which are visible reminders of group membership.

In a series of surveys, a dramatic increase in patriotism (love of country, in-group solidarity) and identification with national symbols (e.g., flag, anthem) was found among American adults immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (e.g., Li & Brewer, 2004). For example, more Americans were flying U.S. flags shortly after 9/11 than prior to the terrorist attack. A similar increase in patriotism was reported recently by Sibley et al. (2020) among New Zealanders immediately following the COVID-19 outbreak (compared to a matched pre-pandemic group).

Heightened in-group identification has also been noted following exposure to physical threats (e.g., potential virus contagion; Bélanger et al., 2013) as well as economic and ecological threats (e.g., Barth et al., 2018; Uhl et al., 2018). For example, Barth et al. (2018) found that study participants who read an article about the threat of climate change (as compared to those who read a neutral article) showed greater adherence to in-group norms and more negative reactions to people who acted against the group's interests. People also tend to strengthen their psychological connection to an in-group when facing threats to their sense of control and agency (Fritzsche et al., 2013). Experimental reminders of lack of personal control over life events have been found to increase in-group identification, mainly when groups are framed as strong and competent (Stollberg et al., 2015). These reminders have also been found to increase positive appraisals of in-groups (Fritzsche et al., 2013) and conformity with salient in-group (but not out-group) norms (Stollberg et al., 2017).

Terror management studies provide some of the best evidence that existential concerns (i.e., death reminders) activate proximity-seeking inclinations in relation to a group. For example, Castano et al. (2002) found that, as compared to Italian participants in a control condition, Italians exposed to death reminders displayed stronger identification with Italians,

perceived themselves to share more common characteristics with Italians, and held more positive attitudes toward Italians (vs. Germans). Moreover, mortality salience has been found to increase self-group overlap, causing people to conform to an in-group's beliefs and overestimate their similarity to in-group members in both psychological traits and opinions (Pyszczynski et al., 1996, Renkema et al., 2008; Watanabe & Karasawa, 2012).

Mortality salience also increases positive attitudes toward in-group members. In one of the early terror management studies, Greenberg et al. (1990) found that Christians who were reminded of their mortality gave more positive evaluations of Christians, but more negative evaluations of Jews. This finding was conceptually replicated when in-groups and out-groups were arbitrarily formed in the context of a lab experiment (using the minimal group paradigm; Harmon-Jones et al., 1996). Moreover, as compared to a control condition, participants exposed to death reminders tend to report more interest in interacting with an in-group rather than an out-group member (e.g., Frischlich et al., 2015).

Sociopolitical relationships. There is also some evidence supporting the idea that existential concerns increase citizens' tendency to rely on social institutions (e.g., government, army) for protection and support. Longitudinal surveys conducted in the U.S. and Switzerland indicate that people expressed greater trust in government and public health agencies during the H1N1 pandemic than in a pre-pandemic assessment (Bangerter et al., 2012; Quinn et al., 2013). Similar findings were reported by Sibley et al. (2020), who examined the effects of a nationwide lockdown in response to the COVID-19 outbreak by comparing matched samples of New Zealanders assessed before and during the first 18 days of lockdown. People in the pandemic/lockdown group reported more trust in the government and in the police, and they expressed more positive attitudes toward them than was the case before the pandemic.

Experimentally induced threats to one's sense of continued existence and control also seem to heighten reliance on governmental services and foster more positive attitudes toward social organizations. For example, Kay et al. (2008) found that, as compared with a control condition, a threat to personal control (created by a memory task that required participants to recall uncontrollable events) increased explicit requests for help from the government. Prusova and Gulevich (2019) found that a mortality salience manipulation caused Russian students to give government more responsibility and control over their lives, and Jonas et al. (2011) reported that participants exposed to death reminders were more likely to endorse aspects of their workplace culture than participants in a control condition. Beyond these experimental findings, a cross-national survey conducted in 67 countries found that people who felt less control over their lives were more likely to turn to their government in times of need (Kay et al., 2008).

The search for protection and support in times of need may also be directed at social or political leaders. Popper and Mayseless (2003) proposed that desire for a strong leader tends to arise in times of personal or collective crisis, trauma, or uncertainty. During demanding and challenging periods, people wish to feel close to, and rely upon, a leader who can protect them. This tendency was first documented in 1970 by John Mueller, a political scientist who found that sudden international crises during the Cold War led Americans to rally behind their leaders and increase their trust in American presidents. In a subsequent review, Baker and Oneal (2001) suggested that military crises, mainly if they are sudden, dramatic, and international in scope, can in and of themselves trigger heightened support for a president. Indeed, dramatic increases in support for American presidents were found following the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Bay of Pigs crisis in 1962, the entry of the US into the Gulf War in 1991, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, and the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Lambert et al., 2011). This “rally behind the

leader” tendency was also found in laboratory studies: As compared to a control condition, American participants who were reminded of the 9/11 attacks (by watching a short video clip) expressed more favorable attitudes toward President Bush (Lambert et al., 2011).

Religious/spiritual relationships. Believers turn to God when distressed and tend to strengthen their emotional connection to this omnipotent and omnibenevolent attachment-like figure by prayer, the most prototypical proximity-seeking behavior in relation to God (Granqvist, 2020). In early studies of prayer, Stouffer (1949) observed that combat soldiers pray frequently before, during, and after battle. And subsequent studies have shown, as we all know from personal observations and experiences, that prayer is a common practice used by believers to cope with physical illnesses and injuries (see Koenig et al., 2012, for a review).

People also tend to increase their emotional connection to God by heightening their endorsement of religious beliefs and engagement in religious practices. Indeed, studies conducted with patients diagnosed with a serious physical illness have documented more frequent attendance at religious services, increased desire for closeness to God, and a greater tendency to ask for God protection and support during the illness (e.g., Keefe et al., 2001). In addition, a study of weekly variations in Google search in 16 nations over a period of 12 years revealed that a larger than usual weekly Google search volume for life-threatening illnesses (e.g., cancer, diabetes, hypertension) predicted increases in searches for religious content (e.g., God, Jesus, prayer) during the following week (Pelham et al., 2018). This effect evaporated when examining searches for a non-life-threatening illness (e.g., sore throat).

Increases in religiosity have also been found during and following natural and man-made disasters. For example, Sibley and Bulbulia (2012) found an increase in religious faith among people who were directly affected by the 2011 Christchurch earthquake in New Zealand, and

Davis et al. (2019) reported that Louisiana flood survivors who were directly affected by the flooding were especially prone to view God as a source of protection, comfort, and care. Using a large worldwide sample ($N = 86,272$), Du and Chi (2016) found that people living in areas that suffered from more wars or violent conflicts and were more worried about wars tended to be more religious, as assessed by religious practices, religious identity, and belief in God. However, in this case, one can equally argue that heightened religiosity might be a cause and not the consequence of intergroup conflicts and wars.

Heightened emotional connection with God can also be observed following experimental inductions of existential threats (making salient one's lack of control or one's mortality) in the laboratory. Kay et al. (2008) found, for example, that, as compared to a control condition, participants who were asked to recall an uncontrollable personal event were more likely to say they believed in God's existence and power. In addition, terror management studies have found stronger endorsement of religious beliefs following a mortality salience manipulation than following neutral inductions among Christians, Muslims, and Agnostics (e.g., Vail et al., 2012).

The dark side of attachment-system activation. Although the search for protection and support from one's social or religious group, institutions, or leaders might, under ideal conditions, result in the provision of a safe haven and secure base and a renewal of the sense of attachment security, it can create two important societal problems under less optimal conditions. First, this search can contribute to the rise of autocratic leaders or dictators who promise to restore order and security at the price of eroding personal freedom and trampling on democratic values and practices. As Fromm noted in his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, fear and insecurity often lead to "a readiness to accept any ideology and any leader if only he offers a political structure and symbols which allegedly give meaning and order to an individual's life"

(p. 124). In times of collective crises, people are likely to be particularly susceptible to the influence of, and more prone to rely upon, charismatic and confident-seeming leaders who proclaim that they have the power to rid the world of distress and chaos. Therefore, when attachment-system activation is directed at political leaders, it can inadvertently contribute to the rise of dictators and the erosion of democracy.

This effect was illustrated by Hertzber (1940), who analyzed the rise of 35 dictators and found that all of them took power in times of collective crises (e.g., Adolf Hitler during a depression following Germany's defeat in World War I). In social psychological research, Gelfand (2018) reported results from surveys she conducted before presidential elections in the US and France showing that people who were more fearful about various social threats (e.g., illegal immigration, unemployment, crime, terrorism) were more supportive of autocratic candidates who offered simple solutions to these complex problems (Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen).

However, these findings do not mean that every collective crisis necessarily results in the rise of a dictator, because more democratic leaders have also attained office during times of upheaval (e.g., Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill). In fact, a solid sense of attachment security might counter this trend and encourage reliance on leaders who not only provide a safe haven during a collective crisis but also respect and support citizens' autonomy and individuality. Attachment-secure people are so confident in their lovability and value, and have developed such a strong sense of mastery and autonomy, that they might be able to disengage from, and rebel against, a leader who dismisses or frustrates their needs for freedom and autonomous growth. For example, a person who is securely attached to democratic institutions and confidently relies on them in times of need might be able to fight actively against leaders

who promise to restore order and safety at the price of destroying these valued sociopolitical sources of felt security. In our opinion, “rallying behind the leader” in times of need does not necessarily require *escaping from freedom* and endorsing a dictatorship. These possible destructive results of attachment-like behavior within sociopolitical relationships might depend on a person’s felt security and might be particularly characteristic of attachment-insecure people who either anxiously intensify their dependence on strong leaders or search for social tightness (Gelfand, 2018) and restoration of the social status quo.

The second problem is that manipulative leaders can take advantage of people’s need for security and deliberately emphasize the imminence and severity of external threats as a way to increase people’s reliance on their leadership. In a recent article, *Creating Fear and Insecurity for Political Goals*, Bar-Tal (2020) provided examples of authoritarian leaders intentionally attempting to evoke fear and insecurity among their followers as a method of increasing dependence, conformity, and obedience. From our attachment-theory perspective, messages that emphasize external threats can be viewed as activating followers’ proximity-seeking bids, which can be targeted toward a leader who promises to eliminate the threats and restore security. In other words, autocratic leadership involves a cynical manipulation of security dynamics in order to amplify followers’ search for protection from a leader, resulting in heightened dependence on the leader and increased compliance with his prescriptions and demands.

This cynical manipulation of security dynamics is also evident in Stern’s (2003) description of the ways in which people are recruited to the role of violent terrorist. Recruiters target people who are chronically insecure because of prior abuse, trauma, or humiliation and draw them progressively into line with the aims of terrorist groups or religious cults by alternately heightening their sense of insecurity (by reactivating the trauma and humiliation and

exacerbating the sense of helplessness) and then reducing it through group solidarity exercises, praise from cult leaders, and applause for feats of violence against threatening enemies. Hapless followers are encouraged to identify with the grandiosity of a destructively charismatic leader who promises security, safety, and permanent approval (eternal martyrdom) to compensate for their sense of vulnerability, meaninglessness, and futility. The enormous danger of this kind of security dynamics for humankind is evident to anyone who thinks about it.

A similar dangerous dynamics can be observed in religious/spiritual relationships. Placing one's problems in God's hands can put emotionally troubled people at risk of being exploited by manipulative and deceptive religious leaders, who promise redemption and inner peace at the price of giving up their individuality and autonomy. As a result, believers can be entrapped in a self-exacerbating cycle of dependence, self-dissolution, fanatic adherence to a faith, and blind merger with the religious group, leader, and cause. This process might be particularly characteristic of attachment-anxious believers, who may be overly dependent on their religious faith and leaders (Granqvist, 2020). However, this dark side of attachment to God might be avoided by a solid sense of attachment security, which sustains and promotes more mature forms of spirituality, curious exploration of others' religious beliefs, and the ability to disengage from religious/spiritual groups, leaders, and institutions that threaten one's individuality and autonomy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment-Related Differences in Managing Existential Concerns

From an attachment perspective, individual differences in the sense of attachment security are highly relevant for explaining the ways people experience and manage existential concerns. In this context, several studies have found that attachment orientations moderate the effects of mortality salience. For example, Mikulincer and Florian (2000) and Mikulincer et al.

(1990) found that attachment security is associated with lower levels of death-related thoughts and fear of death measured by self-report scales, projective tests (narrative responses to TAT cards), and cognitive tasks (completion of death-related word fragments). In contrast, attachment anxiety is associated with heightened fear of death as measured by both self-reports and TAT responses, and with greater accessibility of death-related thoughts even when no death reminder is present. Attachment-related avoidance is related to lower self-reported fear of death, but with a higher level of death-related thoughts and anxiety in TAT responses. That is, avoidant individuals tend to suppress death concerns and exhibit dissociation between their conscious and unconscious thoughts about death.

Attachment-related differences have also been found in people's construal of death anxiety (Florian & Mikulincer, 1998; Mikulincer et al., 1990). Anxiously attached people tend to attribute this fear to the loss of social identity after death (e.g., "People will forget me"), whereas avoidant people tend to attribute it to the unknown nature of the hereafter (e.g., "uncertainty about what to expect"). These findings are compatible with secondary attachment strategies. Anxious people hyperactivate worries about rejection and abandonment, viewing death as yet another relational setting in which they can be abandoned or forgotten. Avoidant people work to sustain self-reliance and strong personal control, which leads to fear of the uncertain and unknown aspects of death – threats to perceived control.

Secure and insecure people differ in the way they manage concerns related to death. Although seeking support for one's cultural worldview has been considered the normative defense against existential threats (Pyszczynski et al., 2019), there is evidence that this response is more characteristic of insecure than of secure individuals. For example, experimentally induced death reminders produced more severe judgments and punishments of moral

transgressors, greater willingness to die for a political cause, and more support for a conservative president candidate only among insecurely attached people (Caspi-Berkowitz et al., 2019; Mikulincer & Florian, 2000; Weise et al., 2008). Securely attached people were less affected by death reminders. Moreover, the experimental priming of attachment security buffered the effects of mortality salience on increased support for violent measures against terrorists (Weise et al., 2008) and increased support for the war in Iraq and harsh foreign policy toward North Korea (Gillath & Hart, 2010).

Some of the studies reveal ways in which secure people react to death reminders. Mikulincer and Florian (2000) found that secure people reacted to mortality salience with an increased sense of symbolic immortality – a constructive, transformational strategy that, while not solving the unsolvable problem of death, leads people to invest in their children's care and to engage in creative, growth-oriented activities whose products live on after death. Secure people also reacted to mortality salience with heightened attachment needs – a more intense desire for intimacy in close relationships (Mikulincer & Florian, 2000), heightened reliance on others in times of need (Cox et al., 2008), and greater willingness to engage in social interactions (Taubman Ben-Ari et al., 2002). In addition, Yaakobi et al. (2014) found that parenthood can serve as a buffer against mortality salience mainly among more secure people (those scoring relatively low on the avoidance dimension).

Caspi-Berkowitz et al. (2019) also found that secure people reacted to death reminders by strengthening their desire to care for others. In her study, people read hypothetical scenarios in which a relationship partner was in danger of death; the participants were then asked about their willingness to endanger their own life to save their partner's life. Secure people reacted to death reminders with heightened willingness to sacrifice themselves. Insecure people were generally

averse to self-sacrifice and reacted to death reminders with less willingness to save others' lives. It's notable that insecure individuals, who seem more ready than secure ones to die for their self-enhancing cultural worldviews, are more reluctant to sacrifice themselves for a particular other person.

People differing in attachment security also differ in their perceptions of life's meaning and in ways of coping with the threat of meaninglessness. For example, feelings of closeness and social support (which are aspects of felt security) are associated with a heightened sense of life's meaning (e.g., Hicks & King, 2009; Steger et al., 2008). Similarly, Lambert et al. (2010) reported that perceived closeness to family members and support from them was associated with greater meaning in life among young adults, even when self-esteem, feelings of autonomy and competence, and social desirability were statistically controlled. Moreover, implicit priming of relational closeness increased the perception of life's meaning when participants were in a bad mood (Hicks & King, 2009). In contrast, experimental manipulations of rejection, social exclusion, and loneliness (which are related to attachment insecurity) reduce people's sense that life is meaningful (e.g., Hicks et al., 2010; Stillman et al., 2009; Williams, 2007).

Mikulincer and Shaver (2005) reported a preliminary study that examined the association between attachment insecurities and perception of life's meaning. Participants who had previously completed a self-report attachment measure were primed with representations of either a security provider (thinking about a supportive other) or a person who did not serve attachment functions. They then completed a self-report measure of the extent to which they perceived the world as understandable and life as "making sense". Lower scores on attachment anxiety and avoidance (i.e., greater attachment security) were associated with higher levels of

meaning and coherence in life. Moreover, as compared to neutral priming, security priming increased the sense of meaning and coherence even among dispositionally insecure participants.

Concluding Remarks

Although existential threats are obviously real and of great consequence, it would be a mistake to conclude that human beings are insufficiently equipped to deal with them or cannot do so without erecting psychologically distorting and socially damaging defenses. A host of studies show that people who have developed dispositional attachment security deal effectively with the fact of mortality and the need for meaning, certainty, and control. Moreover, they deal with these threats while remaining relatively open, optimistic, internally integrated, and well connected socially. We had space here to focus on only a few examples, but there are other relevant and important studies of attachment security and honesty, authenticity, and creativity (e.g., Gillath et al., 2010; Mikulincer et al., 2011). Overall, a coherent body of research indicates that people who are treated well by others, beginning early in life, find life engaging, enjoyable, and meaningful.

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