America Is in Its Insecure-Attachment Era

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About a decade ago, the social psychologist Sara Konrath led a study that yielded some disturbing results. As a researcher at Indiana University, she’d already found that narcissism rates seemed to be increasing among Americans, and empathy decreasing; that was a combination that didn’t bode well, she feared, for the quality of people’s relationships. So she decided to look more deeply into the state of Americans’ connections—and in order to do so, she turned to attachment theory.

Researchers have identified four basic “attachment styles”: People with a secure style feel that they can depend on others and that others can depend on them too. Those with a dismissive style—more commonly known as “avoidant”—are overly committed to independence and don’t feel that they need much deep emotional connection. People with a preoccupied (or “anxious”) style badly want intimacy but, fearing rejection, cling or search for validation. And people with fearful (or “disorganized”) attachment crave intimacy, too—but like those with the dismissive style, they distrust people and end up pushing them away. Konrath’s team analyzed nearly 100 other studies, completed from 1988 to 2011, that had assessed college students’ attachment styles.

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