# Most people accurately read their partner's insecurities, but misreads might actually do some good

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Identifying one's partner's emotional needs plays a foundational role in romantic relationships. Most people think they actually have a pretty

solid understanding of their partner's attachment style and often actively behave in thoughtful ways to support those insecurities.

In a recent study, researchers decided to explore two very simple yet fundamental questions: How well do people read their partner's insecurities and fears in a relationship? Does getting it right change the way we show up and support them? They studied 108 young couples who had been together for about a year and a half and 147 couples who had been together for an average of 12 years.

It turned out that people were usually pretty good at identifying their partner's attachment style. That said, there was a clear directional bias, with people tending to see their partners as more anxious or more avoidant than their partners saw themselves. The findings are published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

## Decoding attachment styles

Psychologists define attachment style as consistent patterns in how people think, feel and behave in close relationships. Two of the most widely studied patterns are attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance. People high in attachment anxiety often worry about being abandoned and strongly crave closeness. In contrast, attachment avoidance is marked by discomfort with intimacy and a tendency to rely heavily on oneself.

These attachment insecurities are often linked to worse relationship outcomes for both individuals and their partners. However, research has shown that romantic partners can buffer each other's issues and help each other feel more secure when they respond in ways that match the type of insecurity, such as giving extra reassurance to a partner who is anxiously attached.

Despite evidence that these buffering behaviors work, it remains unclear how partners decide to use them. Studies could never quite settle whether people actually pick up on real signs of insecurity in their partners or just project their own fears onto them. On top of that, being on point about the attachment style and having a bias were treated as opposites when both can quietly shape how romantic partners see each other. Also, there is not much information about the possibility that anxious people may see their partners as cold and distant, while avoidant people may see theirs as needy and clingy.

## Accuracy and biases

In this study, the researchers used the truth and bias model to compare what people believed about their partner with how the partner actually described themselves. Young couples each completed surveys about their own relationship-specific attachment style and how they saw their partner's style. They were also recorded for eight minutes discussing a personal goal one partner wanted to achieve, and afterward, the supporting partner reported how much reassurance they could offer.

For couples who had been together for more than a decade, the focus shifted to global attachment style, meaning their general pattern across close relationships throughout their lives. Over 10 days, these partners completed four phone surveys per day, reporting affectionate behaviors such as physical touch, saying "I love you," or doing helpful chores in real time. They were also recorded discussing a problem to see whether more stressful conversations triggered greater reassurance from the partner.

Partners can tell with moderate accuracy how anxious or avoidant their partner is, especially about the partner's general attachment style. Interestingly, participants were better at judging their partner's general personality than their partner's specific feelings about the current

relationship.

The researchers identified three distinct biases. First, directional bias, where people tend to see their partners as more insecure than they truly are. Second, projection bias, where individuals assume their partners feel the same way they do, so an anxious person is more likely to believe their partner is also anxious. Finally, complementarity bias, where people instead perceive their partners as the opposite of themselves.

In the community sample, the more people saw their partner as anxiously attached, the more reassurance they gave both in day-to-day life and when conversations turned stressful.

The researchers argued that how romantic partners read each other's insecurities is far more layered than previously thought, and that getting those readings right may be a powerful way people help each other feel better in a relationship.

**More information:** Elina R. Sun et al, Perceiving to Provide: How Partner Attachment Perceptions Inform Reassurance Provision in Romantic Relationships, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2026). DOI: 10.1177/01461672261448771