



A Systematic Review of Adult Insecure Attachment Styles and Relationship Grief Experiences

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Abstract

Grief is a complex and multifaceted response to the dissolution of significant relationships, including loss through death, romantic breakup, or divorce. While grief is a normative experience, attachment-related differences in emotional regulation and coping may increase vulnerability to maladaptive outcomes, such as prolonged grief disorder (PGD). Although attachment theory has been widely applied to grief, existing findings remain fragmented across loss types and attachment dimensions. Guided by attachment theory, this systematic review examined how insecure adult attachment styles, specifically anxious and avoidant, shape emotional, behavioral, and physiological responses to both emotional and physical loss. A comprehensive literature search across psychology- and health-relevant databases yielded 2,737 records, of which 19 peer-reviewed sources met inclusion criteria for qualitative synthesis. Across studies, anxious attachment was associated with heightened emotional distress, persistent yearning, rumination, and difficulty with self-soothing following both bereavement and relationship dissolution. In contrast, avoidant attachment was characterized by emotional suppression, withdrawal from social support, minimization of loss, and delayed or muted grief responses, often accompanied by somatic symptoms. Despite these distinct coping strategies, both insecure attachment styles demonstrated increased vulnerability to PGD, suggesting that insecure attachment functions as a transdiagnostic risk factor. Clinically, results highlight the importance of attachment-informed assessment and interventions to improve grief-related outcomes.

Keywords: anxious attachment; avoidant attachment; bereavement; prolonged grief disorder; relationship dissolution