

People with attachment anxiety more likely to create false memories when they can see the person talking

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Adults who frequently worry about being rejected or abandoned by those closest to them are more prone to having false memories when they can see who is conveying the information, a new study suggests.

The authors, SMU's Nathan Hudson and Michigan State University's William J. Chopik, found that adults with attachment anxiety tend to remember details incorrectly more often than people with other [personality types](#), like neuroticism or attachment avoidance.

However, attachment-anxious adults were more likely to get the facts wrong only when they could see the person relaying the information—not when they read or heard the same information, reveals a study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Some participants in the study were randomly assigned to watch a 20-minute video of a woman

either talking about her tumultuous breakup with a man or another topic—like a shopping trip or the ecology of California wetlands. Other participants got the same information from audio only or by reading a transcript. All groups took a [memory test](#) immediately after receiving the information, regardless of how it was delivered.

Hudson, a [psychology professor](#) at SMU (Southern Methodist University), said seeing the speaker might be a factor in [memory](#) distortion because highly attachment-anxious people tend to be hypervigilant in monitoring facial expressions. They also tend to misjudge the perceived emotional states of others, he said.

"We believe that highly attachment-anxious individuals are likely intensely analyzing what is being said in the videos we showed them," Hudson said. "Their own thoughts and feelings about the video may have gotten 'mixed up' with the actual video contents in their minds. Thus, they experienced false memories when we gave them a test regarding the video's contents."

These findings, Hudson said, illustrate how our personalities can potentially affect our memory abilities.

"It's important to understand that our brains don't store verbatim audio or video clips of events that happen to us," he said. "Instead, our brain stores snippets of information about our experiences, and when we attempt to recall a memory, it combines stored bits of related information and makes its best guess about what happened."

"As you might imagine, this process can be quite error-prone," he said.

A potentially intense feeling, attachment anxiety

relates to how people form relationships. Highly attachment-anxious people often believe they are not worthy of love and care, worry intensely that other people will reject them and spend a lot of time overanalyzing their relationships, Hudson explained.

Usually, attachment anxiety develops in childhood because of an inconsistent relationship with a parent or caregiver. It often continues into adulthood.

Previous research has shown that attachment styles can predict a person's likelihood of forgetting certain details, especially ones related to relationships. But this study is one of the first to show that attachment anxiety actively makes people more inclined to falsely remember events or details that never occurred.

Attachment anxiety leads to false memories not just about relationships

Hudson and Chopik, an associate professor of psychology at Michigan State University, came up with the findings by conducting three separate studies with [college students](#). The number of study participants varied from 200 participants to more than 650.

Studies of these participants showed that highly attachment-anxious people were the most susceptible to having false memories when viewing a video of a person—regardless of whether the subject was about a relationship breakup or something completely impersonal. But the study reveals they were more accurate in their memories when reading or hearing the same details as people who scored lower in attachment anxiety.

Chopik and Hudson compared the attachment-anxiety adults with people who had one of the Big Five personality traits, such as neuroticism or extraversion. In addition, they were compared with people who ranked high for attachment avoidance. Avoiders steer clear of relationships as a way to stay disengaged from emotional closeness and potential hurt.

The researchers used the 9-item Experiences in

Close Relationships—Relationship-Structures to assess the college students' attachment style. Anyone not in a relationship was asked to think about their last romantic relationship or about relationships in general.

Those with high levels of attachment anxiety tended to strongly agree with statements like "I often worry that my romantic partner doesn't really care for me." Meanwhile, people who were highly attachment-avoidant strongly agreed with statements such as "I prefer not to show my romantic partner how I feel deep down."

How attachment-anxious adults can break the cycle

Hudson said students who recognize themselves as being attachment-anxious may derive immediate personal benefit from this study by being aware of interpersonal situations where they are likely to experience [false memories](#)—for example, during online or in-person lectures, conversing with classmates and friends or watching political debates.

Supplementing information received during face-to-face encounters with reading and listening activities can likely improve memory accuracy for individuals with an attachment-anxious [relationship](#) style.

Hudson added that most people wish to temper their attachment anxiety, and interventions may be able to help them do this, leading to improved well-being. His research suggests that moving toward a more secure attachment style may also positively affect memory processes—and he suggests that future studies explore this.

More information: Hudson, N. et al, Seeing you reminds me of things that never happened: Attachment anxiety predicts false memories when people can see the communicator. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2022). doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000447

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