

The Association Between Adult ADHD Symptoms and Insecure Attachment Representations

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Background

- ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention, impulsivity, and/or hyperactivity.^[1]
- Based on early interactions with caregivers, children tend to develop one of four stable attachment styles (secure, anxious, avoidant, disorganized).^[2]
- Characteristics of insecure attachment closely resemble characteristics of ADHD, leading researchers to study if there is a link between the two constructs.
- People with ADHD who also have an insecure attachment style have been found to have more severe symptoms of ADHD and experience more negative outcomes compared to those with ADHD and a secure attachment style.^[3]
- Previous research suggests a bi-directional influence: having ADHD predisposes a person to develop an insecure attachment style, and having an insecure attachment style predisposes a person to develop ADHD symptoms.^[4,5]

Participants/Methods

- Three hundred and ten adult participants completed a clinical screener for ADHD and two measures of attachment representations.
- One hundred and eighty-five participants reported a previous diagnosis of ADHD or scored at or above the cutoff threshold for a provisional diagnosis on the ADHD screener.

Research Questions

Does having ADHD increase the likelihood of having insecure attachment representations?
Do adults with ADHD report higher frequencies of insecure attachment styles compared to the rates observed in the general population?

Results

There was a significant positive correlation ($p < .01$) found between ADHD symptoms and insecure-anxious attachment representations, insecure-avoidant attachment representations, and insecure-disorganized attachment representations such that:

- As the severity of ADHD symptoms increase, the level of attachment anxiety also increases.
- As the severity of ADHD symptoms increase, the level of attachment avoidance also increases.
- As the severity of ADHD symptoms increase, the level of attachment disorganization also increases.

In the ADHD group, 78.8% reported having an insecure attachment style (only 21.2% reported having a secure attachment).

- 19.0% of the ADHD group reported having an anxious attachment style.
- 18.5% of the ADHD group reported having an avoidant attachment style.
- 41.3% of the ADHD group reported having a disorganized attachment style.

The ADHD group had higher rates of attachment insecurity compared to the non-ADHD group.

Correlations Between ADHD Symptoms and Attachment Representations

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. ADHD Symptoms	-	.410**	.203**	.367**
2. Attachment Anxiety		-	.443**	.865**
3. Attachment Avoidance			-	.833**
4. Attachment Disorganization				-

Note. $N = 310$. ** $p < .01$, two tailed

Distribution of Attachment Styles Across Study Groups

Condition	Attachment Style	<i>N</i>	Percent
ADHD	Secure	39	21.2%
	Anxious	35	19.0%
	Avoidant	34	18.5%
	Disorganized	76	41.3%
	Total	184	
non-ADHD	Secure	45	36.0%
	Anxious	28	22.4%
	Avoidant	30	24.0%
	Disorganized	22	17.6%
	Total	125	

Conclusions/Implications

- There is a strong association between adult ADHD symptoms and insecure attachment representations.
- The rate of secure attachment in the ADHD group was nearly three times lower than observed in the general population (59% secure).^[6]
- The rates of disorganized attachment in the ADHD group were especially high, indicating a strong need for more interventions directed at caregivers of children with ADHD.
- These findings highlight how impactful a person's upbringing can be on future outcomes for ADHD.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on the role of the environment when conceptualizing, assessing for, and treating ADHD.
- More trauma-informed, relational, and family systems-based therapies should be used when working with people with ADHD in addition to traditional interventions.
- May explain why traditional approaches to treating ADHD are not always effective because they do not address the underlying attachment wounds which also drive impairment.

References

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