Attachment, *neurodivergently.*

Why our bonds can look different from the textbook — and practical ways to feel safer and more connected in the relationships we care about.

FIRST, A QUICK REFRESHER

Attachment theory (Bowlby, Ainsworth) describes how we look for closeness and safety with the people we depend on. Early experiences shape patterns we often carry into friendships, partnerships and families.

Secure
Closeness and space both feel okay.

Anxious
Worried about losing connection.

Avoidant
Leans on independence, pulls back.

Disorganized
Wants closeness but also fears it.

PART ONE

Why it can look different

Different doesn't mean broken. Many of the "signs" of insecure attachment overlap with ordinary neurodivergent traits.

The yardstick was built on neurotypical cues

Classic attachment measures read eye contact, hugs and running to a caregiver. ND people may show a bond in other ways. Research finds many autistic children are securely attached.

Misunderstanding goes both ways

The "double empathy problem": ND and NT people often misread each other. A flat tone or a quiet day can be taken as distance when none was meant.

Sensory needs shape closeness

Touch, noise and crowded plans can overload the nervous system. Needing space to recover is regulation, not rejection — and not the same as avoidance.

Rejection can hit harder

Many ADHDers describe intense pain at perceived criticism or rejection (often called rejection sensitivity). It can look like anxious attachment from the outside.

Out of sight isn't out of heart

Working-memory and time differences mean a missed text or late reply is usually about executive function, not how much someone cares.

Masking and feeling "too much"

Years of being corrected can teach that our real selves aren't welcome. Add difficulty naming feelings (alexithymia), and needs may surface late or as shutdown.

Continued on back →

WORTH CELEBRATING

Neurodivergent love languages

Info-dumping
Sharing a passion means "I trust you with this."

Parallel play
Doing separate things, side by side, together.

Penguin pebbling
A meme, a snack, a cool rock: "I thought of you."

Deep-dive care
"I researched your problem" is an act of love.

PART TWO

Supporting our attachment styles

For ourselves

1. **Map your needs.** Sensory limits, alone time, how much reassurance helps.
2. **Name the pattern, not a flaw.** "That's my rejection sensitivity talking."
3. **Regulate first, relate second.** Hard conversations go better after a reset.
4. **Unmask with safe people.** Small, gradual steps build trust from the inside.
5. **Find ND-affirming support.** A therapist who gets neurodivergence can help untangle old patterns.

With each other

1. **Say it plainly.** Clear words beat hints: "I'm tired, not upset with you."
2. **Agree on a check-in rhythm.** Reminders or a set time take the guesswork out.
3. **Offer connection options.** Texting, side-by-side time, low-sensory hangouts.
4. **Repair out loud.** After a rupture, name it, own your part, reconnect.
5. **Ask before assuming.** "What did you mean by that?" is a kindness, not an accusation.

Attachment styles aren't a life sentence.

With safe, consistent, understanding relationships, security can be built at any age — people often call this "earned secure" attachment.

REFLECT

One thing that helps me feel safe and connected:

For education and community support, not diagnosis. For personal guidance, reach out to a neurodivergent-affirming professional.

Sources: Bowlby (1969); Ainsworth et al. (1978); Rutgers et al. (2004), J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry; Milton (2012), Disability & Society.