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Research Brief: Attachment Patterns and Resilience

It is well known that having good social support is critical to becoming and staying resilient. Yet some of us struggle in being able to utilize this support in helpful ways. This most likely has to do with the attachment patterns we developed in our childhood. A newborn infant is immediately primed to connect and attach to its caregivers in order to survive. How the caregivers interact with the unique qualities of each child as they mature shapes the patterns of connecting to others that the child will bring into their adult life. Four attachment styles have been identified in the scientific literature. Most of us have a mixture of styles or secondary styles depending on the circumstance in which we find ourselves. The four primary styles are:

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Secure Attachment: People with a secure attachment have a positive view of themselves and others and can connect with others relatively easily.

Dismissive Attachment: People with this pattern have a positive view of themselves but are unsure of others. They tend to be very independent and resist being dependent on others.

Ambivalent Attachment: These individuals have a positive view of others but are unsure of their own worth and lovableness. They may want more connection but are unsure if others will value them.

Fearful Attachment: These individuals struggle with a negative view of themselves and others. While needing to be connected as much as anyone else, they see themselves as unworthy and others as unreliable.

Eric An, a doctoral student at the Fuller Graduate School of Psychology, partnered with the Headington Institute to study resilience and attachment. In a study of U.S. college students he found that individuals who identified with a combination of secure and dismissive styles also endorsed the most beliefs and practices associated with resilience. Individuals who identified with a combination of fearful and ambivalent styles scored lower on the measure of

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resilience. These findings echo my own clinical observations over the years that aid workers who identify with a combination of the secure and dismissive styles are often the most resilient in the field. They can connect well and access social support wherever they are and at the same time can operate independently if needed. On the other hand, those who identify with a combination of fearful and ambivalent styles can struggle getting support when others are around and have a difficult time managing isolation.

While we do not have any control over the early years that shaped our attachment styles, the good news is that we can all work toward having a more secure style in our adulthood. We can work to improve our own self-image while at the same time risk trusting others more. While this involves some intentional effort to expand our social network and abilities it certainly is well worth the effort.

~ Donald S. Bosch, Ph.D.

Eric An, MA; Donald Bosch, PhD; Anne A.T. Nolt, PhD, ABBP-CN; J. Galen Buckwalter, PhD, Attachment Styles and Resilience, Poster presented at the 2013 International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies conference in Philadelphia.

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