



## Attachment and Relationships in Late Adulthood: A Comprehensive Review

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### Abstract

Attachment theory provides a robust framework for understanding interpersonal relationships across the lifespan. Attachment processes are nevertheless important in late adulthood, a developmental stage marked by greater dependence, health vulnerability, relational loss, and social network reconfiguration, even though they were first developed to explain early child-caregiver bonds. Regarding attachment orientations and relational functioning in late adulthood, this review critically synthesises theoretical viewpoints, empirical data, and methodological advancements. Continuity and change in attachment styles, fluctuating attachment figures, relationships between psychological, physical, and relational well-being and attachment security, and the role of attachment in dealing with loss and caregiving dynamics are some of the important areas that were investigated. There is also a discussion of new assessment instruments designed for elderly populations and the measurement challenges they present. The review emphasises the significance of attachment processes in later life and underlines the consequences for social policy, clinical practice, and gerontological research.

**Keywords:** late adulthood, older adults, close relationships, ageing, psychosocial well-being

### I. Introduction

Attachment theory, originally articulated by Bowlby (1969/1982), conceptualises attachment as a biologically rooted behavioural system designed to maintain proximity to significant others in times of stress or threat. Early attachment experiences with caregivers contribute to the formation of internal working models—cognitive-affective schemas of the self and others—that shape expectations of availability, trust, and emotional regulation across the lifespan. Although the theory was initially grounded in child development, subsequent

empirical and theoretical extensions have firmly established attachment as a lifespan construct influencing relational processes in adolescence, adulthood, and old age (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Late adulthood represents a particularly salient period for attachment processes due to increased exposure to attachment-activating conditions such as declining physical health, functional limitations, bereavement, caregiving dependency, and shrinking social networks. These transitions heighten reliance on close emotional bonds for both instrumental and psychological support, thereby reactivating attachment needs (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2004). In this context, attachment orientations serve as critical determinants of how older adults seek support, regulate distress, and maintain relational security.

Empirical evidence indicates that attachment anxiety tends to decline with age, possibly reflecting improved emotional regulation and prioritisation of emotionally meaningful relationships, whereas attachment avoidance remains relatively stable across adulthood (Fraley, 2019). Secure attachment in later life has been consistently associated with higher life satisfaction, reduced loneliness, better marital adjustment, and adaptive coping with loss, whereas insecure attachment predicts depressive symptoms, anxiety, and poorer health outcomes (Consedine & Magai, 2003). Despite growing interest, attachment in late adulthood remains underrepresented in gerontological research, underscoring the need for a comprehensive synthesis. This review aims to critically examine theoretical perspectives, empirical findings, methodological challenges, and practical implications of attachment in late adulthood (Van Assche et al., 2013).

### Theoretical Perspectives on Attachment in Late Adulthood



### **Continuity and Change in Attachment Orientations**

Attachment orientations exhibit both continuity and plasticity across the lifespan. Longitudinal studies suggest moderate stability in attachment styles from early adulthood into later life, while also highlighting the capacity for change in response to significant relational experiences such as long-term partnerships, caregiving roles, and loss (Davila et al., 1999). In late adulthood, repeated experiences of mutual support and emotional reciprocity may consolidate secure attachment, whereas chronic relational stress or unresolved loss may exacerbate insecurity.

Age-related reductions in attachment anxiety have been interpreted through socioemotional selectivity theory, which posits that older adults prioritise emotional regulation and meaningful relationships over novelty and expansion (Carstensen et al., 1999). In contrast, attachment avoidance often persists due to entrenched deactivating strategies aimed at maintaining autonomy and emotional distance.

### **Attachment Figures and Network Reorganisation**

Attachment figures in late adulthood often differ from those in earlier life stages. While spouses or romantic partners frequently remain primary attachment figures, adult children, close friends, siblings, and even professional caregivers may assume attachment functions, particularly in contexts of illness or widowhood. Social networks typically contract with age, but emotional closeness intensifies within remaining ties (Antonucci et al., 2014).

Older adults may also develop symbolic attachment figures, such as deceased spouses, religious beliefs, or spiritual frameworks, which provide emotional continuity and comfort in the absence of physical proximity. These adaptive strategies reflect the flexibility of the attachment system in maintaining felt security despite relational losses.

### **Attachment and Relationship Quality in Late Adulthood**

#### **Romantic and Marital Relationships**

Attachment orientations have an impact on communication, conflict resolution, and caregiving responsiveness in long-term marriages in late adulthood. Older adults who are securely attached report higher levels of emotional intimacy, mutual support, and marital happiness, especially during times of illness or infirmity. On the other hand, attachment anxiety is linked to excessive reassurance seeking and relational pressure, whilst

attachment avoidance is linked to emotional detachment.

### **Parent-Adult Child Relationships**

Relationships between elderly parents and their adult children are also influenced by attachment processes. While insecure attachment can lead to emotional disengagement or overdependence, stable attachment promotes balanced autonomy and reciprocal support. Because attachment insecurity can make older persons and caregivers more stressed, these dynamics are especially important in caring situations.

### **Attachment, Psychological Well-Being and Health**

#### **Emotional Well-Being and Mental Health**

Secure attachment in late adulthood is associated with higher levels of resilience, self-acceptance, and life satisfaction, according to a large body of research. By supporting adaptive emotion regulation techniques, attachment security helps older persons better handle age-related stressors. On the other hand, loneliness, anxiety, and depressive symptomatology are frequently linked to insecure attachment.

#### **Physical Health and Stress Regulation**

Physiological stress reactions and health-related activities are influenced by attachment orientations. Better self-care, adherence to medical regimens, and less perceived stress have all been linked to secure connection. The biopsychosocial effects of attachment in ageing are highlighted by the fact that insecure attachment, especially avoidance, may result in delayed help-seeking and worse health outcomes.

### **Attachment and Coping with Loss in Late Adulthood**

In late adulthood, bereavement is a major developmental obstacle. The notion of attachment provides important insights into how different people react to loss. While avoidant attachment is linked to emotional repression and disengagement, anxious attachment is linked to extended grieving and rumination, and securely attached people typically incorporate loss into their life narratives while preserving emotional connections.

### **Measurement of Attachment in Older Adults**

Due to their emphasis on romantic relationships and the fact that many adult attachment measures were created with younger samples, their application to late adulthood is limited. Attachment security in



more general relational contexts, including non-romantic ties and dependency-related issues, is the goal of recent scale development initiatives. The

advancement of this field of study depends on the ongoing development of age-appropriate tools.

### Measurement Tools Used in Late-Life Attachment Research

Instrument	Primary Focus	Strengths	Limitations in Late Adulthood
Adult Attachment Interview (AAI)	Narrative coherence and attachment representations	Rich qualitative data, lifespan applicability	Time-intensive, requires trained coders
Experiences in Close Relationships (ECR)	Romantic attachment anxiety and avoidance	High reliability, widely used	Overemphasis on romantic bonds
Late Adulthood Attachment Scale (LAAS)	Attachment security in older adults	Context-sensitive to ageing	Limited cross-cultural validation
Relationship Questionnaire (RQ)	Attachment style categories	Brief and easy to administer	Reduced dimensional sensitivity

### Implications for Practice and Policy

In older persons, attachment-informed therapies can improve psychological well-being and relational security. In order to customise therapeutic approaches, especially in bereavement counselling and caregiving assistance, clinicians working with ageing populations may find it helpful to assess attachment orientations. Healthy ageing can be facilitated by policies that enable stable, emotionally supportive relationships.

### Future Research Directions

Longitudinal designs should be given top priority in future research to investigate attachment trajectories throughout late life, investigate cultural differences in attachment and ageing, and incorporate attachment theory with other lifespan frameworks. Particularly little research has been done on attachment-based therapies for senior citizens, which calls for more investigation.

## II. Conclusion

In late adulthood, attachment processes continue to be essential to relational functioning and overall well-being. While insecure attachment increases susceptibility to psychological suffering and interpersonal problems, secure attachment fosters emotional resilience, adaptive coping, and fulfilling relationships. Understanding the lifelong significance of attachment enhances our comprehension of ageing and influences research and practice targeted at fostering well-being in later life.

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