

When Closeness Feels Uncertain

A Clinical Attachment Formulation for Maya

Matthew Doty | GCEP 585



Maya's Central Struggle

Maya wants closeness, but closeness rarely feels secure.

She...

- Deeply values her relationships
- Quickly notices possible signs of distance
- Fears that conflict, disappointment, or imperfection may cause others to withdraw
- Seeks reassurance but struggles to hold onto it
- Experiences similar fears in her relationship with God

Clinical question:

What has Maya learned about whether love remains available when she needs it most?



Part I: What Is Attachment?

- Attachment in One Sentence
- Bowlby and Ainsworth
- Safe Haven and Secure Base
- Internal Working Models
- Attachment Patterns Are Adaptive Strategies
- Adult Attachment Is Dimensional
- Attachment and Mental Health



Attachment in One Sentence

Attachment theory explains how repeated experiences of connection shape our expectations about safety, need, trust, and relationships.

The Attachment system...

- Motivates proximity to protective caregivers
- Activates during fear, distress, illness, or separation
- Helps regulate emotional and physiological states
- Continues influencing relationships throughout life

Attachment isn't simply affection or dependency. It's an adaptive system organized around protection, regulation, and survival. (Bowlby, 1988; Siegel, 2020)

Attachment motivates proximity to caregivers and becomes especially active under threat or separation



Bowlby and Ainsworth

John Bowlby proposed that...

- Attachment is an innate behavioral system
- Children seek proximity to caregivers for protection
- Early relationships become internal working models
- Attachment continues “from the cradle to the grave”

Ainsworth’s research identified...

- Secure attachment
- Avoidant attachment
- Anxious-resistant attachment
- Disorganized attachment (later)

Ainsworth’s early work showed that attachment security was tied less to warmth alone than to caregivers’ availability, perceptiveness, and prompt responsiveness. Her work also emphasized caregiver sensitivity, availability, and responsiveness.

(Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1988)



Safe Haven and Secure Base

A secure attachment figure provides two essential functions:



Safe Haven : When distress rises, the attachment figure offers...

- Protection
- Comfort
- Co-regulation
- Help returning to emotional balance
- Secure Base



Secure Base: When safety is established, we are freer to...

- Explore
- Learn
- Take reasonable risks
- Develop independence
- Form other relationships

Security doesn't trap a person in dependence.
It makes healthy exploration possible.



Internal Working Models

Repeated attachment experiences become internal working models. These implicit maps help answer important questions

Am I
worthy of
love?

What happens
when I disappoint
someone?

Will anyone
respond when
I need help?

Is closeness
safe?

Should I intensify,
withdraw, perform, or
hide to preserve
connection?



Internal Working Models

Repeated attachment experiences become internal working models. These implicit maps help answer important questions

Internal working models influence...

- Attention and interpretation
- Emotional regulation
- Bodily activation
- Relationship expectations
- Memory and meaning-making
- Responses to separation and conflict

They operate largely **outside conscious awareness** and can become self-reinforcing.

Siegel describes internal working models as **schemas that use previous relational experience to anticipate what is likely to happen next.**

(Hall & Hall, 2021; Siegel, 2020)



Attachment Patterns Are Adaptive Strategies

These patterns aren't character defects. They're strategies the nervous system developed within actual relational conditions.

The clinical question isn't only "What's wrong?" but "What once made this response necessary?"

Secure

"I can seek support, receive comfort, and return to life."

Avoidant or Dismissing

"I must minimize need because reaching for others may lead to rejection."

Anxious or Preoccupied

"I must intensify connection because you may not remain available."

Disorganized or Fearful

"I need connection, but connection may also be dangerous."



Adult Attachment Is Dimensional

(Brennan et al., 1998)

Adult attachment can be understood through two dimensions: **Attachment Anxiety** and **Attachment Avoidance**. A person can score high or low on either dimension and may experience different attachment patterns in different relationships. The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale separately measures avoidance and anxiety rather than treating people as fixed categories



Attachment Anxiety

- Fear of rejection or abandonment
- Heightened monitoring of relationships
- Strong reassurance-seeking
- Difficulty settling after perceived distance



Attachment Avoidance

- Discomfort with dependence or vulnerability
- Emotional distancing
- Minimization of attachment needs
- Reluctance to seek comfort

Attachment and Mental Health

Attachment security supports...

- Co-regulation and self-regulation
- Emotional flexibility
- Integrated autobiographical memory
- Empathy and reflective functioning
- Relational resilience
- The ability to explore while remaining connected

However...

- Insecure attachment isn't a diagnosis.
- It doesn't guarantee psychopathology.
- Secure attachment doesn't guarantee mental health.
- New relationships and corrective experiences can support **earned security**.

Attachment insecurity may increase vulnerability to...

- Anxiety and depression
- Relational conflict
- Emotional rigidity or chaos
- Hypervigilance or emotional shutdown
- Difficulty receiving support



Part 2: How Does Attachment Apply to Spirituality?

- God as an Attachment Figure
- Correspondence and Compensation
- Attachment Patterns in Spiritual Life



God as an Attachment Figure

For many believers, God may function psychologically as an attachment figure.

People may seek God for...

- Proximity during distress
- Comfort and protection
- Felt security
- Guidance and strength
- A dependable base from which to live

Religious practices that may support perceived proximity include...

- Prayer
- Scripture
- Worship
- Sacred symbols
- Community participation

Religion and spirituality can't be reduced to attachment, but attachment dynamics may shape how a person experiences God.

(Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016)



Correspondence and Compensation

Correspondence

A person's relationship with God resembles earlier attachment experiences. For example....

- A reliable caregiver may support experiencing God as available.
- An inconsistent caregiver may contribute to fear that God's closeness is unstable.
- A rejecting caregiver may make spiritual intimacy feel uncomfortable.

Compensation

God becomes a source of security that was missing or unreliable in human relationships.

These pathways aren't mutually exclusive. A person may simultaneously repeat earlier patterns and experience genuine healing through faith.

(Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2016)



Attachment Patterns in Spiritual Life

(Hall & Hall, 2021; Mayfield, 2022)



Secure Spirituality

- Turns toward God during distress
- Experiences God as available and accepting
- Receives comfort without compulsive reassurance
- Feels freer to love and serve others



Anxious Spirituality

- Fears abandonment or divine disappointment
- Intensifies prayer or religious behavior to restore closeness
- Experiences temporary reassurance followed by renewed doubt



Avoidant Spirituality

- Distances from God during distress
- Prefers intellectual or impersonal faith
- Minimizes spiritual dependence



Fearful Spirituality

- Desires God but expects shame, punishment, or rejection
- May hide from both God and religious community

Part 3: How Is This Relevant to Maya?

- Maya's Attachment Formulation
- How Maya's Pattern Developed
- Maya's Relational Attachment Cycle
- Maya's Spiritual Attachment Cycle
- Assessment and Ethical Posture
- Treatment Model
- Specific Clinical Interventions
- From Insight to Earned Security



Maya's Attachment Formulation

High Attachment Anxiety + Low Attachment Avoidance

Maya desires closeness and doesn't withdraw from connection. Instead, uncertainty activates **hyperactivating strategies** including...

- Monitoring for signs of withdrawal
- Replaying interactions
- Intensifying contact
- Apologizing quickly
- Seeking repeated reassurance
- Attempting to restore closeness immediately
- Struggling to internalize reassurance once it's given

This is best understood as a clinical hypothesis, not a diagnosis or permanent label.

(Brennan et al., 1998; Mikulincer et al., 2003)



How Maya's Pattern Developed

Her mother could be...

- Affectionate and spiritually encouraging
- Anxious or overwhelmed
- Inconsistently available
- Dismissive when Maya's emotional needs became difficult

Her father was...

- Practically dependable
- Emotionally distant

Maya learned to...

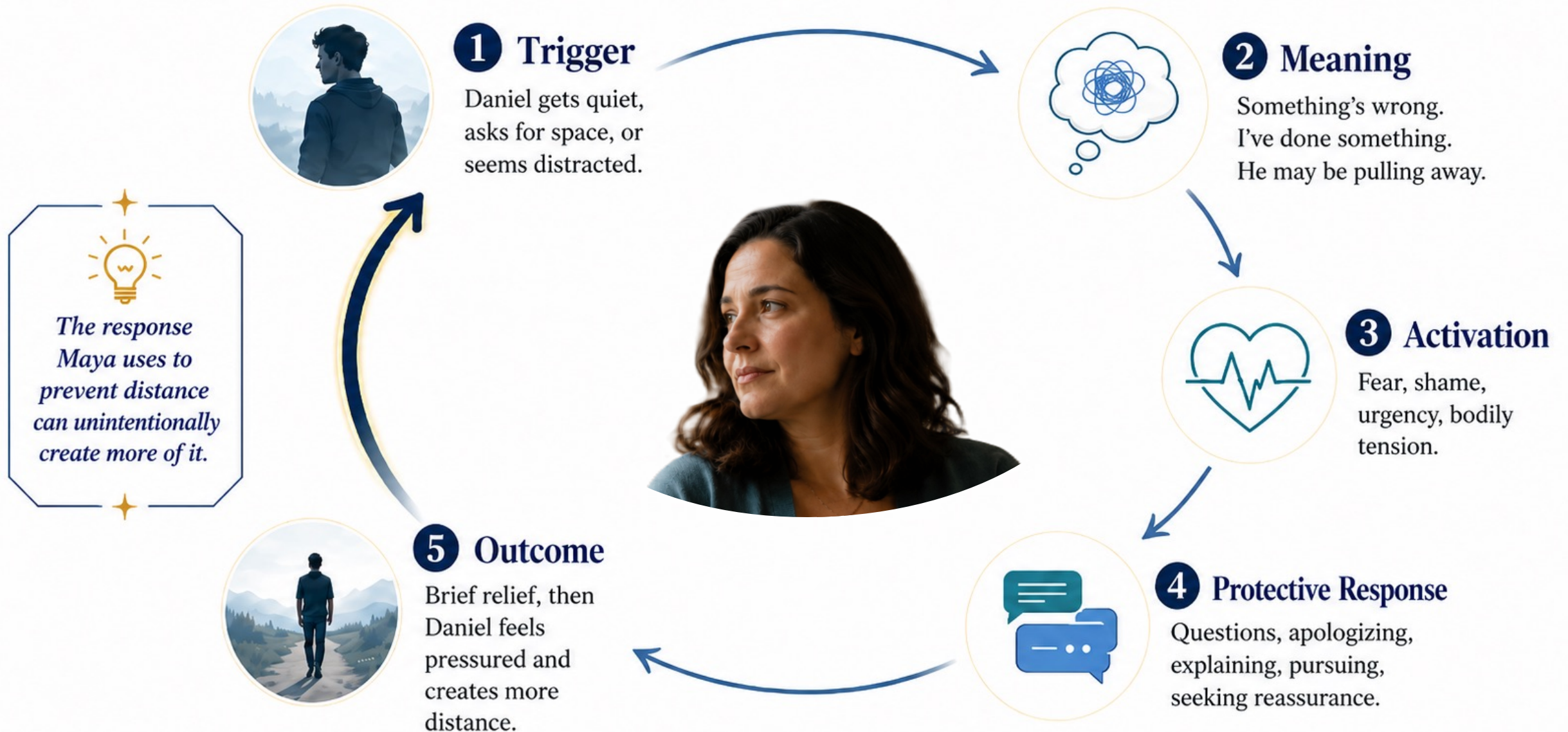
- Monitor her mother's emotional condition
- Remain helpful and compliant
- Avoid adding burden
- Repair disconnection quickly
- Use goodness and spiritual faithfulness to preserve closeness

Her nervous system appears to have learned: "Love is real, but it may become unavailable unless I remain vigilant."



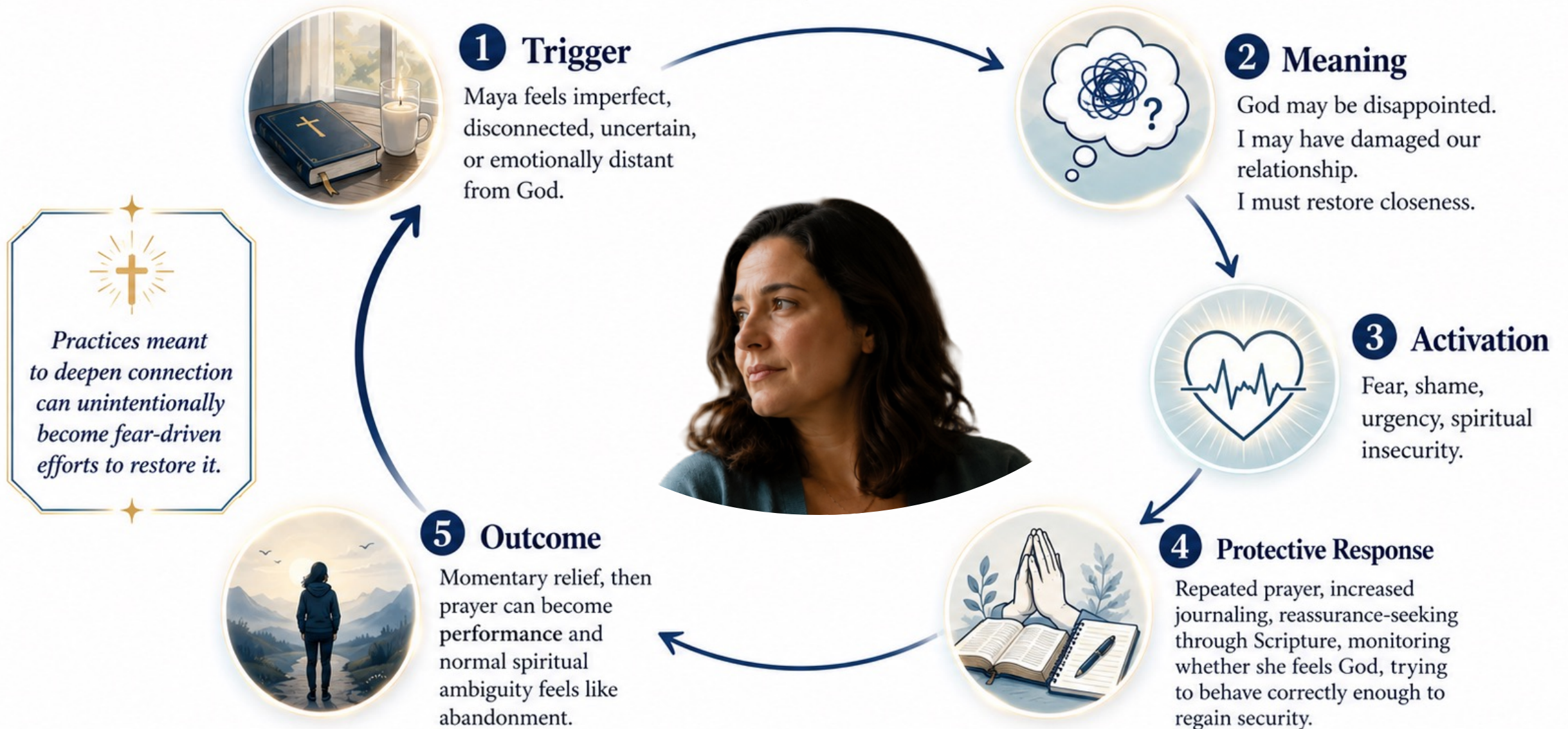
Maya's Relational Attachment Cycle

(Mikulincer et al., 2003)



Maya's Spiritual Attachment Cycle

(Beck & McDonald, 2004; Mayfield, 2022)



Assessment and Ethical Posture

Before incorporating spirituality, the counselor should...

- Assess what Maya believes and values
- Ask how she wants spirituality included
- Use Maya's spiritual language
- Obtain informed consent
- Bracket the counselor's own beliefs
- Remain within professional scope
- Avoid replacing psychological formulation with theological judgment

Possible assessment resources:

- Experiences in Close Relationships Scale
- Attachment to God Inventory
- Religious and spiritual history
- Exploration of God images and metaphors
- Observation of the therapeutic relationship

Assessment should support curiosity, not turn Maya into a score.



Treatment Model

This is my emerging counseling framework, shaped by my background in human-centered design, leadership, and clinical training. It moves through four stages: Illuminate, Evaluate, Activate, and Radiate. With Maya, the model helps organize treatment from recognizing her attachment cycle to practicing and embodying greater earned security.



Specific Clinical Interventions

Emotion Assembly

Explore...

- What happened?
- What are you thinking?
- What are you feeling?
- What is happening in your body?
- What do you feel like doing?

(White, 2026)

Somatic Regulation

- Belly breathing
- Orienting
- Humming
- Soothing or supportive hand placement
- Tracking activation without acting immediately

(Germer & Neff, 2018; Menakem, 2017)

Relational Interventions

- Consistent therapeutic attunement
- Naming ruptures and completing repairs
- Practicing clear requests with Daniel
- Couples work when appropriate

(Johnson, 2019; Siegel, 2020)

Spiritual Interventions

- Imaginal prayer focused on welcome and secure presence
- Lectio Divina without urgency to “get” an answer
- Prayer that includes silence and receiving
- Scripture centered on grace, presence, and enduring love

(Mayfield, 2022; White, 2026)



From Insight to Earned Security

Maya won't move toward security through insight alone.

She needs repeated experiences in which...

- Her needs are taken seriously
- Emotion doesn't overwhelm or drive others away
- Distance doesn't become disappearance
- Rupture can be followed by repair
- She can remain connected without performing
- Another person can be present without taking over
- She can receive care without immediately earning or repaying it

The therapeutic relationship can become a place where Maya experiences being understood, regulated, and “felt” while also developing greater autonomy.

(Siegel, 2020)



Conclusion

Maya's problem isn't that she wants too much love. Her difficulty is that love rarely feels secure enough to rest in.

Attachment theory helps explain...

- Why uncertainty becomes threat
- Why reassurance fades quickly
- Why closeness produces both comfort and vigilance
- Why similar patterns appear in human and spiritual relationships

Treatment can help Maya move from...

- Monitoring love → receiving love
- Preventing abandonment → tolerating relational space
- Performing for connection → trusting enduring connection
- Reacting from fear → living from greater security



References

- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the Strange Situation*. Erlbaum.
- Beck, R., & McDonald, A. (2004). Attachment to God: The Attachment to God Inventory, tests of working model correspondence, and an exploration of faith group differences. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 32(2), 92–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009164710403200202>
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Parent-child attachment and healthy human development*. Basic Books.
- Brennan, K. A., Clark, C. L., & Shaver, P. R. (1998). Self-report measurement of adult romantic attachment: An integrative overview. In J. A. Simpson & W. S. Rholes (Eds.), *Attachment theory and close relationships* (pp. 46–76). Guilford Press.
- Germer, C. K., & Neff, K. D. (2018). *The mindful self-compassion workbook: A proven way to accept yourself, build inner strength, and thrive*. Guilford Press.
- Granqvist, P., & Kirkpatrick, L. A. (2016). Attachment and religious representations and behavior. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (3rd ed., pp. 917–940). Guilford Press.
- Hall, T. W., & Hall, M. E. L. (2021). Transformational change. In *Relational spirituality* (pp. 228–254). IVP Academic.
- Johnson, S. M. (2019). *Attachment theory in practice: Emotionally focused therapy with individuals, couples, and families*. Guilford Press.
- Mayfield, K. (2022). *Attached to God: A practical guide to deeper spiritual experience*. Zondervan.
- Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.
- Mikulincer, M., Shaver, P. R., & Pereg, D. (2003). Attachment theory and affect regulation: The dynamics, development, and cognitive consequences of attachment-related strategies. *Motivation and Emotion*, 27(2), 77–102. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024515519160>
- Siegel, D. J. (2020). Attachment and a sense of self. In *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (3rd ed., pp. 167–229). Guilford Press.
- White, K. M. (2026, June 23). *Attachment and spirituality: Clinical implications* [PowerPoint slides]. George Fox University.