

# Literature Review: Relationship between attachment styles and Eating Disorders

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*Trabajo Final de Grado*

**Grado de Psicología**

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## **RESUMEN**

Los TCA se caracterizan por una conducta inadecuada en la ingesta de alimentos y una gran preocupación por la autoimagen y peso corporal, ocasionando graves problemas físicos y psicosociales. Algunas teorías afirman que un mal vínculo con la madre constituye uno de los factores etiopatogénicos más importantes, por lo que la teoría del apego es un marco relevante para comprender este trastorno. Algunos autores han hallado una asociación entre un apego inseguro y los TCA, pero existen pocas investigaciones acerca del tema. Por tanto, el objetivo es revisar la literatura que examine la asociación entre los estilos de apego y los TCA, a fin de llegar a conclusiones más sólidas.

Para llevarlo a cabo, se ha seguido la guía PRISMA, siendo posible cumplir 14 de 23 criterios. La búsqueda de artículos se realizó mediante las bases de datos de PubMed, SCOPUS, Dialnet, PubPsych y Google Academic usando estrategias de búsqueda avanzada. Fueron escogidos artículos de investigación publicados en los últimos 4 años (2019-2022), en español o inglés y de libre acceso, usando como palabras clave apego y trastornos de la conducta alimentaria. Se obtuvieron así 210 artículos, donde 204 fueron eliminados tras leer el abstract o tras la lectura completa y finalmente fueron incluidos 6 artículos para la revisión.

Los estudios sugieren que los estilos de apego inseguro desarrollados en la infancia, aumentan la vulnerabilidad a los TCA, ya que existe diferencias estadísticamente significativas en cuanto al estilo de apego en personas con y sin TCA, siendo el estilo de apego inseguro el predominante en personas con TCA. Estas personas emplean mecanismos de defensa desadaptativos que actúan como mediadores entre la relación entre los trastornos alimenticios y los estilos de apego. Se podría proponer entonces como medida de prevención que se fomente en las familias el desarrollo de estilos seguros de apego a través de la educación emocional.

**Palabras clave:** trastorno de la conducta alimentaria; apego; influencia; vulnerabilidad

## **SUMMARY**

ED is characterized by inappropriate eating behavior and a strong preoccupation with self-image and body weight, causing serious physical and psychosocial problems. Some theories claim that a poor attachment to the mother is one of the most important etiopathogenic factors, making attachment theory a relevant framework for understanding this disorder. Some authors have found an association between insecure attachment and ED, but there is little research on the subject. Therefore, the aim is to review the literature

examining the association between attachment styles and ED in order to reach more robust conclusions.

In order to do so, the PRISMA guide was followed and 14 out of 23 criteria were met. The search for articles was carried out using PubMed, SCOPUS, Dialnet, PubPsych and Google Academic databases using advanced search strategies. Research articles published in the last 4 years (2019-2022), in Spanish or English and open access, were selected, using attachment and eating disorders as keywords. A total of 210 articles were obtained, where 204 were eliminated after reading the abstract or after the complete reading and finally 6 articles were included for the review.

The studies suggest that insecure attachment styles developed in childhood increase vulnerability to ED, as there are statistically significant differences in attachment style in people with and without ED, with insecure attachment style being predominant in people with ED. These individuals employ maladaptive defense mechanisms that mediate the relationship between eating disorders and attachment styles. It could therefore be proposed as a preventive measure that families should be encouraged to develop secure attachment styles through emotional education.

**Keywords:** eating disorder, attachment, influence, vulnerability



## 1. INTRODUCTION

- Altered food intake behaviour with the aim of weight control
- Onset: **adolescence or early adulthood, anyone.**
- **WHO** → represent the most important health problem
- Consequences: **adverse health effects** and **different areas of life** are affected.
- Spanish prevalence: **1-4%**
- Most prevalent types: **Anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder and food avoidance and restriction disorder.**



There are theories that claim that the **failure of maternal attachment** is one of the most important etiopathogenic factors in this disorder.

### ATTACHMENT THEORY

- secure
- avoidant
- anxious
- disorganized



### OBJECTIVE:

Review the most recent scientific literature (last four years), which examines the association between attachment patterns and eating disorders.

## 4. DISCUSSION

Statistically significant **differences** in attachment style in EDD and healthy people. ED:

- They present a greater degree of **insecure attachment style.**
- Predominantly **avoidant** and **anxious** insecure attachment style.
- **Insecure attachment** functions as a **stable predictor**: ↑ Insecure attachment → ↑ severity of symptoms and ↑ possibility of ED development.
- **Insecure attachment** → ↑ **probability ED** due to the use of **maladaptive strategies** to keep emotions under control.

## 2. METHOD

**Keywords:**  
eating disorders; attachment; influence; vulnerability

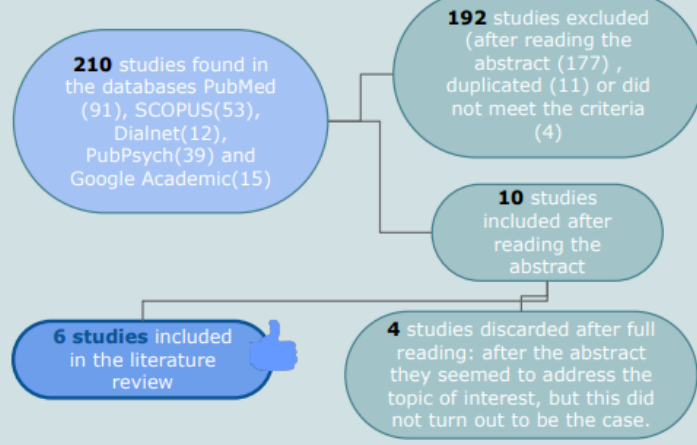
**PRISMA Method** has been followed as much as possible (Urrutia & Bonfill, 2010)

**Exclusion criteria:**

- Language other than English or Spanish
- Private or paid access
- Systematic review

**Inclusion criteria:**

- Language: English or Spanish
- Research article
- Full access to the study
- Publication date: 2019-2022



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

People with EDD:

- Attachment **insecure style**: > **avoidant** and **anxious.**
- ↑ insecurity → ↑ **severity.**
- **Maladaptive defence mechanisms** due to insecure attachment.

Improvement measure: encourage families to develop a secure attachment style → **emotional education**

## 3. RESULTS

AUTHOR	SAMPLE	MEASURING INSTRUMENT	RESULTS
Lenzo et al., 2021	N=284 Age: 18-49 Gender: Female and Male	- ASQ - DSQ - EDI-3	- <b>ED</b> → <b>dysfunctional attachment styles</b> and immature defence mechanisms. - <b>Insecure attachment</b> ↑ internalisation of dysfunctional interpersonal patterns
Curiel, 2020	N= 27 Age: 19-34 Gender: Female and Male	- PBI	- <b>Control</b> : > <b>secure attachment.</b> - <b>ED</b> : > <b>insecure attachment</b> : <u>avoidant</u> attachment style
Cascino et al., 2022	N= 70 Age: + 18 Gender: Female	- EDI-2 - ECR	Women with <b>ED</b> : - 20: <u>anxious attachment</u> ; 30: low attachment anxiety. - 32: <u>avoidant attachment</u> ; 18: ow attachment avoidance <b>Healthy</b> women: - All showed <u>low levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance.</u>
Katznelson et al., 2021	N= 16 Age: 18-48 Gender: Female and Male	- AAI - OBCS	<b>EDs</b> : - <u>81.3%</u> were classified as <b>unsafe.</b> - 18.8% were classified as <b>secure.</b>
García et al., 2019	N= 30 Age: 14-35 Gender: Female and Male	- EDI-2 - Adult Attachment Questionnaire	- <b>ED</b> : <b>insecure attachment</b> (86.8%) - Insecure attachment → <b>stable predictor</b> : ↑ insecure attachment → ↑ severity of symptoms.
Calzona et al., 2022	N= 34 Age: 17-36 Gender: Female	- Adult Attachment Questionnaire	<b>ED</b> : - ↑ scores on <b>insecure attachment</b> - 0 with <b>secure attachment</b> <b>Control</b> : - > <b>insecure attachment</b> - There are people with <b>secure attachment</b>  - <b>ED</b> : tendency attachment style (anxious). - <b>Control</b> : no predominant attachment.

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