Attachment patterns · About 4 minutes

When Distance Starts to Mean You Don’t Matter

Keeping a wish for contact separate from a verdict on the relationship

Owen throws his head back laughing. Across the room, Nisha feels the particular ache of having come with someone and suddenly feeling alone.

This fictional evening contains a small distance and a much larger question: do I matter to you?

The question deserves care. Calling Nisha insecure would tell us too little about what happened. Perhaps they made a clear plan and Owen has ignored it. Perhaps they understood the evening differently. Perhaps this is one more instance of a familiar exclusion. We need more of the relationship before deciding.

“You would rather be anywhere than with me” supplies Owen’s intention. “I wanted to look at the exhibition with you” tells him something Nisha knows about herself.

The second sentence can lead toward a practical question: is company available now? It can also leave room to address an agreement: “We said we would look around together.” Naming a wish need not soften a fact that matters.

Adult attachment research considers anxiety about rejection and discomfort with dependence, alongside the importance of a close person’s availability.[1] Those ideas can help us understand why distance carries weight. A single reaction at an exhibition, however, cannot establish somebody’s attachment pattern or reveal another person’s motive.

Earlier expectations may be stirred by the evening. Current behavior may also need to change. An attachment explanation is useful only if it helps us see more of the situation, rather than treating the whole problem as a defect in the person who wants contact.

Nisha could say, “I thought we were seeing this together. I’d like your company in the next room.” Until Owen answers, his response remains unknown.

Suppose he says he had not understood that they planned to stay together and joins her. She has learned something about his account, and his behavior has changed for the rest of the visit. She may still feel disappointed about the earlier hour. His explanation does not make her wish unreasonable.

If he dismisses her or continues to ignore an explicit plan, that is different information. Clearer wording cannot guarantee an interested response. Whether the relationship offers dependable contact needs to be considered over time, including what happens when expectations are missed.

A useful reading question is what Nisha loses when the wish becomes only an accusation. Her interest in the exhibition, her desire for his company and the possible shared plan can all disappear behind a struggle over what kind of person Owen is.

She need not make a gentle request before leaving unwanted or unsafe contact. Where being together is wanted, though, keeping the wish audible may give them something more specific to discuss. They can disagree about the earlier plan and still decide whether to walk into the next room together.

Nisha gets to feel how much the encounter matters and find out what this distance means here.

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Across the room, Owen is still talking. Nisha can attend to what she wants from him and keep listening for what he actually offers.

Companion reading · When Distance Feels Like Danger

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Attachment patterns (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Fraley, R. C. (n.d.). A brief overview of adult attachment theory and research. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Source.

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