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Anxious Attachment as a Factor in Individual Survival in Toxic Relationships: A Phenomenological Study

Rizqa Hafizha[1*], Sri Nurhayati Selian[2]
[1, 2] Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, Indonesia
*Correspondent email: rizqahafizah3@gmail.com[1]
Email: seliansrinurhayati@gmail.com[2]

Abstract: Toxic relationships are a harmful interpersonal phenomenon commonly experienced by young adults, yet the decision to remain in such relationships is often difficult to understand. One psychological factor believed to play a role is anxious attachment, a pattern characterized by fear of abandonment and a high level of emotional dependence on a partner. This study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of individuals with anxious attachment tendencies who remain in toxic relationships. This study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The participants consisted of three 19-year-old women who had experienced or were currently involved in unhealthy romantic relationships, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed using phenomenological analysis. Four main themes were identified: unhealthy relationship dynamics characterized by emotional instability, overprotective behavior, and poor communication; emotional responses including sadness, overthinking, and fear of loss; factors contributing to staying centered on affection, hope for change, and temporary positive moments; and a process of self-awareness leading to personal growth. Anxious attachment was found to be a significant factor in maintaining individuals in toxic relationships; however, these experiences also open pathways for personal growth and a better understanding of healthy boundaries in romantic relationships.

Keywords: Anxious attachment; phenomenological; toxic relationship; young adults.

Kelekatan Cemas Sebagai Faktor Bertahannya Individu Dalam Hubungan Beracun: Studi Fenomenologis

Abstrak: *Hubungan beracun (toxic relationship) merupakan fenomena interpersonal yang merugikan dan banyak dialami oleh individu dewasa muda, namun keputusan untuk bertahan di dalamnya sering kali sulit dipahami. Salah satu faktor psikologis yang diduga berperan adalah kelekatan cemas (anxious attachment), yaitu pola kelekatan yang ditandai oleh rasa takut ditinggalkan dan ketergantungan emosional yang tinggi terhadap pasangan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami secara mendalam pengalaman subjektif individu dengan kecenderungan kelekatan cemas yang bertahan dalam hubungan beracun. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain fenomenologis. Partisipan terdiri dari tiga perempuan berusia 19 tahun yang pernah atau sedang menjalani hubungan romantis tidak sehat, dipilih melalui purposive sampling. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur yang kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis fenomenologis. Ditemukan empat tema utama: (1) dinamika hubungan tidak sehat ditandai oleh ketidakstabilan emosional, perilaku overprotektif, dan komunikasi buruk; (2) respons emosional berupa kesedihan, overthinking, dan ketakutan akan kehilangan; (3) faktor bertahan berpusat pada rasa sayang, harapan perubahan, dan momen positif sesaat; serta (4) proses kesadaran diri menuju pertumbuhan pribadi. Kelekatan cemas terbukti menjadi faktor signifikan yang mempertahankan individu dalam hubungan beracun, namun pengalaman tersebut juga membuka jalan bagi pertumbuhan diri dan pemahaman tentang batasan yang sehat dalam hubungan romantis.*

Kata Kunci: *Kelekatan cemas; fenomenologis; hubungan beracun; dewasa muda.*

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are one of the important aspects of young adult life that significantly influence psychological well-being. However, not all romantic relationships are healthy and functional. Toxic relationships refer to patterns of interpersonal interaction that harm one party, including excessive control, emotional instability, lack of mutual respect, verbal abuse, and power imbalance between partners (Saskia et al., 2023). This phenomenon is quite common among young people and students, but a person's decision to remain in a painful relationship is often difficult to understand from an outsider's perspective. This is because 19-year-old individuals, who are in the transitional phase from late adolescence to early adulthood, are psychologically highly vulnerable to anxious attachment. In this state, their intense need for emotional validation from their partners often triggers conflicts or becomes the foundation of their self-esteem. Consequently, they tend to remain in stressful relationships, especially when their partners exert control through social isolation, emotional manipulation, and gaslighting. These patterns systematically build a psychological dependency that leaves the victims feeling powerless to leave—not because they are weak, but because the relationship structure itself has been manipulated to block their way out (Sari & Wahyuning, 2025).

Various studies indicate that toxic relationships have a negative impact on mental health, including triggering anxiety, depression, emotional stress, social isolation, and reduced self-esteem (Nurdini et al., 2024; Saskia et al., 2023). Furthermore, Sari & Wahyuning (2025) found that the impact of toxic relationships on students also includes a decline in the quality of social interactions due to excessive actions by partners. Nurlina and Selian (2025) add that social anxiety among university students creates complex emotional regulation dynamics, so that individuals experiencing relational pressure often face a dilemma between the need to express emotions and the desire to avoid negative judgment. This condition is exacerbated by poor emotion regulation abilities, which tend to worsen an individual's response to interpersonal conflict.

One psychological construct relevant to understanding why individuals remain in toxic relationships is attachment theory. An anxious style is characterized by an excessive fear of rejection and loss and a high need for validation and emotional closeness from a partner. In daily life, this pattern can be observed through behaviors such as constantly seeking reassurance of their partner's love, easily feeling anxious when messages are delayed, and consistently prioritizing their partner's desires over their own needs to maintain relationship stability. Because they struggle to regulate their emotions independently, the only way they know to feel secure is by staying close to their partner. Ultimately, this condition explains why individuals with an anxious attachment style tend to stay in unhealthy relationships; for them, the pain of losing their partner feels far more terrifying than the pain they endure while in the relationship. Individuals with anxious attachment tend to exhibit hyperreactive responses to separation threats, increasing proximity-seeking behavior rather than rationally assessing whether the relationship is worth maintaining (Kalamsari & Ginanjar, 2023). This theory explains how childhood experiences shape maladaptive adult attachment patterns. Selian et al. (2025) affirms that children who grow up in disharmonious family environments with insecure attachment patterns tend to develop less adaptive emotion regulation strategies, which can carry over into adulthood and influence romantic relationship dynamics.

Research in Indonesia has increasingly addressed the phenomenon of toxic relationships from various perspectives, including interpersonal communication (Sumarjo et al., 2023; Syafdana & Gumelar, 2024), victim resilience, and factors contributing to

dating violence. However, studies specifically addressing anxious attachment and the tendency to remain in toxic relationships through a phenomenological approach remain very limited, particularly in the context of Indonesian young adults. (Khoiriah, 2021) found a connection between anxious attachment style and the emotional experience of abuse in dating relationships, while (Dewanti & Setyadi, 2024) demonstrated a significant negative relationship between a healthy adult attachment style and the level of toxic. This gap underscores the need for in-depth exploration of individuals' subjective narratives.

Based on this research, this study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design to explore in depth the subjective experiences of individuals with anxiety in maintaining toxic relationships. Previous research has largely relied on quantitative approaches that measure attachment patterns and their impact on emotional regulation and relational aggression, but has not been able to answer the more fundamental question: why someone who is already aware of unhealthy foundations—characterized by overprotective attitudes, poor emotional control in their partner, and unbalanced communication patterns—still chooses to stay, and how their inner processes in interpreting affection, emotional exhaustion, and the decision to end it. This very personal dimension of life experience cannot be captured only through numbers and scales, so a phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows researchers to understand the deepest meaning behind individual decisions without prejudice, and from there it is hoped that practical contributions will emerge for psychological interventions that are more contextual and achievable in the individual's real experiences. Furthermore, the anxious attachment style not only influences romantic dynamics but also coping patterns toward conflict in relationships. Individuals with this style often employ avoidance strategies or hypervigilance, which in turn reinforces the toxic cycle. (Nurlina & Selian, 2025) found that university students with social anxiety tend to employ maladaptive emotion regulation strategies such as avoidance and emotional suppression—similar strategies are also found in individuals with anxious attachment in toxic relationships. From a neuropsychological perspective, anxious attachment is associated with excessive amygdala activation that impairs rational decision-making in emotionally threatening situations. This explains why victims of toxic relationships find it difficult to leave their partners even when aware of the harm. The integration of these findings with the phenomenological approach can enrich a holistic understanding of this phenomenon.

Previous research has also highlighted the role of social media in toxic relationships for individuals with anxious attachment. The use of digital platforms to monitor partners often becomes a form of control disguised as care (Putri & Nawangsih, 2023; Syafdana & Gumelar, 2024). Nisa and Selian (2026) affirm that pressure from social media and perfectionist culture contributes to the deterioration of mental health among adolescent girls, especially when they feel they have failed to meet socially set standards. This condition is closely related to the anxious attachment pattern that drives individuals to constantly seek validation from their social environment.

Beyond individual impacts, toxic relationships with an anxious attachment background also affect family and broader societal dynamics. In Indonesia, where the family's role in partner selection remains dominant, early intervention is crucial to prevent the transmission of maladaptive patterns to the next generation. (Nisa & Selian, 2026) affirms that a lack of emotional support from family and ineffective communication makes adolescent girls increasingly vulnerable to maladaptive behaviors, including remaining in harmful relationships.

The practical implications of this study include the development of attachment for students. The phenomenological findings will enrich counseling synchronization with

authentic narratives from victims. Methodologically, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was chosen to capture the nuances of subjective experience, in which participants reflect on the personal meaning of their perseverance in toxic relationships. Thematic analysis will identify common patterns such as “fear of abandonment” and “constant search for validation”, which align with attachment theory.

This study also contributes to cross-cultural attachment theory literature, where Indonesian cultural variations modify the expression of anxious attachment. In the Indonesian cultural context, where collectivist values and early marriage norms remain strong, individuals with anxious attachment often face additional pressure to maintain relationships even when they are toxic. (Nisa & Selian, 2026) shows that the stigma surrounding psychological problems in Indonesian society further aggravates this condition, as adolescents prefer to remain silent rather than seek professional help.

Thus, toxic relationships represent a phenomenon that seriously impacts the mental health of young adults, especially in individuals with an anxious attachment style who tend to maintain unhealthy relationships. Nurlina and Selian (2025) emphasize the importance of more contextual and culturally sensitive campus interventions to help students develop adaptive emotion regulation strategies—a recommendation that is equally relevant for individuals with anxious attachment in toxic relationships. The limited phenomenological study in Indonesia highlights the importance of exploring subjective experiences to support the development of contextual and effective psychological interventions.

2. Methods

a. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. The phenomenological design was chosen because this research aims to deeply understand and explore the subjective experiences of individuals who have a tendency toward anxious attachment in maintaining toxic relationships. This approach allows the researcher to understand the meaning of experiences directly felt by participants regarding the relational dynamics they live, without attempting to statistically generalize the findings (Khalefa & Selian, 2021).

Epistemologically, this study positions the subjective experiences of participants as the primary source of knowledge. The researcher adopts a bracketing (epoche) stance, which involves suspending personal assumptions and biases to allow the phenomenon to emerge as it is from the participants' perspective. In the context of this research, the phenomenon explored is how individuals with anxious attachment characteristics give meaning to respond to and decide to remain in toxic romantic relationships.

b. Participants

The participants in this study were three individuals who had been or were currently in a toxic relationship and exhibited characteristics of anxious attachment. Participant selection was carried out using purposive sampling, a non-random sampling strategy selected based on the researcher's judgment in accordance with the needs and objectives of the study (Khalefa & Selian, 2021). (Khalefa & Selian, 2021) affirms that purposive sampling is a practical and efficient tool when used appropriately and can be equally or even more efficient than random sampling in qualitative research. Inclusion criteria for participants included: (1) having been in or currently in an unhealthy romantic relationship for at least six months; (2) displaying characteristics of anxious

attachment such as fear of abandonment and high emotional dependency on a partner; and (3) willingness to participate voluntarily and provide informed consent.

The number of participants in this study was three women, consistent with the principle that in qualitative research, the sample size can be small as long as the depth of experience explored is adequate to answer the research questions (Khalefa & Selian, 2021). All participants were 19 years old and resided in Banda Aceh, Indonesia. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the authorized ethics committee. Participant identity was kept confidential using codes (P1, P2, P3), and all data were managed securely in accordance with research ethics principles. Demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1.
Research Participant Identities

Participant	Age	Status	Relationship Duration
P1	19 years old	University Student	September 2023 – completed (±1.5 years)
P2	19 years old	Unemployed	May last year – present (±11 months)
P3	19 years old	Unemployed	April last year – present (±12 months)

c. Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured in-depth interviews (in-depth semi-structured interview) conducted between January and February 2026. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes, conducted either face-to-face or online based on participant availability, and was recorded with participants' consent for subsequent transcription. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to obtain more in-depth data about the experiences, feelings, and meaning that participants attributed to the relationships they had been in.

The interview guide comprised six core questions developed based on attachment theory and the concept of toxic relationships, including: (1) How do you describe the romantic relationship you have had or are currently in?; (2) What has made you feel uncomfortable in that relationship?; (3) How did you feel when conflict or the threat of separation occurred?; (4) What led you to decide to stay?; (5) How supportive have the people around you been in dealing with this situation?; and (6) What have you learned from the experience of that relationship? Probing questions were used to elicit deeper emotional and cognitive insights. Field notes were also taken during the interview process to capture non-verbal expressions and contextual nuances.

d. Data Analysis

Data analysis used an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach through four systematic stages. First, immersion was conducted by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts—at least three times per transcript—to gain a comprehensive understanding before the coding process began. Second, initial coding was conducted by highlighting emotionally charged and meaningful phrases from participants' narratives, including repeated words, metaphors, and expressions that indicated the intensity of experiences. Third, theme development was conducted by grouping the codes into coherent units of meaning based on similar patterns and their relevance to the research questions. A code was designated a theme if it appeared consistently throughout the narrative and reflected a meaningful psychological construct. Fourth, integration and interpretation were conducted by connecting the emerging themes to the underlying constructs, namely emotional connection and quality.

Data validity was maintained through three strategies. Source triangulation was conducted through comparisons between participants to identify recurring patterns and significant deviations. Member checking was conducted by providing a summary of the transcript and initial interpretation to each participant to ensure it aligned with their actual experiences. Participants were given the opportunity to correct, add, or retract the information provided. Furthermore, discussions with two psychology researchers were conducted to strengthen the objectivity of interpretation. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through a reflective journal, which was consistently used to monitor and document potential interpretive bias throughout the research process. All participants provided written informed consent prior to the interviews, and data confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identities using the codes P1, P2, and P3 instead of real names, and storing transcripts only on a password-protected device.

3. Result

a. Overview of Superordinate Themes

A phenomenological analysis of interview data from the three participants yielded four superordinate themes that describe how individuals with anxious attachment make sense of and sustain themselves within toxic relationships. The four themes are: (1) Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics, (2) Emotional Responses and Anxious Attachment Characteristics, (3) Factors That Drive Remaining in the Relationship, and (4) The Process of Self-Awareness and Growth.

These themes do not represent discrete, linear stages; rather, they constitute a dynamic, interdependent process that forms cyclical patterns in attachment-based adaptation. Participants repeatedly moved between emotional responses, re-evaluations of the relationship, and behavioral adjustments when confronted with recurring relational challenges. Taken together, these themes portray anxious attachment both as a cognitive framework for reinterpreting conflict and as an emotional resource that sustains hope and relational bonds.

Table 2.
Analytical Process in Phenomenological Analysis

Analytical Level	Description of Analytical Process	Illustrative Quotation (Participant Statement)	Researcher's Interpretive Commentary	Superordinate Theme
1. Descriptive Noting	The researcher identifies salient emotional expressions and meaningful language from the participants' direct lived experiences.	*"At first I was afraid of losing him, but over time I felt like he was taking me more and more for granted."* (P1)	This statement reflects a gradual cognitive shift from the *hyperactivation* of the attachment system toward an emerging self-awareness.	Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics
2. Linguistic and Conceptual Coding	Focusing on the use of cultural idioms and metaphors to uncover deeper affective meanings.	*"Whenever there is a conflict, I usually feel sad, find myself constantly thinking about it, and cry quite often because I am the type of person who is sensitive and prone to overthinking."* (P1)	The overthinking pattern reflects the *hyperactivation* of the attachment system that is characteristic of *anxious attachment*, in which the threat of separation triggers an intense emotional response.	Emotional Responses and Anxious Attachment
3. Pattern Recognition / Cluster Development	Codes are grouped into clusters that connect emotions, cognitions, and attachment-based coping practices.	*"I am still staying because I still care and I still want this relationship to be fixed and become better."* (P2)	Affection functions as an emotional anchor that maintains the individual within a cycle of *intermittent reinforcement*.	Factors for Remaining in the Relationship
4. Thematic Abstraction	Emerging clusters are abstracted into higher-level interpretations that capture existential transformation.	*"I have come to know myself better, especially regarding boundaries and what I want in a relationship."* (P1)	Relational suffering becomes a pathway for identity growth and emotional maturity.	Self-Awareness and Growth
5. Integrative Interpretation / Hermeneutic Synthesis	The researcher synthesizes iterative insights into a cyclical interpretive model that connects all themes.	---	Across cases, anxious attachment operates as a dynamic hermeneutic system in which emotional suffering is continuously reinterpreted through affection and hope for change.	Attachment-Based Meaning-Making Cycle

Table 2 illustrates the iterative analytical process employed in this study. Each layer of analysis, from descriptive noting to hermeneutic synthesis, reflects the double hermeneutic that lies at the heart of phenomenology: participants make meaning of their relational experiences, while the researcher interprets that meaning-making process within the framework of attachment theory and the Indonesian cultural context.

b. Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics

All three participants identified behavioral patterns in their partners that characterized an unhealthy relationship. These patterns included the partner's emotional instability, overprotectiveness, poor communication, and dismissive behavior. P1 described a partner who was unable to regulate emotions and would say hurtful things when angry, and who was extremely overprotective to the point of forbidding P1 from meeting female friends. P1 recounted the experience as follows: *"Particularly when he is angry, he tends to lose control of his emotions, so words come out without being thought through, and that hurts quite a bit. Sometimes he also misunderstands and gets angry without truly grasping the situation (P1)"*. The overprotective and controlling pattern experienced by P1 is further revealed in the following account: *"He is also overprotective and likes to control me; he even would not allow me to hang out with female friends, even though my parents permitted it. He is afraid I will talk about other guys, which I think is a bit excessive (P1)"*.

This overprotective and controlling pattern aligns with the characteristics of a *toxic relationship* as a form of excessive dominance that is often mistaken for an expression of love, yet in reality constitutes a form of psychological violence (Saskia et al., 2023). P2 and P3 both identified discomforts arising from a partner who was aloof and difficult to communicate with. P2 stated: *"What makes me uncomfortable is when my partner becomes aloof, hard to communicate with, or just seems not to care (P2)"*. A similar experience was described by P3, who went through something nearly identical: *"What makes me uncomfortable is when my partner is aloof and hard to talk to (P3)"*.

These findings are consistent with research showing that a lack of empathy and poor communication are the primary hallmarks of *toxic relationships* experienced by women (Syafdana & Gumelar, 2024). A partner's tendency to restrict social interaction constitutes a form of control that leads to the victim's social isolation, which in turn deepens the emotional dependence of individuals with anxious attachment (Sumarjo et al., 2023; Syafdana & Gumelar, 2024).

c. Emotional Responses and Anxious Attachment Characteristics

All three participants demonstrated emotional responses consistent with the characteristics of anxious attachment, namely sadness, overthinking, and fear of losing their partner. P1 described the emotional state during conflicts as follows: *"Whenever there is a conflict, I usually feel sad, find myself constantly thinking about it, and cry quite often because I am the type of person who is sensitive and prone to overthinking (P1)"*. P1 also described how the fear of loss emerged at the beginning of the relationship and then shifted over time: *"At the start of the relationship, I was indeed afraid of losing him, especially whenever we had a fight. But after repeatedly trying to sustain a relationship like that, over time I felt like he was becoming more and more careless with how he treated me (P1)"*.

P2 and P3 explicitly stated that they had experienced a fear of loss whenever their partner showed a change in attitude. P2 expressed: *"Yes, especially when he changes his attitude or becomes a bit distant, I get afraid of losing him (P2)"*. P3 shared a similar

experience: *"Whenever there is a problem, I usually feel like I am alone with my thoughts, and sometimes I end up overthinking (P3)"*.

These responses reflect the *hyperactivation* of the attachment system, which is the hallmark feature of *anxious attachment* as described by (Farhan et al., 2024), whereby the threat of separation drives the individual to seek closeness rather than to consider ending the relationship. (Nurlina & Selian, 2025) identified a similar pattern among college students with social anxiety, finding that avoidance and emotional suppression strategies actually reinforce the cycle of psychological distress rather than resolving it. (Mutiara et al., 2022) found a significant association between anxious attachment and suicidal ideation in individuals in romantic relationships (r=0.472; p<.001), indicating that the emotional distress arising from anxious attachment in unhealthy relationships can have serious consequences for mental health. (Nst & Selian, 2026) affirm that unresolved emotional pain can lead to *self-harm* behaviors, while (Selian, 2025) demonstrates that young adults with high interpersonal sensitivity are at risk of developing generalized anxiety disorder accompanied by a history of *self-harm*.

d. Factors That Drive Remaining in the Relationship

The primary reasons all three participants remained in the relationship were closely linked to affection, hope for the partner's change, and intermittent positive moments. P1 clearly articulated the main factor that kept her staying: *"The factor that most influences me to stay is that I still have feelings for him, and also because when he is good, he can be really wonderful (P1)"*. P1 also recounted a recurring experience in which every attempt to end the relationship failed because the partner refused and promised to change: *"I have often thought about ending the relationship. I even tried to do so at one point, but he did not want to and kept saying he would change. On one hand, I still had feelings for him, so in the end we did not break up at that time (P1)"*. P2 articulated the reasons for staying in a way that reflected a similar dynamic: *"I am still staying because I still care and I still want this relationship to be fixed and become better (P2)"*. Meanwhile, P3 conveyed nearly identical reasons, demonstrating a consistent pattern across all three participants: *"I did think about ending the relationship, but in the end I kept staying because I still care and did not want to just give up like that (P3)"*.

This pattern reflects the *intermittent reinforcement* that is characteristic of toxic relationships, in which unexpected positive moments paradoxically strengthen the emotional bond. (Dewanti & Setyadi, 2024) showed that insecure attachment styles are positively correlated with the degree of *toxic relationship*, indicating that individuals with unhealthy attachment are more vulnerable to becoming trapped in a cycle of toxic relationships and find it more difficult to leave. (Ananda, 2022) also found that insecure attachment is negatively associated with commitment in romantically involved young adults, thereby complicating the process of ending an unhealthy relationship.

e. The Process of Self-Awareness and Growth

Despite experiencing difficult relational dynamics, all three participants demonstrated a growing level of self-awareness over time. P1 described a process of deep reflection on the meaning of the relationship: *"I regard the relationship as a learning process. From it I came to understand that not everything we fight to keep is actually good for us. I also came to realize that a relationship must have boundaries and mutual respect, rather than simply staying together out of love alone (P1)"*. P1 also expressed a deeper awareness of herself after going through that experience: *"I have come to know myself better, especially regarding boundaries and what I want in a relationship. I have also become more aware that I cannot keep sacrificing my own feelings just to hold on to someone who does not treat me well (P1)"*. P2 and P3 likewise

interpreted their experiences as a valuable learning process. P2 shared: *"I see this as a learning process so that I can become more mature in relationships. I have come to understand myself better and also to better understand how to deal with others (P2)"*. P3 conveyed a similarly reflective insight regarding the lessons learned from the relationship: *"The lesson I took away is the importance of communication, honesty, and mutual understanding (P3)"*.

These findings align with research showing that college students who are victims of *toxic relationships* are capable of building resilience, although this requires adequate time and support (Ajeng et al., 2025). (Syifa & Selian, 2025) found that college students facing toxic relationships in friendships employ two primary forms of coping strategies: emotion-focused coping (distancing oneself, calming down) and problem-focused coping (setting personal boundaries, seeking social support), both of which are influenced by personality and prior experience. (Nisa & Selian, 2026) affirm that empathic intervention and warm family communication are important in helping individuals experiencing psychological distress to develop more adaptive coping strategies—a principle that is equally relevant for young adults in toxic relationships.

f. Analytical Integration: The Cyclical Nature of Meaning Reconstruction

Across all participants, the meaning-making process unfolded cyclically rather than linearly. Moments of conflict, pain, or emotional upheaval frequently pushed participants back toward earlier interpretive acts: reaffirming affection, surrendering to the hope of change, and once again seeking emotional closeness. This reflexive movement reflects the dynamic hermeneutic circle that lies at the heart of phenomenology: understanding is continually revised as new experiences challenge previously held meanings.

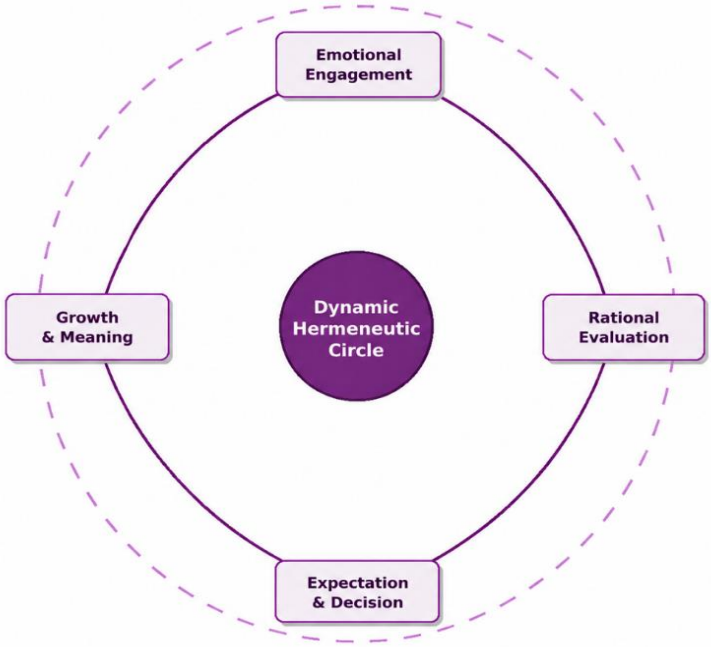


Figure 1. The Hermeneutic Cycle of Anxious Attachment

From the researcher's interpretive standpoint, this pattern illustrates that anxious attachment functions simultaneously as structure and as process: it organizes cognition while remaining flexible enough to be reinterpreted. Participants did not

merely describe their emotional bonds; they lived them through narrative language that served as a ritual of self-making. As one participant expressed: *"When I talk about it, I feel calmer, like I can see everything from the outside"* (P2), inadvertently revealing that narration and reflection converge as acts of remembering and re-meaning-making.

The analysis therefore concludes that the lived experiences of the participants exemplify how anxious attachment operates as a living hermeneutic, continuously negotiating between emotional attachment and rational evaluation, between despair and hope, between suffering and growth.

Table 3.
Summary of Research Themes and Sub-Themes

Main Theme	Sub-Themes / Indicators
Unhealthy Relationship Dynamics	Emotional instability, overprotectiveness, poor communication, aloofness and dismissiveness
Emotional Responses and Anxious Attachment	Sadness, overthinking, fear of loss, crying during conflict, insecurity
Factors for Remaining in the Relationship	Affection, hope for the partner's change, *intermittent* positive moments, refusal to accept a breakup
Self-Awareness and Growth	Understanding healthy boundaries, interpreting the experience as a learning process, strengthening personal identity

4. Discussion

a. Anxious Attachment as an Integrative Meaning System

The findings of this study support and extend the understanding of the role of anxious attachment in the context of toxic relationships. The themes emerging from the experiences of the three participants consistently reflect the characteristics of anxious attachment as described by (Farhan et al., 2024), which include hyperactivation of the attachment system, excessive fear of rejection, and a tendency to prioritize the continuity of the relationship over one's own emotional well-being. (Dimas et al., 2023) found that adult attachment significantly influences emotional regulation capacity, while (Aurellia & Arjadi, 2023) demonstrated that the quality of romantic attachment correlates with dyadic perspective-taking and relationship satisfaction. For the participants, the emotional bond functioned simultaneously as an interpretive lens and an affective framework that transformed conflict into something to be saved rather than avoided.

This process aligns with the concept of positive relational coping in attachment literature, wherein individuals reframe negative experiences as meaningful challenges to be confronted (Kalamsari & Ginanjar, 2023). The belief in the potential for a partner's change functioned as a cognitive map guiding the participants' appraisal and decision-making processes, as well as an affective refuge that nurtured resilience and hope. This mechanism is consistent with the findings of (Dewanti & Setyadi, 2024), which demonstrated that cognitive restructuring through relational hope can significantly prolong the duration of remaining in a dysfunctional relationship.

b. Ethical Dimensions of Emotional Dependency

The construct of emotional dependency identified in this study offers a distinctive perspective on attachment psychology within the Indonesian cultural context. Unlike Western conceptualizations that emphasize intrapsychic regulation and individual autonomy, the emotional dependency experienced by the participants integrates

relational awareness and communal sensitivity, situating affection within a collective and transcendent dimension. This dual orientation frames coping as an act of loyalty manifested through social harmony and moral consciousness.

This construct illustrates how local cultural values such as loyalty and affection shape relational cognition. (Gayatri & Ariana, 2024) found that insecure attachment in young adults is associated with broader patterns of anxiety, while (Adelia & Subroto, 2023) demonstrated that self-concept significantly influences the romantic attachment styles that develop. (Selian et al., 2025) reinforced this by finding that the majority of children with behavioral disorders grew up in families characterized by disharmonious parenting and insecure attachment, in which 58.2% felt misunderstood by their families and turned to figures outside the parents for support—a similar pattern can be observed in young adults trapped in toxic relationships due to roots of insecure attachment. (Jundiyana & Noorrizki, 2024) further noted that attachment in early adulthood exerts a profound impact on the quality of relationships formed, including a tendency to maintain relationships without clear commitment. However, the findings also highlight an important caveat: emotional dependency must not be mistaken for genuine strength. Participants who viewed affection as an absolute obligation demonstrated lower levels of proactive coping. This distinction reinforces the psychological principle that agency-based affection must accompany healthy relational commitment.

c. Intermittent Reinforcement and Hope-Based Cognition

The pattern identified in P1—continuing to strive to repair the relationship while the partner behaved inconsistently—aligns with the concept of intermittent reinforcement in toxic relationships. Unexpected positive moments create irregular reinforcement patterns that paradoxically strengthen the emotional bond, keeping individual's hopeful and reluctant to leave the relationship. This is reinforced by the findings of (Dewanti & Setyadi, 2024), which demonstrated a significant negative relationship between mature attachment style and the degree of toxic relationships ($r = -0.712$, $p < .001$), confirming that anxious attachment systematically undermines adaptive relational evaluation capacity.

The fear-of-loss responses observed in P2 and P3 are consistent with the research of (Zhao et al., 2024), which demonstrated that attachment style influences how individuals process emotions in romantic relationships, with insecurely attached individuals tending to experience emotions more intensely and less stably. (Kalamsari & Ginanjar, 2023) also found that anxious attachment significantly reduces satisfaction in romantic relationships, a finding consistent with (Septiani & Cahyanti, 2022), which demonstrated a positive correlation between secure attachment and satisfaction in long-distance romantic relationships. (Agustin & Dewi, 2024) further noted that college students in toxic relationships tend to experience significant difficulties in emotional regulation, while (Oktafiani & Handayani, 2025) demonstrated that insecure attachment style interacts with neuroticism in exacerbating individuals' emotional regulation strategies. (Nurlina & Selian, 2025) reinforced these findings by demonstrating that maladaptive emotional regulation strategies may alleviate anxiety in the short term but worsen the condition in the long term.

d. Anxious Attachment, Hope for Change, and Low Self-Esteem

All three participants consistently believed that their partners "could still change" despite recurring negative behavior. This belief is rooted in the core mechanisms of anxious attachment. According to (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2016), individuals with anxious attachment carry an internal working model containing two core beliefs: that oneself is

not sufficiently worthy of love, and that the attachment figure is an unpredictable source of security. These two beliefs combine to create a powerful drive to maintain closeness, even when the relationship is clearly signaling danger.

The "hope for change" expressed by participants is not ordinary optimism, but rather a product of the hyperactivation of the attachment system. (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2016) explain that individuals with anxious attachment develop hypervigilance strategies toward separation threats and automatically seek closeness intensively. As long as the "potential for change" in the partner is still believed to exist, ending the relationship feels emotionally illegitimate. (Dewanti & Setyadi, 2024) reinforced this: insecure attachment style correlates negatively with adaptive relational evaluation capacity, such that evidence of the partner's problematic behavior tends to be reinterpreted as a temporary condition that can still be remedied.

This condition is further strengthened when accompanied by low self-esteem—individuals tend to feel their sense of worth depends on their partner's acceptance. As a result, conflict-laden relationships paradoxically serve a distinct psychological function: the struggle to "win" the affection of an inconsistent partner provides a sense of purpose and identity. (Adelia & Subroto, 2023) demonstrated that a weak self-concept influences the development of insecure romantic attachment styles, while (Gayatri & Ariana, 2024) noted that insecure attachment in young adults is associated with anxiety about rejection and a sense of being unworthy of love. In other words, the "hope for change" maintained by participants is the intersection of anxious attachment hyperactivation and self-esteem deficits—wherein ending the relationship feels like confirming the belief that one is truly unworthy of love.

e. The Factor of Age 19: Identity Search and the Blurring of Self-Boundaries in Romantic Relationships

Age 19 is not merely a demographic variable. This age places all three participants in the phase known as emerging adulthood—a transitional period between late adolescence and early adulthood characterized by identity exploration and instability. (Saputri et al., 2022) situate this phase within the identity versus role confusion conflict, in which the quality of social relationships, including romantic relationships, greatly determines how an individual constructs a picture of themselves. This is where the problem originates: romantic partners often become the primary mirror of self-identity, such that the way a partner views and treats someone directly influences how that person views themselves.

Because self-identity is not yet sufficiently consolidated, the need for validation from a partner becomes very great. In the context of anxious attachment, this need becomes even more intense because the internal working model has already instilled the belief that oneself is not sufficiently worthy. As a result, psychological boundaries become blurred: participants struggle to differentiate their own emotional needs from their partner's demands and tend to sacrifice their own sense of security to maintain the relationship. The reluctance to establish boundaries is not because they do not know how, but because establishing boundaries feels like inviting rejection. (Jundiyana & Noorrizki, 2024) noted that attachment in early adulthood exerts a profound impact on the quality of relationships formed, including a tendency to maintain unhealthy relationships to avoid emotional emptiness.

Age 19 also coincides with the transition to university, which separates individuals from their family support networks. The reduced closeness with early attachment figures drives individuals to transfer attachment functions to romantic partners more intensively. When a partner becomes the sole source of emotional security, the ability

to assess the relationship objectively is also impaired. This aligns with the findings of (Selian et al., 2025) that individuals who do not feel understood within the family tend to seek attachment figures outside the family, and if not accompanied by adequate emotional regulation capacity, this pattern increases vulnerability to toxic relationships. Age 19 is the point at which many of these vulnerability factors converge simultaneously.

f. Reflective Practice as Emotional Regulation and Growth

A salient aspect of this study is the presence of self-awareness and growth experienced by all three participants. P1 explicitly described a gradual strategy for loosening emotional attachment in preparation for ending the relationship—a form of agency that developed over time. The participants' narratives revealed that resilience in facing toxic relationships is not merely a survival process, but a path toward moral improvement and existential clarity.

The participants' reflections resonate deeply with Frankl's logotherapy perspective that the discovery of meaning transforms suffering into strength. These findings are consistent with research showing that resilience among victims of toxic relationships can be built through processes of reflection and social support (Ajeng et al., 2025). (Syifa & Selian, 2025) also demonstrated that the selection of adaptive coping strategies among college students in toxic relationships is influenced by personality, prior experience, and the availability of social support, making the development of adaptive coping capacity an important intervention target. (Nisa & Selian, 2026) affirmed that empathic intervention and mental health awareness are crucial in helping individuals experiencing psychological distress to develop more adaptive coping strategies, as self-harming behavior and maladaptive behavior are not merely impulsive acts but expressions of unresolved emotional suffering.

g. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three primary theoretical contributions. First, in terms of model integration, this study bridges attachment theory with existential perspectives within a unified attachment-based adaptation model. Each framework contributes a distinct dimension: attachment theory illuminates relational appraisal and hyperactivation, while the existential perspective emphasizes transformation arising from meaningful suffering.

Second, in terms of cultural context, this study demonstrates that attachment and spirituality are not homogeneous phenomena, but are expressed through distinct local idioms, social ethics, and collective practices. Third, in terms of dynamic adaptation processes, the findings reveal cyclical and reflective patterns in which individuals shift between emotional attachment, reappraisal, hope-based coping, and growth in self-awareness. When challenges re-emerge, individuals return to earlier phases through reflection and the renewal of relational commitment, embodying the psychological principle that attachment-based coping is a living and renewable process.

h. Practical Implications

For clinical psychology and counseling, these findings highlight the importance of recognizing clients' attachment schemas as an integral part of psychological functioning. Therapy with clients with anxious attachment is more effective when the attachment style is not treated as a peripheral aspect, but as a core dimension of relational meaning and resilience. Psychologists can integrate techniques such as attachment-oriented cognitive-behavioral therapy, logotherapeutic dialogue emphasizing the discovery of meaning in relational suffering, and attachment-based mindfulness practices that cultivate self-awareness through structured reflection.

In campus mental health practice, recognition of anxious attachment as a coping and motivational system supports the provision of culturally sensitive and holistic counseling services. (Nurlina & Selian, 2025) emphasized the importance of more contextual campus interventions to help students develop adaptive emotional regulation strategies—a recommendation that is relevant to the prevention of toxic relationships rooted in anxious attachment. At the community level, campus leaders and social workers can form support groups and psychospiritual education programs that normalize self-reflection and promote compassion-based solidarity among students who have experienced toxic relationships.

i. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The scope of this study is limited by a small number of participants (three individuals) with a homogeneous demographic profile (all female, aged 19 years, from one city), so generalizations of the findings must be made with caution. Furthermore, this study was constrained by limited access to supporting clinical documentation, which limits precision in categorizing anxious attachment characteristics diagnostically. Future research is recommended to involve participants who are more diverse in terms of gender, age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background, and to use standardized instruments such as the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale (ECR) to measure the degree of anxious attachment more systematically. Longitudinal designs and mixed methods are also recommended to observe temporal changes in attachment patterns and to validate the proposed model quantitatively.

j. Integrative Reflection

Ultimately, the participants' stories reveal that healing transcends the relational dimension alone. Toxic relationships become a sacred dialogue between vulnerability and attachment, inviting reflection, acceptance, and growth. In this sense, anxious attachment simultaneously provides a prison and a refuge—a way to make sense of pain while nurturing hope and inner peace. For young adults with anxious attachment, healing means recognizing, accepting, and growing.

5. Conclusion

This phenomenological study examines the lived experiences of young adults with an anxious attachment style who remain in toxic relationships through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with three participants. Four interrelated superordinate themes were identified: (1) unhealthy relationship dynamics characterized by emotional instability, poor communication, and neglectful behavior as a form of covert psychological abuse; (2) emotional responses such as sadness, overthinking, and fear of loss, reflecting the hyperactivation of the enduring system, where the threat of separation paradoxically increases the need for closeness; (3) inhibiting factors such as affection, hope for change, and inconsistent positive moments, reflecting intermittent reinforcement mechanisms—supported by the finding of a significant negative correlation between emerging adulthood and the level of toxic relationships; and (4) self-awareness and growth in meaning, where experiences are interpreted as lessons toward understanding personal boundaries and emotional maturity, according to a logotherapy perspective.

These four themes are not linear but rather form a dynamic hermeneutic cycle: conflict triggers an emotional response, the response prompts a reassessment of the relationship, and the reassessment renews the resulting reassessment. Anxiety's entanglement with these functions serves as a hermeneutic of life—a constant negotiation between war and rationality, despair and hope, suffering and growth.

These findings have several practical implications. For counselors and psychologists, interventions need to go beyond symptom management to healing the underlying wounds, with increased self-esteem as a primary target. Recommended approaches include settling-based therapy, cognitive reconstruction of maladaptive schemas ("I am worthless without this relationship"), emotion regulation training to reduce protest behavior, and the development of a distinct identity outside of the romantic relationship. For friends and parents, effective support begins not with judgment or pressure to leave, but with the creation of a warm, non-judgmental safe space—active listening, validating feelings, and gently reminding individuals of their worth—given that individuals with anxiety are particularly vulnerable to coercive experiences.

This study is limited by the small number of participants and homogeneous demographics, so generalizations of the findings should be made with caution. Future research is recommended to involve more diverse participants, use standardized instruments such as the ECR Scale, and apply longitudinal and mixed method designs to quantitatively validate the adaptation of the model based on the proposed innovation.

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