

# How to Spot Emotional Unavailability: 5 Signs

**Indifference**, **avoidance**, and **detachment** are three of the many signs of emotional unavailability. Learning to spot an emotionally unavailable person can protect you from toxic relationships.

You may have felt someone you care about couldn't be there for you emotionally at some point. Maybe they seemed distant, unaffectionate, or uninterested.

It's natural to be emotionally unavailable when you have a lot going on or need personal space.

But, what about people who frequently seem this way? How can you recognize an emotionally unavailable person, in general?

What causes emotional unavailability may be specific to the person. It could include an [insecure attachment style](#), a [personality disorder](#), or even a [symptom of childhood trauma](#).

Although everyone's different, there are a few telltale signs of emotional unavailability.

Learning to recognize these signs may help you make

decisions about your relationships and protect yourself if you feel invested in someone emotionally unavailable.

Emotional unavailability refers to someone who doesn't respond to your emotional needs or cues. An emotionally unavailable man or woman has persistent difficulty expressing or handling emotions, and getting emotionally close to other people.

Lack of emotional intimacy is a sign of unavailability in a relationship, for example.

"When we say someone is emotionally unavailable, we mean that they are not comfortable feeling their own emotions, sharing emotions with others, or being present and responsive to someone else's emotions," says [Dr. Lindsay Jernigan](#), a licensed clinical psychologist in South Burlington, Vermont.

On the other hand, someone who's emotionally available is comfortable sharing an uninhibited connection with someone else, and this includes emotional intimacy.

Everyone's different and may express emotional unavailability in their own way. However, someone who is emotionally unavailable may:

- seem standoffish in general
- find it challenging to talk about their feelings

- avoid certain topics or situations that involve emotional expressions

"Many people, particularly male gender-identified people, receive culturally reinforced messages that emotional vulnerability is 'weak,' and in response, they develop patterns of emotional unavailability in an attempt to live up to cultural gender expectations," says Jernigan.

Still, it's a misconception that only men show signs of emotional unavailability or that *all* men are emotionally unavailable.

Being emotionally unavailable may look different depending on the situation, but the common theme is that dealing with emotions is a challenge.

Here are some important signs that tell you someone is emotionally unavailable:

## 1. They avoid intimacy

Someone who's emotionally unavailable may fear [intimacy](#) — sharing their innermost feelings and thoughts with you.

"Discomfort with vulnerability leads some people to distance themselves from their own emotional experiences, which makes it almost impossible to engage with others in a way that has emotional intimacy and depth," says Jernigan.

She adds that a lack of physical affection or eye contact could also be indicators of emotional unavailability, although this isn't a rule.

When your loved one dodges intimate conversations or situations, it might seem like they don't trust you. But in most cases, it's not a personal thing. They're used to relying on themselves and being self-sufficient.

You may also find you "hit a wall" every time you try to get close to them.

"Painful emotions, or emotions that make someone feel emotionally vulnerable, are particularly challenging," says Jernigan.

## 2. They avoid commitment

Commitment is often difficult for someone who is emotionally unavailable.

For instance, they may put off labeling your romantic relationship or initiating a next step, such as moving in or proposing marriage.

[Fear of commitment](#) and [fear of getting too close](#) are two common signs of emotional unavailability in men and women.

Emotionally unavailable partners might prefer having casual relationships with multiple people or may end relationships if things are getting "too serious."

In a friendship, the person may be hesitant to make plans or might cancel those often. They might also become evidently uncomfortable if you express love for them or treat them as a confidant.

### **3. They get defensive easily**

"Someone who is emotionally unavailable rarely initiates conversations that involve discussing relationship dynamics, hurt feelings, or requests for behavioral changes," says Jernigan.

An emotionally unavailable partner also tends to respond in a defensive way. Or, they might blame you or someone else for their problems. They find trusting others challenging and this may lead them to emotional detachment as well.

Living detached and distrustful is actually a sign of [cluster A personality disorders](#). These conditions could lead someone to become emotionally unavailable.

### **4. They aren't available... period**

If you tell them you need them, emotionally unavailable

people tend to run the other way. Sometimes, they literally are nowhere to be found when you're going through a rough time or simply want to talk.

Or they might stick around, but they'll tend to minimize your emotions. They could also try to change the subject or just withdraw from an emotional conversation.

Someone who's emotionally unavailable might also persistently want to keep topics "light" even when you tell them you need to vent or need advice.

## 5. They might not empathize with your feelings

Because they tend to "turn off" emotions and have poor insight, people who are emotionally unavailable might also exhibit [low empathy](#) — the inability to understand or share someone else's feelings.

In other words, an emotionally unavailable person may not be able to relate to you, put themselves in your shoes, or consider your feelings when making a decision.

This doesn't necessarily mean [they don't care about your feelings](#), but they might not have the emotional capability to identify and honor your needs.

Since an emotionally unavailable person isn't comfortable

exploring their own emotions, they might not be able to connect with other people's emotional needs, either.

"A lack of exploration of one's own emotional landscape leads to a lack of personal insight, and ultimately, limited comfort with and attunement to others' feelings," says Jernigan.

There are likely many causes for emotional unavailability. But much of the research on the topic has focused on [attachment styles](#) and the early parent/child relationship.

Your first relationships with caregivers may play a [key role](#) [Trusted Source](#) in emotional intimacy and availability.

When caregivers deny affection and emotional support or reprimand the child for emotional expressions, children tend to repeat this pattern in their adult relationships.

Those children who don't experience adequate responses to their emotional needs may be more likely to develop an avoidant attachment style, a form of [unhealthy attachment](#).

This means they'll tend to be more independent, physically and emotionally, and have a harder time getting intimate with others or relying on them.

Jernigan says that "attachment wounds," such as a history of being abandoned, neglected, or ridiculed, may also lead to

emotional unavailability. These wounds can develop in childhood or later in life.

"Staying emotionally distant serves a self-protective purpose in these cases," she says. "If I don't have to feel, then I don't have to feel pain, and if I don't feel too close to you, then I'm not particularly vulnerable to having my feelings hurt by you."

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Emotional unavailability can be managed, but it often requires the person to acknowledge this blockage and seek help.

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