

# Adult attachment and long-term singlehood

Christopher A Pepping<sup>1</sup> and Geoff MacDonald<sup>2</sup>

Rates of singlehood are increasing rapidly in the Western World. In the current paper, we discuss the phenomenon of long-term singlehood from an attachment perspective, outline three distinct sub-groups of singles (anxious, avoidant, and secure), and demonstrate the utility of these groups by highlighting their unique characteristics and possible life outcomes, including factors that may moderate these outcomes. Finally, we offer suggestions for future research to enhance our understanding of this vastly under-researched population.

## Addresses

<sup>1</sup> School of Psychology and Public Health, La Trobe University, Australia

<sup>2</sup> Department of Psychology, University of Toronto, Canada

Corresponding author: Pepping, Christopher A ([c.pepping@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:c.pepping@latrobe.edu.au))

Current Opinion in Psychology 2019, 25:105–109

This review comes from a themed issue on **Attachment in adulthood**

Edited by **Jeffry A Simpson** and **Gery Karantzas**

For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

Available online 16th April 2018

doi:[10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2018.04.006)

2352-250X/© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

The desire for romantic love is so pervasive across cultures it may serve an evolutionary function [1<sup>\*\*</sup>]. However, rates of singlehood are increasing rapidly in the Western World, and more people are now living alone than at any other point in history [2]. Singles are often ignored in psychological research, which is unfortunate given that singles are a sizeable and growing group of individuals. Here we discuss the phenomenon of long-term singlehood from an attachment theoretical perspective.

## Individual differences in attachment and long-term singlehood

Attachment theory has proven to be one of the most useful frameworks for understanding relationship dynamics across the lifespan. Adult attachment avoidance is characterized by the maintenance of attachment system deactivation, discomfort with intimacy and closeness, and excessive self-reliance. In contrast, attachment anxiety is characterized by hyperactivation of the attachment system, sensitivity to rejection and abandonment, and

intense distress when attachment needs are not met. Those low in attachment anxiety and avoidance have an internal working model of attachment security, characterized by confidence that protective others will be available and responsive in times of need, and a sense that it is safe to confidently explore one's environment [3,4].

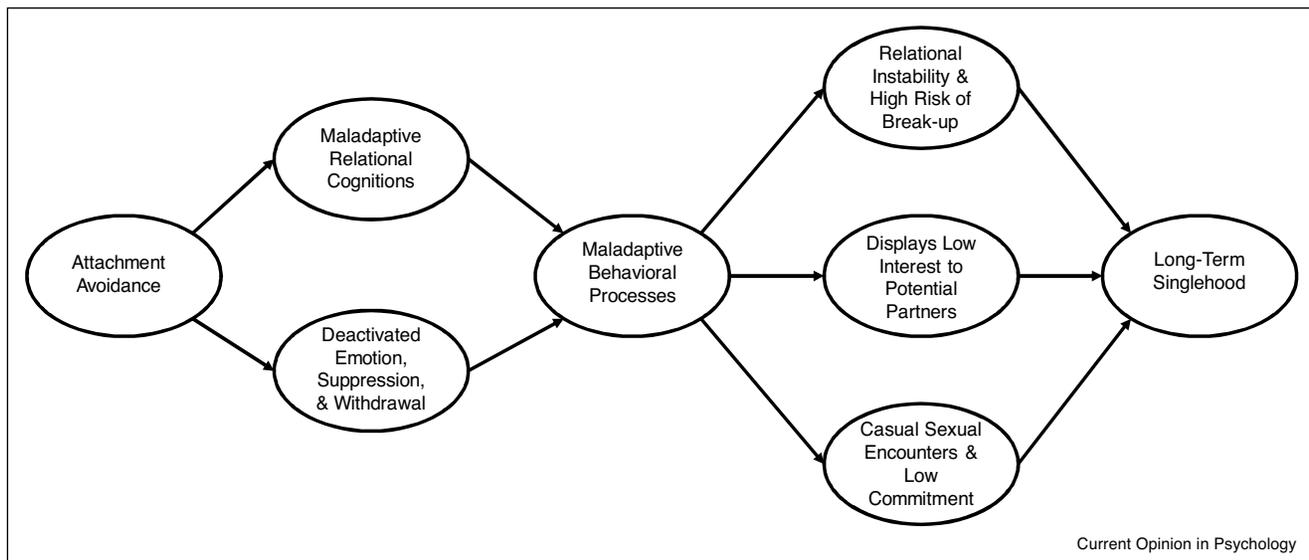
Emerging evidence suggests that single individuals are higher in attachment insecurity than their partnered counterparts; however, there are discrepancies between studies regarding which dimensions of attachment predict singlehood, and the magnitude of these effects [5<sup>\*\*</sup>]. We recently outlined an attachment theoretical model of long-term singlehood, and reviewed evidence suggestive of at least three distinct sub-groups of singles [5<sup>\*\*</sup>]. Here we demonstrate the utility of these distinctions by highlighting the unique characteristics and possible life outcomes of each group.

## Attachment avoidance

Attachment avoidance is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that undermine potential for intimacy. Those high in attachment avoidance dampen their hopes for intimacy, especially when there is opportunity for connection, in order to circumvent attachment system activation, and prevent potential distress [6]. They show less non-verbal intimacy, affection, and expressiveness [4], and even sit further away from partners during interactions [7]. The strategies used by avoidant individuals to maintain attachment system deactivation are at odds with factors known to facilitate satisfying relationships [8]. Accordingly, they are less likely to form a committed romantic relationship [9], and more likely to avoid new relationships following break-up [10]. Thus, as displayed in [Figure 1](#), one sub-group of singles is likely to be characterized by attachment avoidance [5<sup>\*\*</sup>].

Those who remain long-term single due to processes associated with attachment avoidance are likely to display relatively poor life outcomes. Specifically, although this group defensively downplays the importance of close relationships, they do still desire intimacy, and are even more affected by separation and rejection than their secure counterparts [11]. The characteristic features of avoidant attachment are pervasive and undermine potential for intimacy in both romantic and non-romantic relationships [12<sup>\*\*</sup>], which reduces the likelihood that attachment needs will be successfully met in non-romantic relationships. This group may therefore be at greater risk of poor psychosocial adjustment. However, there may be factors that can buffer negative effects of singlehood amongst avoidant individuals.

Figure 1



Model of Attachment Avoidance Predicting Long-Term Singlehood.

From: Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ. **Toward a psychology of singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* (in press). doi:10.1177/0963721417752106, reprinted with permission.

Given that those high in attachment avoidance prefer more solitary activities, it is plausible that success in these activities might, to some extent, compensate for a lack of social connectedness. For instance, early qualitative research found that some people remain single because they are dedicated to career pursuits and work [13]. Recent evidence reveals that those high in attachment avoidance can in fact be more successful in careers characterized by self-reliance and autonomy, and may be more satisfied in their work compared to those low in avoidance [14]. Perhaps career success and job satisfaction might moderate associations between singlehood and life satisfaction amongst avoidant individuals. It seems likely, however, that any protective qualities associated with career success might be attenuated following retirement. A longitudinal study tracked workers from pre-retirement to 7-years post-retirement and found that, although most people coped well, income decline predicted higher rates of depression and more psychosomatic complaints amongst those high in attachment avoidance [15].

It is also important to consider the influence of age and developmental stage. For instance, romantic relationships during adolescence and early adulthood are often brief, and many adolescents remain single, which is not associated with poor outcomes during adolescence [16]. Indeed, dating and romantic involvement during adolescence is often associated with poorer outcomes [17], a pattern that reverses in adulthood [18]. Thus, singlehood in adolescence and young adulthood may be more normative, and not associated with attachment insecurity. Indeed, age moderates the

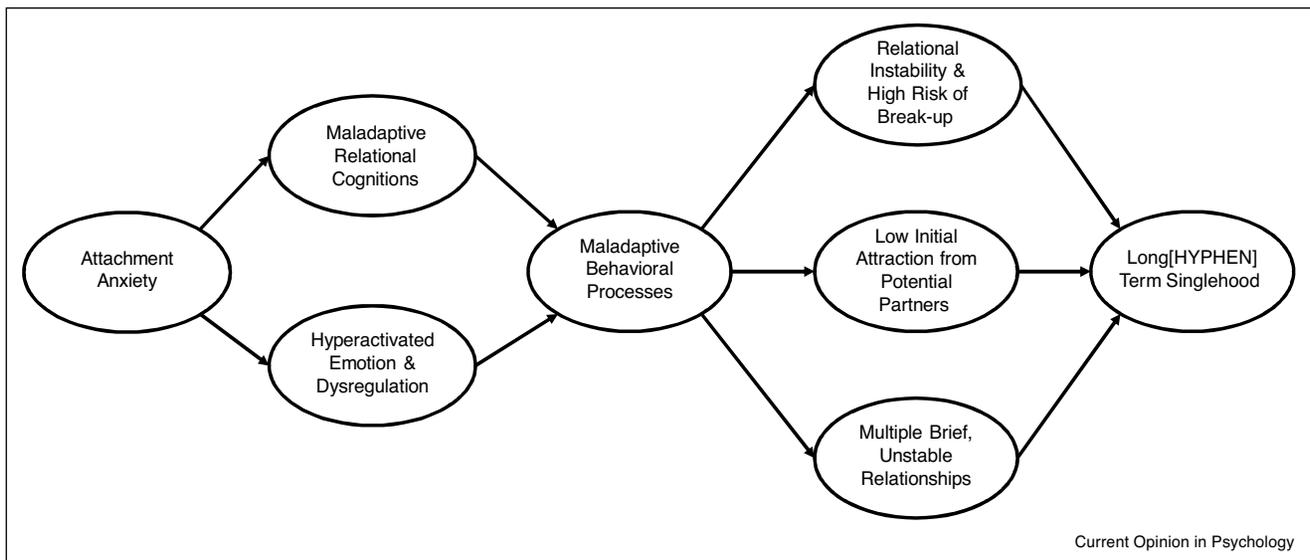
association between attachment avoidance and single status, such that younger singles (aged 18–30) display *more* comfort with closeness (low avoidance) compared to their coupled counterparts, whereas older singles (aged 46–60) display less comfort with closeness (high avoidance) [19]. Thus, it seems that in adolescence and young adulthood, attachment avoidance may not be associated with singlehood, whereas for those who remain long-term single into adulthood, attachment avoidance may be implicated.

Avoidant singles may fare worse over time as they age and require more social and practical support, as they are especially reluctant to seek support in times of need [20]. Social support buffers the effects of depression on life satisfaction in older age [21], and the solitary coping strategies used by avoidant individuals may thus become less effective with age. Consistent with this proposition, attachment avoidance is associated with less satisfaction with support received from others in older (35–66) but not younger (18–34) adults, and these perceptions of support mediate associations between attachment avoidance and poor psychosocial adjustment in older adulthood [22]. Thus, for avoidant singles, individualistic coping strategies, such as immersion in work, might buffer the effects of isolation on life outcomes in young adulthood, but these strategies are likely to become increasingly ineffective as one ages and requires more support.

#### Attachment anxiety

Attachment anxiety is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that undermine romantic

Figure 2



Model of Attachment Anxiety Predicting Long-Term Singlehood.

From: Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ. **Toward a psychology of singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* (in press). doi:10.1177/0963721417752106, reprinted with permission.

relationships [4]. Anxious individuals have intense desires for intimacy, but hold little confidence that their efforts to get close to others will be successful, and are hypervigilant to signs of rejection and abandonment [12\*\*]. These fears give rise to maladaptive behaviors such as excessive reassurance seeking, anger and clinginess in response to jealousy, and interpersonal awkwardness [4], and these processes undermine their interpersonal success [23]. Accordingly, attachment anxiety is associated with relational instability and high risk of break-up [12\*\*]. A second sub-group of long-term singles is therefore likely to be characterized by attachment anxiety (see Figure 2) [5\*\*].

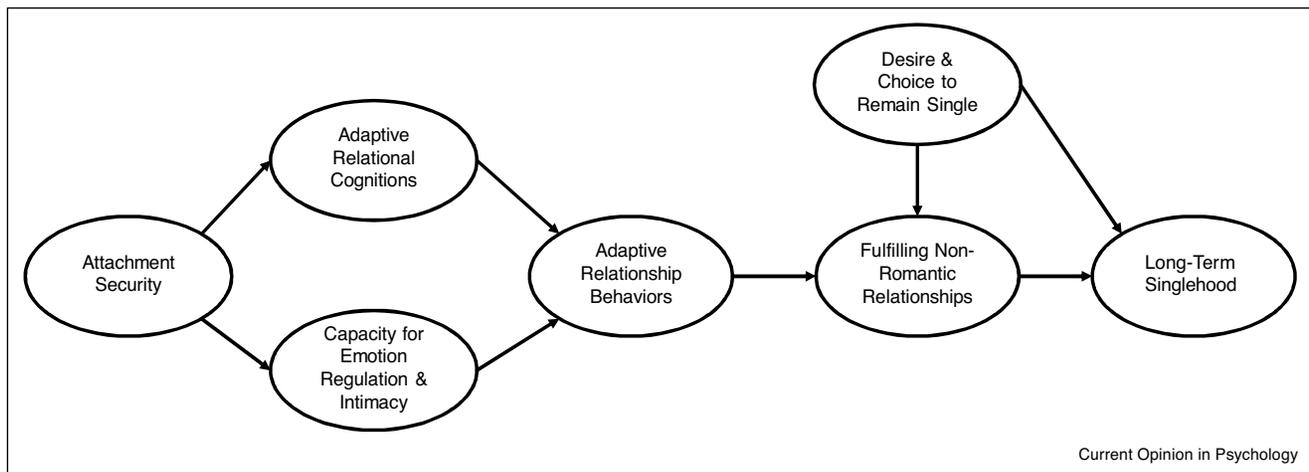
Those who remain long-term single due to processes associated with attachment anxiety are likely to display relatively poor life outcomes. Those high in attachment anxiety report more fear of being single, defined as the tendency to experience anxiety or distress related to being without a romantic partner [24\*\*], which is associated with longing for ex-partners [25] and increased loneliness and depression [24\*\*]. They are therefore likely to be less satisfied with their single status given their strong desire for intimacy [3], and dissatisfaction with relationship status predicts less overall life satisfaction [26]. Again, there may be factors that moderate, or buffer, these associations.

Given that attachment anxiety is characterized by an intense desire for intimacy, anxious singles may seek out non-romantic relationships more readily, and the

quality of these relationships might buffer the negative effects of singlehood. Evidence from social identity theory research reveals that those with more group memberships and broader social ties display a range of beneficial psychosocial outcomes [27]. Interestingly, single individuals are more socially connected to neighbors, friends, and relatives than their married counterparts [28]. Perhaps the quality of these relationships might moderate associations between singlehood and well-being amongst anxiously attached individuals. However, attachment anxiety is pervasive and also undermines non-romantic relationships [12\*\*]. Nonetheless, the correlation between global attachment (e.g. attachment anxiety) and relationship-specific attachment (e.g. attachment to friends) is imperfect ( $r = .41-.77$ ) [29]. For instance, an individual high in attachment anxiety may have experienced parental and romantic attachment figures as rejecting and inconsistent, but have experienced supportive, sensitive, and responsive relationships with friends [29]. Research is needed to investigate whether the quality of non-romantic relationships moderates the association between singlehood and low well-being amongst anxiously attached singles, with better outcomes for those with more secure attachments outside of romantic relationships.

Anxious individuals report more fear about being single [24\*\*], and are often not optimistic about their future relationship prospects [30]. However, anxious singles who are able to muster optimism about finding a partner in the future may fare better than their less optimistic

Figure 3



Model of Attachment Security Predicting Long-Term Singlehood.

From: Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ. **Toward a psychology of singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood.** *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* (in press). doi:10.1177/0963721417752106, reprinted with permission.

counterparts [31], though this may be somewhat dependent on age and developmental stage. Single older adults report few opportunities to meet potential partners in their social circles, as they no longer frequent venues where single people typically socialize (e.g. clubs or pubs), and many in their existing social circles are already partnered [32]. Research should test whether optimism about future relationship prospects moderates associations between singlehood and well-being amongst anxious singles, and whether the protective quality of optimism declines with age.

Finally, pet ownership can decrease loneliness and increase well-being [33], and pets can serve as attachment figures [34]. Pet ownership may therefore assist those high in attachment anxiety to cope with loneliness and buffer effects of social isolation. However, the beneficial effects of pets seem to be more pronounced amongst securely attached individuals [35] which, again, attests to the pervasive effects of attachment insecurity in non-romantic relationships.

### Attachment security

For some, singlehood may not reflect attachment insecurity, but may instead represent a satisfying personal choice [36\*\*]. That is, those whose singlehood is an autonomous decision (rather than an avoidant denial of intimacy needs) and who get attachment needs met in other, non-romantic relationships, may fare relatively well on psychosocial indicators (see Figure 3) [5\*\*]. Consistent with this proposition, recent evidence indicates that satisfaction with single status is a strong predictor of overall life satisfaction [26].

Securely attached individuals who choose to remain single may have greater success forming long-term stable friendships to meet attachment needs [12\*\*]. Indeed, recent evidence suggests singles may be more socially connected with friends and family than their coupled counterparts [28]. Secure individuals rely on the primary strategy of the attachment system, namely proximity seeking, and may therefore use these same strategies to develop non-romantic relationships. Satisfying interpersonal relationships and broader social ties predict increased quality of life and well-being, reduced risk of depression, and lower mortality risk [37,38]. Thus, when singlehood reflects a secure personal choice as opposed to difficulties forming or maintaining relationships, single status should be associated with positive life outcomes.

### Conclusions

Here we have outlined three distinct sub-groups of long-term singles and their differential associations with life outcomes. Research is needed to investigate factors that may distinguish between insecure individuals who remain long-term single from those who do not, and life outcomes amongst distinct sub-groups of long-term singles. Attachment Theory brings a strong theoretical and empirical foundation to enhance our understanding of long-term singlehood, and our hope is that the current paper will stimulate further research on this much-neglected topic.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

Nothing declared.

## References and recommended reading

Papers of particular interest, published within the period of review, have been highlighted as:

●● of outstanding interest

1. Fletcher GJ, Simpson JA, Campbell L, Overall NC: **Pair-bonding, ●● romantic love, and evolution the curious case of *Homo sapiens***. *Perspect Psychol Sci* 2015, **10**:20-36.  
This paper presents an overview of theory and research highlighting that pair-bonding may serve an evolutionary function. It also includes research pertaining to attachment theory and romantic love.
2. U.S. Census Bureau 2010. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/2010census/>.
3. Hazan C, Shaver P: **Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process**. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 1987, **52**:511-524.
4. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: *Attachment in Adulthood: Structure, Dynamics, and Change*. edn 2. New York: Guilford Press; 2016.
5. Pepping CA, MacDonald G, Davis PJ: **Toward a psychology of ●● singlehood: an attachment theoretical perspective on long-term singlehood**. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci* 2018. (in press).  
This paper outlined the attachment theoretical model of long-term singlehood discussed in the current manuscript, and reviews evidence suggestive of at least three sub-groups of long-term singles.
6. Spielmann SS, Maxwell JA, MacDonald G, Baratta PL: **Don't get your hopes up avoidantly attached individuals perceive lower social reward when there is potential for intimacy**. *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2013, **39**:219-236.
7. Guerrero LK: **Attachment-style differences in intimacy and involvement: a test of the four-category model**. *Commun Monogr* 1996, **63**:269-292.
8. Simpson JA, Campbell L: *The Oxford Handbook of Close Relationships*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2013.
9. Schindler I, Fagundes CP, Murdock KW: **Predictors of romantic relationship formation: attachment style, prior relationships, and dating goals**. *Pers Relationsh* 2010, **17**:97-105.
10. Davis D, Shaver PR, Vernon ML: **Physical, emotional, and behavioral reactions to breaking up: the roles of gender, age, emotional involvement, and attachment style**. *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2003, **29**:871-884.
11. Shaver PR, Mikulincer M: **Adult attachment strategies and the regulation of emotion**. In *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*. Edited by Gross JJ. New York: Guilford Press; 2009:446-465.
12. Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: **Adult attachment orientations and ●● relationship processes**. *J Fam Theory Rev* 2012, **4**:259-274.  
Reviews the empirical research pertaining to adult attachment and relationship processes, including factors that contribute to positive relationships, and processes that undermine relationship functioning.
13. Forsyth CJ, Johnson EL: **A sociological view of the never married**. *Int J Sociol Fam* 1995:91-104.
14. Ein-Dor T, Reizer A, Shaver PR, Dotan E: **Standoffish perhaps, but successful as well: evidence that avoidant attachment can be beneficial in professional tennis and computer science**. *J Personal* 2012, **80**:749-768.
15. Segel-Karpas D, Bamberger PA, Bacharach SB: **Income decline and retiree well-being: the moderating role of attachment**. *Psychol Aging* 2013, **28**:1098-1107.
16. Collins WA, Welsh DP, Furman W: **Adolescent romantic relationships**. *Annu Rev Psychol* 2009, **60**:631-652.
17. Olson JS, Crosnoe R: **Are you still bringing me down? Romantic involvement and depressive symptoms from adolescence to young adulthood**. *J Health Soc Behav* 2017, **58**:102-115.
18. Lucas RE, Dyrenforth PS: **The myth of marital bliss?** *Psychol Inq* 2005:111-115.
19. Petrowski K, Schurig S, Schmutzer G, Braehler E, Stobel-Richter Y: **Is it attachment style or socio-demography: singlehood in a representative sample**. *Front Psychol* 2015, **6**:1738.
20. Vogel DL, Wei M: **Adult attachment and help-seeking intent: the mediating roles of psychological distress and perceived social support**. *J Counsel Psychol* 2005, **52**:347-357.
21. Adams TR, Rabin LA, Da Silva VG, Katz MJ, Fogel J, Lipton RB: **Social support buffers the impact of depressive symptoms on life satisfaction in old age**. *Clin Gerontol* 2016, **39**:139-157.
22. Kafetsios K, Sideridis GD: **Attachment, social support and well-being in young and older adults**. *J Health Psychol* 2006, **11**:863-875.
23. McClure MJ, Lydon JE: **Anxiety doesn't become you: how attachment anxiety compromises relational opportunities**. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 2014, **106**:89-111.
24. Spielmann SS, MacDonald G, Maxwell JA, Joel S, Peragine D, ●● Muise A, Impett EA: **Settling for less out of fear of being single**. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 2013, **105**:1049-1073.  
This paper outlined and investigated the concept of fear of being single, including factors that predict comfort with singlehood.
25. Spielmann SS, MacDonald G, Joel S, Impett EA: **Longing for ex-partners out of fear of being single**. *J Personal* 2015, **84**:799-808.
26. Lehmann V, Tuinman MA, Braeken J, Vingerhoets AJ, Sanderman R, Hagedoorn M: **Satisfaction with relationship status: development of a new scale and the role in predicting well-being**. *J Happiness Stud* 2015, **16**:169-184.
27. Jetten J, Haslam C, Haslam SA, Dingle G, Jones JM: **How groups affect our health and well-being: the path from theory to policy**. *Soc Issues Policy Rev* 2014, **8**:103-130.
28. Sarkisian N, Gerstel N: **Does singlehood isolate or integrate? Examining the link between marital status and ties to kin, friends, and neighbors**. *J Soc Pers Relationsh* 2016, **33**:361-384.
29. Fraley RC, Heffernan ME, Vicary AM, Brumbaugh CC: **The experiences in close relationships – Relationship Structures Questionnaire: a method for assessing attachment orientations across relationships**. *Psychol Assess* 2011, **23**:615-625.
30. Carnelley KB, Janoff-Bulman R: **Optimism about love relationships: general vs specific lessons from one's personal experiences**. *J Soc Pers Relationsh* 1992, **9**:5-20.
31. Spielmann SS, MacDonald G, Wilson AE: **On the rebound: focusing on someone new helps anxiously attached individuals let go of ex-partners**. *Personal Soc Psychol Bull* 2009, **35**:1382-1394.
32. Malta S. **Why go online? Older adults' reasons for online dating**. Retrieved from: <https://www.tasa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Malta.pdf>.
33. McConnell AR, Brown CM, Shoda TM, Stayton LE, Martin CE: **Friends with benefits: on the positive consequences of pet ownership**. *J Personal Soc Psychol* 2011, **101**:1239-1252.
34. Zilcha-Mano S, Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: **An attachment perspective on human-pet relationships: conceptualization and assessment of pet attachment orientations**. *J Res Personal* 2011, **45**:345-357.
35. Zilcha-Mano S, Mikulincer M, Shaver PR: **Pets as safe havens and secure bases: the moderating role of pet attachment orientations**. *J Res Personal* 2012, **46**:571-580.
36. DePaulo B: **A singles studies perspective on mount marriage**. ●● *Psychol Inq* 2014, **25**:64-68.  
This paper provides outlines research pertaining to singlehood, largely from the perspective of singlehood as a satisfying personal choice.
37. Cruwys T, Dingle GA, Haslam C, Haslam SA, Jetten J, Morton TA: **Social group memberships protect against future depression, alleviate depression symptoms and prevent depression relapse**. *Soc Sci Med* 2013, **98**:179-186.
38. Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Layton JB: **Social relationships and mortality risk: a meta-analytic review**. *PLoS Med* 2010, **7**: e1000316.