



# Relationship between Attachment Styles and Depression among Thai Nursing Students

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## Abstract

Previous studies have demonstrated that nursing students are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues, especially depression. While several studies have explored the factors associated with depression in this group, few have examined individual differences, such as attachment styles, in relation to these mental health challenges. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between attachment styles and depressive symptoms among nursing students in the Thai context. The online survey questionnaire was used to collect the data from 112 undergraduate nursing students. The Attachment Styles Questionnaire Short Form and The Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale, 10-item version were administered to all participants. The results of present research showed that nursing students' attachment styles were significantly associated with depression using Pearson's correlation analysis ( $p < .01$ ). From the two aspects of attachment styles, namely secure and insecure, higher secure attachment was related to fewer depressive symptoms ( $r = -.51$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The best predictor of depression was attachment preoccupied and confidence ( $R^2 = 0.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The findings highlight the importance of nursing students' attachment styles for early detection of depressive symptoms and ways to promote mental health and well-being of nursing students in universities.

**Keywords:** Attachment styles, Depression, Nursing students

## What was Known

- It has been found that nursing students are at risk of having depression.
- Attachment styles associated with depressive symptoms among depressed patient in Thailand.
- There were limited studies on attachment styles and depression among nursing students in Thai context.

## What's New and Next

- Intervention on building secure attachment styles to prevent depression among nursing students should be promoted such as the Interpersonal Psychotherapy (IPT-A).
- Future research could expand by recruiting participants from the entire Thai general population.

## Introduction

Depression is commonly reported among university undergraduates. It shows that the depressive symptoms present more in university students than general population<sup>1</sup> especially in nursing students<sup>2</sup>. In 2018, the global prevalence of having depressive symptoms among nursing students was 34%<sup>3</sup>. Many studies found that nursing students have higher risk of being depressed as they encounter multiple challenges and stressors that are specific to their academic field<sup>4</sup>. The challenges can be both clinical and academic such as examination, research projects, class assignments, relationship problems with classmates, insufficient clinical knowledge and skills, fear of making mistakes, conflicts with peers and senior nurses, and weak connections with patients<sup>5, 6, 7</sup>. Research have shown that depression can affect on daily life and in worst case, it can lead to the suicide ideation<sup>8</sup>.

Though there were concerns on mental health of nursing students as it was stated that nursing is one of the most stressful professions<sup>9</sup>. Many studies have studied interventions and programs aimed at preventing depression. However, research on individual differences that can predict and are associated with depressive symptoms, particularly early detection, has received limited attention.

Attachment is one of the theories provided knowledge on individual differences<sup>10</sup>. It is an individual's unique way of responding to basic needs of being in a relationship with other people.

Human attachment is formed since infant and persist throughout the lifespan. There were two dimensions of attachment patterns namely, secure, and insecure. The secure type of attachment is usually formed when a person experienced acceptance, reliable, and responsive parenting style. As parents or the significant caregivers provide infant with the safe environment to learn and grow, it will make infant experiences positive sense of self and others from the process of parenting. This will be the formation of confidence attachment pattern. On the other hand, insecure type of attachment can occur when there is a sense of unworthiness in self or others from the inconsistent and undependable parenting styles. The two insecure types of attachment patterns are formed among, can be viewed as, dangerous environment for infant to learn and grow. There are two insecure types of orientations that human can lean towards namely, avoidant and anxious. The avoidant attachment style may manifest as discomfort with closeness and viewing relationships as secondary to achievement, while the anxious attachment style is characterized by a need for approval, stemming from a fear of rejection and abandonment, as well as a preoccupation with relationships, including clinging to and relying on caregivers to meet emotional needs<sup>11</sup>.

It has been found that individual whose orientation of attachment styles lean towards insecure types is prone to have mental health issues<sup>12</sup>. Previous studies also shown that attachment is one of the key factors associated with depressive symptoms<sup>10</sup>. As attachment patterns are formed, they provide sense of self-concept for all individuals including nursing students. The insecure types of attachment among nursing students may leaves these young adults with low self-esteem and unable to view one as competent. Moreover, it can reflect inability to maintain healthy relationships with others resulting in lack of social support<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, nursing students who possessed insecure attachment styles might have greater vulnerability of being depressed and later can lead to ineffective in their work performance.

The aim of this study is to investigate the attachment styles and its relationship with depression in Thai nursing students. Understanding the relationship between the two factors will provide knowledge for the university health care professional in assisting the depressed students and promoting overall health and well-being.

## Materials and Methods

### *Design, Participants, and Procedures*

This study employed a cross-sectional descriptive design. The sample consisted of 112 Thai undergraduate nursing students (3 men, 109 women), who were purposively selected

through one institution. Participant were also not under psychiatric treatment. The sample size was calculated according to the suggestion of Hair and others with 10% of additional sample size<sup>14</sup>. Following the ethics committee approval, the data were collected by an online survey, via Google Form, with the demographic questionnaire, attachment styles questionnaire, and depression questionnaire. Those who are eligible were given the online informed consent and were informed of the study objectives.

### *Measures*

#### *Demographic Questionnaire*

Demographic Questionnaire including sex, age, and academic status was used to assess the demographic characteristics of the nursing students.

#### *Attachment Styles Questionnaire*

Attachment Styles Questionnaire Short Form (ASQ-SF) Thai version<sup>15</sup> was used to assess the attachment patterns of participants. It consisted of 29 items exploring five styles of attachment: (1) discomfort with closeness, (2) relationship as secondary, (3) need for approval, (4) preoccupation with relationship, and (5) confidence. The responses were recorded on 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the current study for each style namely (1) discomfort with closeness, (2) relationship as secondary, (3) need for approval, (4) preoccupation with relationship, and (5) confidence is .71, .75, .80, .86, .78, respectively. The higher the score in certain styles indicating the more individual's orientation lean towards those styles.

#### *Depression Questionnaire*

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression Scale, 10-items Thai version (CES-D-10)<sup>16</sup> was used to measure the depression. The scale consists of 10 items. It is a 4-point Likert scale (0 = Rarely or None of the Time, 1 = Some or Little of the Time, 2 = Moderately or Much of the time, 3 = Most or Almost All the Time). With the higher scores indicating the greater occurrence of depressive symptoms. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient is .85 in this current study.

#### *Statistical Analysis*

The SPSS software version 26 for Windows was used to analyze the data. Descriptive statistics, including percentage, mean, standard deviation, and minimum-maximum values, were used to describe the characteristics of the participants.

Inferential statistics were used to identify the association between attachment styles in each dimension and depression. Pearson's correlations coefficient test was used to evaluate the relationship between attachment styles and depression. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis using enter method was also conducted to identify each type of attachment style as a predictive factor for depression.

## Results

### *Characteristic of Participants*

Nursing students from four academic years were included in this study. A total of 112 nursing students were enrolled to complete the questionnaire. Their mean age was 21.05 (SD = 1.16). Most of participants were female (97.3%) as displayed in Table 1. The level of depression among nursing students in Thailand, based on the mean total scores, indicated occasional or moderate experiences of depressive symptoms (Mean = 1.06, SD = 0.58). Their mean total score of attachment orient towards discomfort with closeness was the most common among the nursing students (Mean = 3.86, SD = .74) and followed by confidence (Mean = 3.70, SD = .94), need for approval (Mean = 3.21, SD = 1.10), relationship as secondary (Mean = 3.20, SD = 1.07) and preoccupation (Mean = 3.01, SD = 1.23) as shown in Table 2.

### *Relationship between Attachment Styles and Depression*

From Table 3, the Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a significant association between each attachment style and depression. The confidence attachment was negatively related to depression which means that having higher secure attachment styles (confidence) was associated with fewer depressive symptoms ( $r = -.51, p < .01$ ). As for the insecure orientations, they were all positively correlated with depression which means that having more insecure attachment styles namely discomfort with closeness, relationship as secondary, need for approval, and preoccupation was associated with more frequent depressive symptoms ( $r = .31, r = .33, r = .53, r = .63, p < .01$ ).

### *The Multiple Regression analysis*

Multiple regression analysis revealed that all five attachment style patterns explained 46% of the variance in depression among nursing students who conducted this study ( $R^2 = 0.46, p < 0.01$ ). Two types of attachment including confidence and preoccupied had significant effect on depression while other types of attachment namely, discomfort with closeness, relationship

as secondary, and need for approval were not significantly contribute to depression in Thai nursing students. Table 4 displayed the detailed results of the analysis.

**Table 1** Participant's characteristic (*n* = 112)

Variables	Frequency	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Females	109	97.3
Males	3	2.7
Variables	Mean (SD)	Range
<i>Age</i>	21.05 (1.16)	18 – 24

**Table 2** Attachment styles and level of depression among nursing students (*n* = 112)

Variables	Mean (SD)
<i>Attachment styles</i>	
Discomfort with closeness	3.86 (.74)
Relationship as secondary	3.20 (1.07)
Need for approval	3.21 (1.10)
Preoccupation	3.01 (1.23)
Confidence	3.70 (.94)
<i>Depression</i>	1.06 (.58)

**Table 3** Relationship between attachment styles and depression (*n* = 112)

Variables	Variables					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Attachment styles</i>						
1. Discomfort with closeness	–					
2. Relationship as secondary	.46**	–				
3. Confidence	-.26**	-.16	–			
4. Need for approval	.33**	.44**	-.34**	–		
5. Preoccupation	.33**	.53**	-.53**	.75	–	
6. Depression	.31**	.33**	-.51**	.53**	.63**	–

\*\**p* < .01 (2-tailed)

**Table 4** The Multiple Regression analysis (Enter Method) ( $n = 112$ )

Predict variable	B	S.E.	Beta	t
Attachment Styles				
Discomfort with closeness	.06	.07	.07	.89
Relationship as secondary	.00	.07	.01	.07
Confidence	-.16	.05	-.26	-2.91**
Need for approval	.09	.06	.16	1.47
Preoccupation	.16	.06	.34	2.66**
Constant	.64	.36	-	1.79

$R = .68$ ,  $R^2 = .46$ ,  $F = 17.78$ , Sig. of  $F = .000$ , \*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

Nursing students are prone to have psychological health problems<sup>17</sup>. The results of this study suggested that the mean score of depressive symptoms among Thai nursing students was 1.06 (SD = .58), indicating that the students experienced some symptoms of depression. This result might be because of the nursing students are vulnerable to have mental health issues according to their specific education system<sup>4</sup>. This result is similar to the previous studies which stated that nursing students had tendency of being depressed<sup>17</sup>.

In addition, exploring the individual factors that associated with depression is important as it can assist in detecting the risk of having depressive symptoms. In this study, the attachment styles play a crucial role. The results suggested that individual differences like attachment styles had significant relationship with depressive symptoms in nursing students. The higher the score on secure attachment (confidence), the less of having depressive symptoms, while the higher the score on insecure attachment (discomfort with closeness, relationship as secondary, need for approval, and preoccupation), the more tendency of having depression. Moreover, this study suggests that, among all attachment patterns in nursing students, preoccupation and confidence are significant predictors of depression. These two factors account for 46% of predicting depressive symptoms in Thai nursing students. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating that secure attachment is associated with better psychological health, while insecure attachment is linked to poorer mental health<sup>18</sup>.

Attachment styles are individual factors that can influence the relationships people have with others, as they represent the bond formed between an infant and their caregiver. The connection will determine by the parenting styles. Inappropriate formation of a connection or bad

experience between the infant and caregiver will lead to insecure types of attachment. Individuals who possess more insecure types of attachment usually have negative perception on self and others which different from ones who lean more on secure type<sup>11</sup>.

This self and others' viewpoints can be used to explain the risks of having depression as it resembles with Beck's Cognitive Triad Theory<sup>19</sup>. It is stated that depression results from three negative viewpoints, or the cognitive triad, which includes a negative view of the self, the world, and the future. Therefore, having secure attachment means less risks of being depressed as individuals who lean towards confidence (secure attachment) will have positive views of themselves and others. However, insecure types of attachment (discomfort with closeness, relationship as secondary, need for approval, and preoccupation) will associate more with depressive symptoms as it means ones always have negative views on self and others resulting in reluctance of building a relationship with other people. Moreover, individuals with insecure types of attachment are more likely to have poor communication skills, and poor emotion regulation<sup>20, 21</sup>. Thus, they will have less social support which can assist them when encounter with life problems and have ineffective ways to cope with negative emotions.

Although this study fills the gap in understanding the relationship between attachment styles and depression among nursing students in Thailand, some limitations remain. First of all, this is cross-sectional design research in its nature thus, it could not explain the causal relationship between the factors. Secondly, the sample was predominantly female and small. Therefore, it is suggested that future research should include a larger sample size and investigate the cause-and-effect relationship between the factors. Furthermore, research on the effectiveness of interventions to promote secure attachment is recommended.

## Conclusion

The present study examines the relationship between attachment styles and depression among Thai nursing students. Our findings revealed significant correlations between the two factors. Higher scores on insecure attachment were associated with more severe depressive symptoms. In contrast, secure attachment, characterized by confidence, can serve as a protective factor, while insecure attachment such as discomfort with closeness, viewing relationships as secondary, needing approval, and being preoccupied can increase vulnerability to depression. The insights obtained from this study's results can help healthcare professionals raise awareness of individual differences. Additionally, they can develop interventions to foster

secure attachment among nursing students, thereby improving and promoting their overall well-being.

### **Ethical Approval Statement**

This study was reviewed and approved by Research Ethics Review System for Research Involving Human Participants, Chulalongkorn University (Project Number 233/63).

### **Author Contributions**

TK, KP and SJ designed the study. TK conducted the study, including data collection, data analyzes, data interpretation under the supervision of KP and SJ. TK drafted the manuscript. KP revised the manuscript. All authors read and approved the manuscript prior to submission for publication.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

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