

Study asks who's playing 'hard-to-get' and who's attracted by the ploy

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Credit: Pexels

Playing 'hard-to-get' is an age-old gambit for dating and mating, familiar to moviegoers, readers of literature and any admirer who's ever been "left on read."

New research just published in the peer-reviewed journal *Personality and Individual Differences* looks at the psychological underpinnings of making yourself seem more desirable by withholding obvious signs of romantic interest.

"If you think about things like 'breadcrumbing' or 'benching'—you're letting people think you're interested in them, then pulling away or keeping things as they are without moving the relationship forward," said Omri Gillath, professor of psychology at the University of Kansas, who co-wrote the paper. "You're not escalating or de-escalating the effort. For instance, you're sitting there and playing with your phone—phubbing—not paying full attention to the other person and making them struggle to get your attention. It's sending a double message. On the one hand, you're saying you're interested. But on the other hand you're saying, 'You'll have to work hard to actually get my full attention.'"

Gillath and Jeffery Bowen of Johns Hopkins University looked to discover the associations among romantic aloofness, gender and "[attachment style](#)," the psychological term for people's way of thinking, feeling and behaving in [close relationships](#).

Attachment style, usually formed in childhood, falls into the primary categories of secure or insecure (people with an insecure attachment style are usually classified as anxious or avoidant). Overall, the researchers found that women and people with insecure attachment styles tended to play hard-to-get more.

"Hard-to-get behaviors seem to serve as strategies to self-protect and manage potential partners' behaviors," Gillath said. "Women, as we expected, are playing hard-to-get more, and men are pursuing them. Avoidant people tend to be playing hard-to-get, and anxious people are pursuing them. The nice thing is it's compatible. If you're secure about

yourself and about others loving you, you're less likely to get involved in such game-playing—and you're not playing hard-to-get or pursuing people that are playing hard-to-get. But if you're insecure you're more likely to use these strategies, playing and pursuing, and it's serving a role for both sides."

Across four studies involving over 900 participants, the authors examined links between attachment style and hard-to-get strategies. Among their findings:

- Attachment style predicts and shapes hard-to-get behavior, particularly among insecurely attached individuals.
- People higher on attachment avoidance and women (vs. men) reported playing hard-to-get more.
- People higher on attachment anxiety and men (vs. women) reported more pursuing of hard-to-get others.
- When researchers nudged (or primed) thoughts of attachment insecurity, they found primed avoidance led to a greater likelihood of playing hard-to-get among avoidant heterosexual men. Primed anxiety led to greater reported likelihood of pursuing hard-to-get targets overall.
- While many people might be using these strategies (playing and pursuing), their reasons for doing so might be different (control, self-protection, partner selection, etc.)

According to the authors, their study sheds light on how people with avoidant and anxious attachment styles manage their psychological vulnerabilities. Put another way, our behavior in trying to find mates and partners is rooted in early life experiences.

For people with insecure attachment styles, Gillath said playing hard-to-get, or chasing an aloof potential mate, are efficient approaches for securing intimacy, [romantic relationships](#) and sex.

"We're not saying it's good or it's bad, but for some people these strategies are working," he said. "It helps people create relationships and get partners they want. But who's doing it and what are the outcomes? These people are usually insecure people—and their relationships are often ones that won't last long or will be dissatisfying."

For other people, playing hard-to-get is less a romantic strategy and more of a survival instinct.

"Sometimes, it's not so much about the relationship but about helping people to stay in control," Gillath said. "Some people are behaving in such a way because they're terrified. They can't trust anyone—and they're doing whatever they can to protect themselves from getting hurt again. So, for them, it's not 'playing.' This is not a game for them but a way to protect themselves and to verify people out there are serious and are going to be reliable mates."

The KU researcher said "playing hard-to-get" is one aspect of the psychological power dynamics that define many human relationships, whether they're romantic or not.

"Any [relationship](#) where we have two sides involved is going to have some push and pull," Gillath said. "There are relationships where one side wants it more and the other side wants it less. The side that is less invested has more power. If you really need my friendship and I have other friends, I'm going to have more power and control in the friendship and could potentially play hard-to-get. The person who's more desperate is likely to have less control and less power and likely to pursue more."

More information: Jeffrey D. Bowen et al. Who plays hard-to-get and who finds it attractive? Investigating the role of attachment style, *Personality and Individual Differences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.paid.2020.109997](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2020.109997)

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