

Abandonment and intimacy

A tension filled dynamic

By: Hannah Cuppen

They will certainly be familiar to you? People with busy social lives, who have successful careers, are content in their daily lives yet are still unlucky in love. People who are looking for a partner but who are unable to form a long-term, close and reciprocal relationship. People who have transitory or unrequited infatuations. People who never fall in love or, when they do, it is with the wrong person. People who have developed a pattern of always falling in love with someone who is unavailable, already in a relationship or who, for one reason or another is incapable of intimacy. People who are in a relationship which lacks either the mutual attachment or intimacy they long for or both; going through life more like brother and sister than as partners. Patterns like these that keep repeating themselves are an indication that it may be time to look beyond coincidence and take a deeper look inwards to see how they run like a thread through your life.



The dynamic of separation anxiety and fear of attachment.

Separation anxiety (fear of abandonment) and fear of attachment (fear of bonding) are two sides of the same coin. There is a strong dynamic (force field) at work between separation anxiety and fear of attachment that arises from a deep fear of losing love. It is in relationships that we experience the deepest form of intimacy and therefore precisely here that we are most at risk of losing love. A person with separation anxiety will be attracted to a partner with a fear of attachment and vice versa. This does not happen consciously, but the underlying dynamic is so strong that both parties ensure a safe distance is maintained between them; a sort of forbidden ground that prevents the partner from getting too close. Although, at first sight, this appears to apply more to people with a fear of attachment, people with separation anxiety also benefit from the safety this distance ensures. People subconsciously build in this security to ensure that they can never again be hurt, rejected, abandoned or lose anyone dear to them. It is a survival pattern that is intended to protect them against having to experience the pain of loss again.

The dynamic is in you.

In a particular relationship you may react from the position of separation anxiety whilst in another you may do so from the position fear of attachment. Both are sides of the same dynamic, which, when you have it, means you will attract a partner who also recognises this dynamic in him or herself. You are never both on the same side at same time however, but the opposite poles attract one another like a magnet. If you are on the side of separation anxiety you will have the tendency to be extremely focussed on your partner, to long for closeness and to always seek confirmation. It is no longer a free choice, but one that is driven by what I call a hidden claim. It is a claim that comes from needing the other person, being dependent on them, wanting hold onto or cling to them, even if they do not always treat you respectfully. This is often justified in the sense of: "But I do really understand him/her." The person on the side of fear of attachment will, when they feel the claim, increase the distance even more, become more aloof or withdraw inwardly and/or physically in order to keep their partner at a safe distance. They are the people who cannot actually commit to their partner (to the *bond*) and who will see everything in that person that is "just not good enough" in order to justify the distance to themselves. The moment the person with separation anxiety actually lets go, the dynamic can change and the partner with fear of attachment feels that he/she needs to fight to maintain the relationship. All at once he/she realizes they do not want to lose their partner and suddenly begins to see their attractive and valuable aspects. The partner who at first had a fear of attachment now sits on the side of the separation anxiety and vice versa. Thus, within a single relationship, the dynamic can alternate between partners and this dance can be maintained over a long period of time so as to prevent true bonds from ever forming.



Hidden beneath the dance is panic and the deep fear of loneliness, of being thrown back upon one's own resources, of inner emptiness, of losing the ground beneath one's feet, the fear of not being able to cope alone or of being alone forever. One of the partners breaking the pattern brings these feelings to the surface and it becomes an enormous task to face them. The choice then is either to clutch at a new love, to look for something to hold onto in an (old) addiction, to bury oneself in work or ... to gather up the courage to face the old wound that is being triggered.

The wound of abandonment.

Beneath the dynamic of separation anxiety and fear of attachment is a deep wound that cannot be seen on the surface, one people are not always aware of.

The dynamic is a symptom of this underlying wound, often suffered at a very early age, one that posed a serious threat to survival. Once people are caught up in the dynamic, the 'symptom' cannot simply be changed using willpower, because the underlying wound still threatens to draw them into the old survival pattern.

A wound of abandonment can be caused by a birth trauma, think for example of incubator babies deprived of physical contact and their parents' caress for a substantial period of time, complications which result in a child being separated from its mother too quickly or the story of the lost twin.



Abandonment can be physical and/or emotional and both have a direct impact on survival. A child who is not touched enough experiences a kind of abandonment, even if it is given other care. Whenever a child is separated from its mother, it feels a bit abandoned. Short periods of separation are normal and do not cause permanent damage. Longer periods, such as a prolonged hospital stay, divorce or long trips bring about deep uncertainty.

When a child is adopted, there is the question of abandonment by the biological mother. Adoptive parents have to compensate for the child's separation anxiety by providing consistent love and security – more than would be needed by their own children.¹

Abandonment can also arise as a result of inherited emotional trauma, which means that parents may not be available for their child because they are still struggling with their own (repressed) trauma. Examples here would be parents who suffered a war trauma, or parents who have lost a child, fear losing a new child and in so doing they pass their fear onto that child. Think, too, of parents who lost their own mother or father and who were forced to survive very early on; who had to look after their brothers and sisters and who could not simply be children themselves. These parents need their own children to hold on to so as not to feel the emptiness of their own unfulfilled needs. Think too, of parents who have unresolved issues of some kind and who are not capable of being completely present physically. The child feels the parent's needs subconsciously and, out of a strong sense of loyalty to the parent, tries to connect with these and fulfil them.

Healthy symbiosis

For healthy development, it is necessary that a child's need for warmth, protection, security, love and belonging are met. A child looks for the fulfilment of these needs by entering into a symbiosis with its mother so that it gets what it needs and feels that it is welcome, it can truly arrive in the world and feel safe. There is the basic trust that a child will receive what it needs and from within this secure base, it can strive for independence because it is confident it will be supported by the parent in doing so. The parent does not need the child to fulfil an unmet need in him or herself and can support it and encourage it to follow its own path. This lays down a basis of trust and security in the child what forms a solid foundation from which it can take on life and relationships with confidence.



Entangled in symbiosis

Children who, for whatever reason, cannot enter into a safe symbiosis with their parents (primarily their mothers) have no choice but to adapt themselves completely because they are totally dependent on their parents for their survival.

If a healthy symbiosis is not established or when there is a threat of losing an attachment figure a child experiences a chain of reactions including: fear(of death) and panic, protest and anger, sadness and despair and eventually it will withdraw inwardly², become hardened and a disconnection (inner-division) between body and soul arises.

The child is forced to fall back on itself, an independence that is developmentally impossible. The child is forced to move upwards with its energy because the basis is not perceived as being safe enough to protect it from the unbearable depths of fear and helplessness.

As a survival strategy, therefore, the child learns to adapt, the result being that it becomes entangled in its parent's emotions. This is known as a symbiotic entanglement. The child does not learn to distinguish between what is its and what belongs to the other person, where the boundary is between inner and outer because it experiences what the other person is feeling so closely. When the specific needs of children are not met they become afraid to set boundaries because they are trying at all costs to achieve the merging and contact they lack. Not being able to establish healthy boundaries often becomes a recurring theme in later life.

Dependent Relationship

A child who ended up in a symbiotic entanglement will, throughout its life, unconsciously continue to look for an available 'other' who will give it the love and warmth it needs and can satisfy its unfulfilled longings. In relationships, these unmet needs are, more often than not, projected onto the partner thus creating a (symbiotic) dependent relationship with all the consequences thereof. A person who always took care of a traumatized child in their mother or father will then go on to take care of the traumatized child in their partner. In this way they try to get what the traumatized child themselves so desperately needed and never received. This is doomed to fail because a partner can never make up for what you did not get from your parent as a child. If this is attempted (and it is almost always done unconsciously), it will once again result in distance, a rejection or abandonment, which in turn completes the circle and the painful conviction is reaffirmed; "You see, people always let me down".



High Sensitivity

Everyone who did not experience safety and warmth in a normal, healthy symbiotic relationship develops high sensitivity³ (HSP). In looking everywhere for the other person who is not available, you open yourself up so much that you take in too much of what is not yours. What then remains of your self? These people learn (from a survival point of view) to go to extremes in empathizing with others. Often, from a young age, they carry responsibilities that are not age appropriate. They have a tendency to care for other people (in the hope that they will be looked after in return) and bear their suffering (because they are subconsciously afraid that the other person cannot bear it on their own). They learn to hide their own vulnerability and sensitivity very deeply because it is too threatening to feel how alone they are with it. These people learned to abandon themselves very early on. A child takes the abandonment (by others) personally. It cannot yet distinguish between its self and others and from there develops the belief that its self is not good enough or lovable enough. Thus it loses its self-respect and love for itself. This is the greatest loss of all.

The right of existence

Abandonment makes people feel unwelcome and makes them doubt their right to exist. It creates fear, which in turn inhibits appropriate responses in ordinary situations. A fear of being abandoned can lead to people being afraid to give their opinion about things they do not like in relationships. They do this out of fear of being abandoned again. It could also lead them to accepting abandonment easily; that they take the slightest criticism or mood change in their partner as a sign that they are unwanted. The emptiness that abandonment leads to is experienced anew every time it happens to the adult; loss of a loved one gives people the feeling that they are on the point of collapse. The body can reflect this collapse: muscles tension decreases, legs become weak and shoulders bent as though the spine can no longer quite keep itself upright.



People who experienced abandonment in their formative years tend to cling to security, food, loved ones or routines. People can hang onto a job because they are afraid of never finding a new one. They may be afraid to leave a relationship out of fear that they will then be alone forever. All their energy goes into the clinging to something that provides false security.⁴

People who have been abandoned have learned to abandon themselves and find it difficult to get in touch with their own feelings; instead they have learned to reason out and rationalize their emotions and in that way to separate themselves from their deepest feelings. They are much better attuned to needs of others than that they are aware of their own emotional or physical needs.

An important quality such people have is the gift of a tremendous capacity for empathy. They are often people who have developed their creativity and spirituality and who want be of meaning to others or who want to work towards a better world.

A way out of the dynamic

Initially, stepping out of the dynamic of separation anxiety and fear of attachment requires the courage to face yourself and to examine your own wound with compassion. Ask yourself where you have known desolation in your own life and what was the source thereof. Once you can recognize that it is in you, the possibility to change it arises.

Healing this wound is not something you do in a minute. In some cases it may be a lifelong task, especially if the wound occurred so early in life that a basis had not yet been laid. At the start of your life, you are chiefly busy with survival and it is only later that you find yourself coming up against hindering patterns or discover separation anxiety or fear of attachment in relationships and seek help in overcoming them.



Learning to love yourself

In my practice, I regularly see people with various complaints, which, when we look deeper, appear to be the result of this dynamic operating. People not being aware of this initially, often points to an underlying inherited trauma. A process then begins that reveals the thread running through their lives and makes them aware of the underlying cause of the (symptomatic) complaints.

With psychotherapy I help free clients from the (traumatic) emotions they acquired from someone else. Clients learn to distinguish between what is theirs and what belongs to another person. In order for people to step out of the dynamic that is keeping them dependent on someone else, it is essential that their autonomy be strengthened. To this end, it is important they return to their own body, become aware of their own emotions and learn to feel secure with them so that they learn anew to trust who they are in essence.

Integrating isolated parts

Along this path, people arrive at their own pain, fear or anger or a deep sense of loss at what they lacked, at their own loneliness. The parts of themselves that were spilt off, the authentic feelings of their inner child all need to be re-integrated. By healing the grief and expressing the anger you regain access to your source of love, spontaneity, openness, playfulness, enjoyment etc. Your vulnerability then becomes a source of strength that helps you to set healthy boundaries and make your own choices.

Until this happens the inner child in the adult keeps unconsciously searching for someone on the outside to still fulfil these unmet needs. Sooner or later this illusion always bring new disappointments. In order to break the pattern, it is vital you learn to see the reality that no single partner can replace the love you did not get from your own parents.



Photo: Inner Child by Jose Prins

You can, however, learn to experience the love that was lost to you for so long, to feel again, to learn to appreciate yourself and to gain (more) confidence in yourself. You then learn that you your SELF are now the adult who can provide for the needs of your own inner child.

You will then not be dependent on others for healing, but instead can take responsibility for your own happiness. The more you can love yourself unconditionally, the more someone else will be able to truly love you.

Each their own roots

A partner relationship requires both partners to learn to take root in their own ground.

Where their roots were first interwoven in their mutual dependence, they now find more room to spread their roots in their own ground. The partners each feel stronger in themselves.

The person with the separation anxiety will be more capable of giving their partner room because he or she enters the relationship with more confidence and a stronger autonomy. The feeling of needing the other person that previously resulted in the (hidden) claim becomes less the more they are able to take care of their own unfulfilled needs.

The partner with a fear of attachment will be able to connect more easily because they have learned to take care of their own boundaries whenever they risk losing themselves in the other person.

If partners feel confident that they can each carry their own grief and take care of their own loneliness, then they no longer need to hand that task to their partner. The relationship can then change from one of 'needing each other' to one of 'being there for each other'. This is a vital difference. Being together has an added value because both partners enter the relationship from a position of increased inner wholeness, which allows them to *be* with another person.



Hannah Cuppen

The path of humankind

Life knows many roads, but of all
these roads
There is only one you need to travel,
That, and only that one, is yours.
And whether you want to or not, you
have to travel it.
The choice therefore is not the road
because it chooses you.
The choice is how you journey on
that road.
Unwillingly around the pot-holes and
rocks,
With resistance because the sun
Can barely reach a road as it passes
through ravines.
Or with the will, at the end of that
road,
To be gentler, and wiser than at the
beginning.
The road chose you. Will you also
choose your road?

Hans Stolp, to Dag Hammarskjöld



Symptoms:

- perfectionism
- setting high standards
- immediate feeling of guilt when choosing for oneself
- strong sense of responsibility
- impulse to control
- lack of self-confidence
- low self-esteem
- self-effacing
- weak boundaries
- self-rejection, chastise yourself
- existential rage (often suppressed)
- loneliness and inner emptiness
- seek confirmation from others
- afraid of rejection/being let down
- fear of life/death
- withdrawn
- being a spectator instead of a participant
- adapt strongly to others
- extreme loyalty to others
- wanting to care for others
- obsessively continue to act so as to not have to feel
- ask yourself; do I have the right to exist?
- quickly adjust your opinion to that of others
- difficulty taking care of yourself

¹ Anodea Judith: *The Sevenfold Journey: Reclaiming Mind, Body and Spirit Through the Chakras*

² Seminar Prof. Dr. Franz Ruppert; *Symbiosis and Autonomy.* (J. Bowlby)

³ Seminar Prof. Dr. Franz Ruppert; *Symbiosis and Autonomy.*

⁴ Anodea Judith: *The Sevenfold Journey: Reclaiming Mind, Body and Spirit Through the Chakras*