



Abandonment and intimacy

A TENSION FILLED DYNAMIC

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**They will certainly be familiar to you:
People who fall in love quite often but
find their love is usually unrequited.
People that do not fall in love very
easily, but when they do it's for the
wrong person, for someone who's
unavailable, already in a relationship
or incapable of emotional intimacy for
some other reason.**

People who are looking for a partner, but who are unable to enter into a long-term, close and reciprocal relationship. People who are in a relationship but are lacking true intimacy or closeness, often behaving like a brother and sister. Until people understand how this dynamic plays out, they run the risk of falling into the same trap again and again and will continue to attract relationships that revolve around pursuing and then withdrawing from love.





THE DYNAMIC BETWEEN FEAR OF ABANDONMENT AND FEAR OF COMMITMENT

Fear of abandonment and fear of commitment are two sides of the same coin. There is a strong dynamic (force field) at work between the two 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 fear of abandonment will be attracted to a partner with fear of commitment 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 commitment, people with fear of abandonment 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 WITHIN YOU

In a particular relationship you may react from the position of fear of abandonment whilst in another you may do so from the position of fear of commitment. Both are sides of the same dynamic, which, when you have it, means you will attract a partner who also recognizes this dynamic in him or herself. You are never both on the same side at the same time however; the opposite poles attract one another like a magnet. If you are on the side of fear of abandonment you will

have the tendency to be extremely focused 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 to hold on to 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 commitment will, when they feel the claim, increase the distance even more, become more aloof and 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 fear of abandonment actually lets go, the dynamic can change and the partner with fear of commitment feels that he/she needs to fight to maintain the relationship. Suddenly 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 commitment now sits on the side of the fear of abandonment 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 in order 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



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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 fear of abandonment and fear of commitment is a deep wound that cannot be seen on the surface, one that 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 fear of abandonment by providing consistent love and security – more than would be needed to their own children.

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. For example, a parent who suffered a war trauma, or parents who have lost a child. Those parents may fear losing their new child and in doing so 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 as well 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, feels that it is welcome and that it can truly arrive in the world and feel safe. There is the basic trust that a child will receive what it needs. From this secure foundation, 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 and encourage it to follow its own path. This lays down a basis of trust and security in the child and 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. Eventually it will withdraw, become hardened and a disconnection between body and soul arises. The child is forced to fall back on itself, an independence that is developmentally impossible. The child will disconnect from its feelings in the body because the foundation is not perceived as being safe enough to protect it from the unbearable depths of fear and helplessness. The child now distrusts what it feels in the body and will seek safety and control in the mind. In the mind it feels safe, because it does not have to feel anymore and thus has the illusion of control.

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 own emotions and the emotions belonging to the other person. The child cannot recognize the distinction because it experiences what the other person is feeling so deeply. 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 connection they lack. Not being able to establish healthy boundaries often becomes a recurring theme later in 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 often projected onto the partner, thus creating a (symbiotic) dependent relationship with all the consequences thereof.

A person who always took care of the traumatized child in their mother or father will go on to take care of the traumatized child in their partner. In this way, they try to get what the traumatized child in 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 parents as a child. If this is attempted (and it is almost always done unconsciously), it will once again result in distance, rejection or abandonment. This completes the circle and reaffirms the painful conviction: "You see, people always let me down".





HIGH SENSITIVITY

People who did not experience safety and warmth in a normal, healthy symbiotic relationship develop high sensitivity (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 own self? Highly sensitive 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 tend 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 deep down, because it is too threatening to feel how alone they are in it. These people learned to abandon themselves very early on. A child takes the abandonment (by others) personally. It cannot yet distinguish between its own self and others and from there develops the belief that its own self is not lovable or good enough. Thus, it loses its self-respect and love for itself. This is the greatest loss of all.

THE RIGHT TO EXIST

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.

The fear of abandonment can lead people to feel afraid of giving their opinion about things they do not like in relationships. They do this to prevent being abandoned again. It could also lead them to accept 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 keep itself upright.

People who experienced abandonment in their formative years tend to cling to security, food, loved ones or routines. People can hang on to 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.

People who have been abandoned have learned to abandon themselves and find it difficult to contact their own feelings. Instead, they have learned to analyze and rationalize their emotions. To separate themselves from their deepest feelings. They are much better



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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, who want to help other people and want to contribute to a better world.

LEARNING TO LOVE YOURSELF

In my practice, I regularly see people with various complaints. When we look deeper, it becomes clear that this dynamic is operating in their lives. When people are not aware of this dynamic initially, it often points to an underlying trauma inherited from their parents. The process that starts begins to reveal recurring themes and makes them aware of the underlying cause of the (symptomatic) complaints.

In my trainings, I help clients to free themselves 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 it is vital to strengthen their sense of autonomy. This is done through returning to their own body, becoming aware of their own emotions and learning to feel secure with them in order to learn anew to trust who they are in essence.



A WAY OUT OF THE DYNAMIC

Initially, stepping out of the dynamic of fear of abandonment and fear of commitment requires the courage to face yourself and to examine your own wound with compassion. Ask yourself where you experience desolation in your own life and explore what might be the source of it. Once you can recognize that it stems from inside of you, the possibility to change the dynamic arises.

Healing this wound is not something you do overnight. In some cases, it may be a lifelong journey, especially if the wound occurred so early in life when a secure foundation of self-love had not yet been established. At the start of your life, you are mainly occupied with surviving and it is only later that you find yourself coming up against limiting patterns or problems in relationships and seek help in overcoming them.

INTEGRATING ISOLATED PARTS

When you start on the path of healing, people first arrive at their own pain, fear, anger or a deep sense of loss at what they lacked, or 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 and enjoyment. Your vulnerability then becomes a source of strength that helps you to set healthy boundaries and to make your own choices.

Until this happens the inner child in the adult keeps unconsciously searching for someone on the outside to fulfil these unmet needs. Sooner or later this illusion brings 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.

You can, however, learn to experience the self-love that was lost to you for so long,

to feel again, to learn to appreciate yourself and to develop (more) self-confidence. You then learn that you *yourself* are now the adult who can provide for the needs of your own inner child.

You will no longer 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 both feel stronger in themselves.

The person with the fear of abandonment 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 commitment 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 now has an added value because both partners enter the relationship from a position of increased inner wholeness from which they can relate.

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

