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FROM ABANDONMENT TO SELF ACCEPTANCE

Katie Andrews-Guzman LMHC and Marcio Guzman LMHC

WHAT IS ABANDONMENT?

- **Abandonment**: an act or instance of leaving a person or thing permanently and completely. The state of being left feeling helpless and without protection.
- **Emotional neglect → abandonment**: emotional needs are not met. Feeling rejected (a significant component of abandonment) can leave an emotional imprint in the brain's warning system.
 - When we feel abandoned we feel unlovable, undesired and unimportant.
- **Abandonment trauma**: the ongoing experience of abandonment (and coping). The ongoing re-experiencing of the constellation of emotions surrounding the experience of abandonment, which stem from experiences that made us feel unsafe, insecure and alone in childhood.

“IF YOU FEEL SAFE AND LOVED, YOUR BRAIN BECOMES SPECIALIZED IN EXPLORATION, PLAY, AND COOPERATION; IF YOU ARE FRIGHTENED AND UNWANTED, IT SPECIALIZES IN MANAGING FEELINGS OF FEAR AND ABANDONMENT.” – BESSEL A. VAN DER KOLK

TYPES OF ABANDONMENT

› Literal Abandonment

- › A parent or primary care-giver dying or otherwise leaving.
- › Growing up in the foster system.
- › Socially: racism and other social realities that abandon basic human rights/needs.

› Emotional Abandonment

- › “ “Since the earliest period of our life was preverbal, everything depended on emotional interaction. Without someone to reflect our emotions, we had no way of knowing who we were.” - John Bradshaw
 - › Can be difficult to accept or talk about. But we need to have perspective and be able to separate intention from impact.
 - › Growing up with neglectful parents (often well intentioned people who themselves did not receive or learn emotional attunement - parents can be doing their very best to provide and it can fall short of what the child needs due to their temperament, life experiences, etc.)
 - › Growing up with absent parents (again, the reason for the absence is not as relevant as exploring how the reality of how their absence impacts one emotionally)
 - › Parents divorce
 - › Feeling rejected by someone you love
 - › The loss of someone you love
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EXPERIENCES THAT CAUSE FEELINGS OF ABANDONMENT

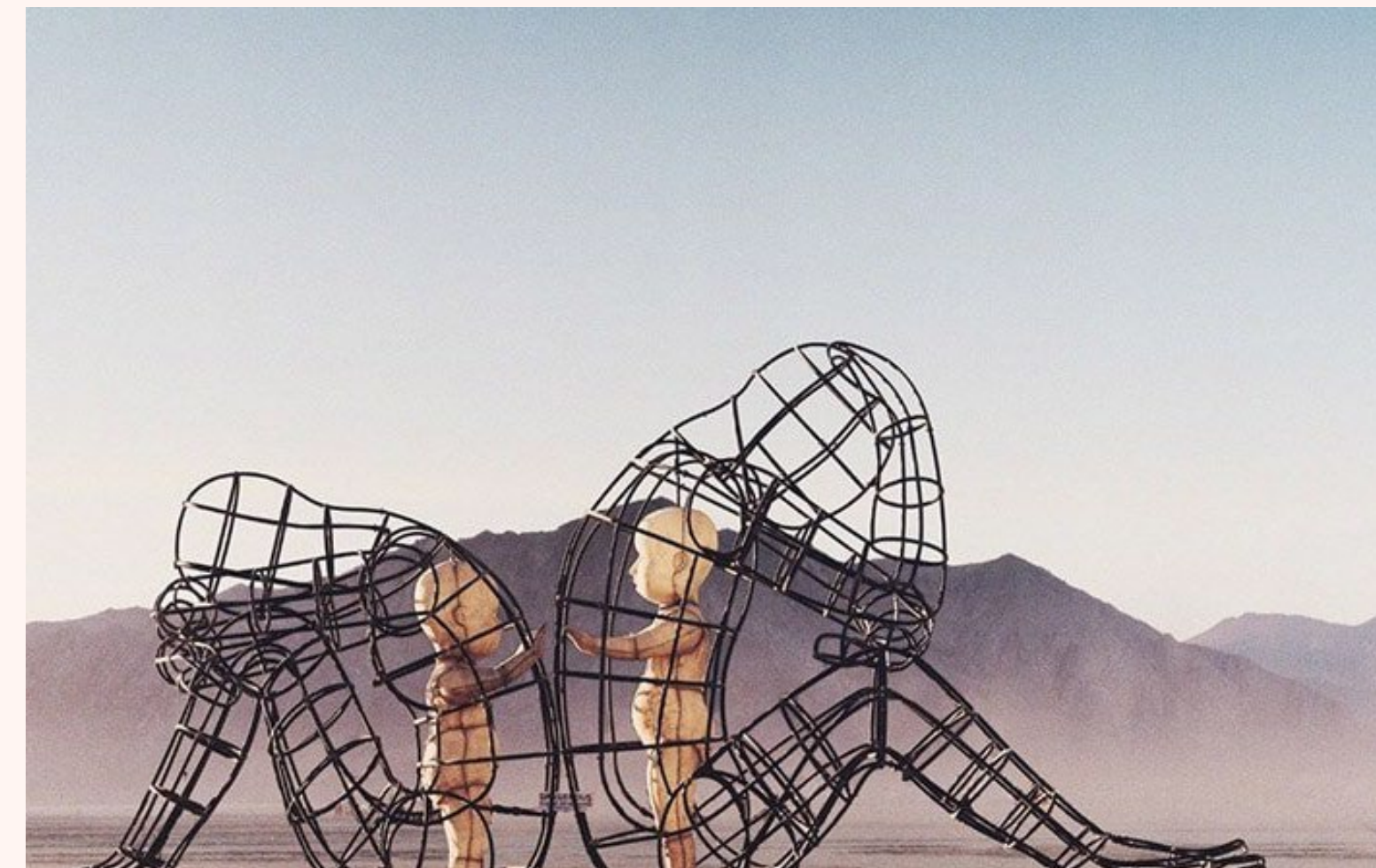
- An emotionally unavailable caregiver
 - Childhood neglect due to substance abuse disorder
 - Mental illness or physical illness or disability in a caregiver.
 - Parentification of a child (treating child like a peer or excessive responsibility beyond age)
 - Parent or caregiver dismissing your needs and boundaries
 - Loss of a caregiver
 - Divorce, conflict, and familial instability
 - Your spouse or most essential relationship dismissing your boundaries and needs
 - Pressure to achieve
 - Exposure to criticism or ridicule
 - The internalization of abandonment - violating your own boundaries perpetuates abandonment feelings
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COMMON EFFECTS/SIGNS OF ABANDONMENT ISSUES IN ADULTS

- **Difficulty maintaining intimate relationships due to a fear of abandonment**
 - **People-pleasing**
 - **Jealousy towards others your friend or partner may be close to**
 - **Trouble trusting intentions**
 - **Feeling insecure about relationships**
 - **Controlling tendencies**
 - **Settling in unsatisfactory, codependent relationships**
 - **Sabotaging relationships**
 - **Seeking constant reassurance**
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COMMON EFFECTS/SIGNS OF ABANDONMENT ISSUES IN ADULTS

- Difficulty forming/maintaining intimate, healthy relationships
- Patterns of choosing partners who are abusive, controlling, needy, emotionally unstable, emotionally unavailable
- You recognize a “pursue-withdraw” dynamic in your relationships
- Patterns of unhealthy interpersonal communication with partners and friends
- Losing yourself in relationships
- Inability to trust others
- Pushing others away to avoid rejection



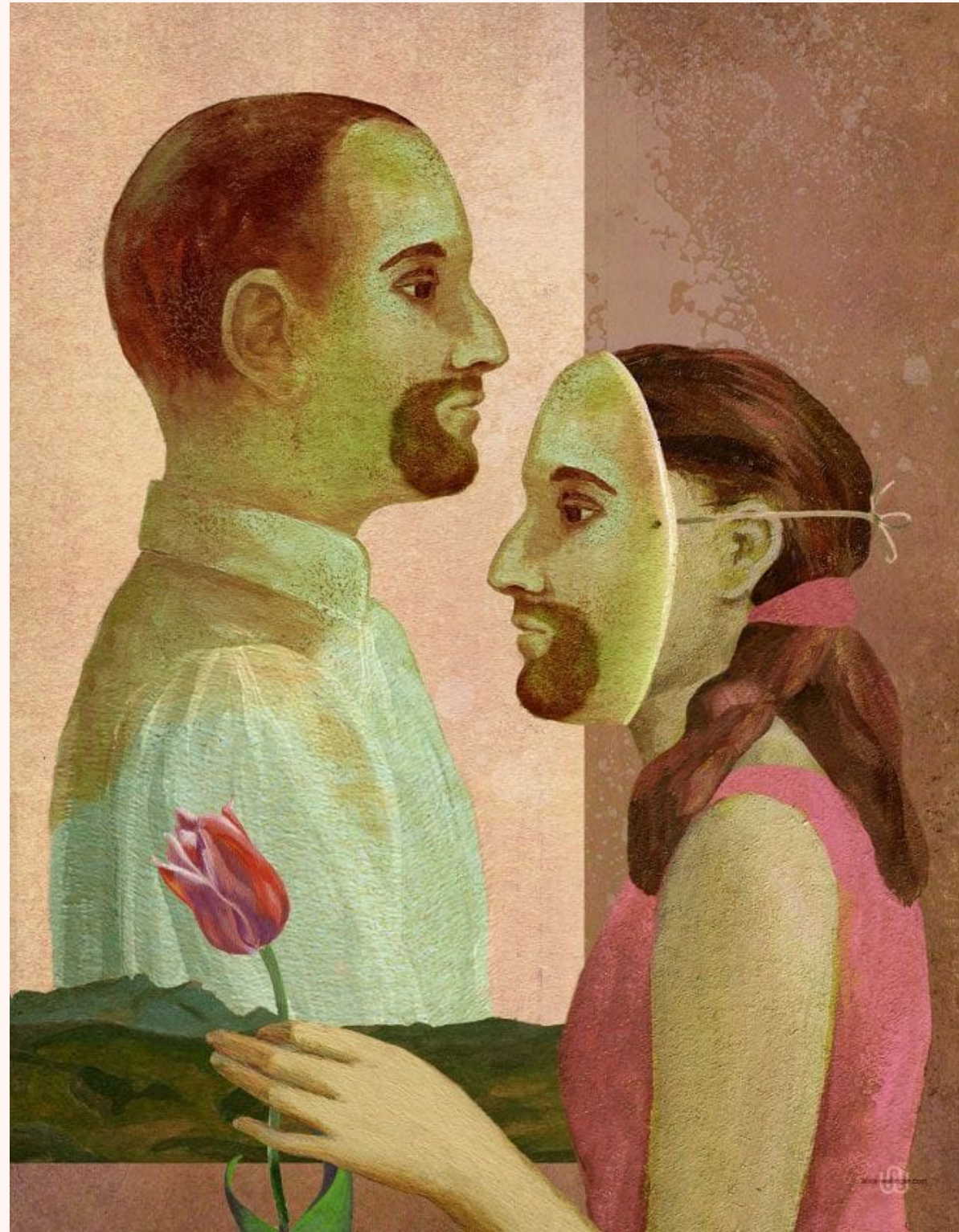
COMMON EFFECTS/SIGNS OF ABANDONMENT ISSUES IN ADULTS

- **Developing codependency**
 - **Hypersensitivity to criticism**
 - **Tendency to dissociate**
 - **Social anxiety**
 - **Addictions, eating disorders, and self harm**
 - **Anxiety disorders**
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NOVELS DESCRIBE IT WELL...

- “She was all I had. If you’ve not known the dragon we were chasing, words may not help. People talk of getting high, this blast you get. Not so much what you feel as what you don’t. The sadness and dread in your gut. All the people who have judged you useless, the pain of an exploded leg. **This tether that is meant to attach you to something all your life...be it home, or parents, or safety...has been flailing around unfastened all this time. Tearing at your brain’s roots, whipping around so hard it might take out an eye...all it wants...that tether...is to go still not he floor, and you’re at rest.** You start out trying to get back there, and pretty soon you’re just trying to get out of bed. It becomes your job to stave off the dope sickness for another day. And then it becomes your God. Nobody ever wanted to join that church.” - Barbara Kingsolver, “Demon Copperhead”
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...PAINTINGS TOO



Self-Abandonment

[Alice Wellinger](#)



Katie Martin / The Atlantic

COMMON EXPERIENCES THAT TRIGGER ABANDONMENT ISSUES IN ADULTS

- Separation
- Cheating
- Rejection
- Criticism
- Betrayal
- Interpersonal conflict
- Precious love relationships (the fear of losing what we love!)
- ...Marriage?



WHAT HAPPENS TO US WHEN WE FEEL ABANDONED?

- Sometimes, we walk around our lives without conscious awareness that we were or have a fear of abandonment.
 - We notice we keep repeating the same mistakes and relationship patterns.
 - It dawns on us that we're disconnected. Things that seem to move others don't seem to be moving us. We may feel depressed.
 - We've been numbing for so long that we forget what we're numbing from.
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WHAT HAPPENS TO US WHEN WE FEEL ABANDONED?

- We try to make sense of it by telling ourselves stories about why it happened
 - In these stories we tend to conclude that there is something about us that is unlovable
 - *We do this because we hope that if we “figure it out” we can “fix” ourselves so it does not happen again*
 - *Unfortunately (and fortunately) - the only way out is through. But that is scary and abandonment teaches us to distrust ourselves, so...*
 - We feel ashamed easily
 - Reject ourselves and our needs
 - Subjugate to the needs of others we want to stay attached to
 - We stay vigilant of signs that we may be abandoned so we're not surprised/shocked by it. This can look like anxious attachment or avoidant attachment.
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WHAT HAPPENS TO US WHEN WE FEEL ABANDONED?

- We develop an insecure attachment style:
 - We polarize around bonding.
 - On the one hand, we dissociate or distract ourselves from our need for others. We intellectualize and debate our need for others instead of feeling. We distance and numb. We are pseudo-independent and avoidantly attached.
 - In relationships, we find ourselves coping with our concerns with distancing
 - On the opposing pole, we become overwhelmed by our need for others - we feel intense loss, loneliness, shame, desperation, and despair. We feel needy and are anxiously attached.
 - In relationships, we find ourselves coping with our concerns with pursuing
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HOW DO I KNOW IF ABANDONMENT IS RELEVANT TO ME?

- You can't know until you know.
 - If you are tending to strong emotions, it's likely they are related to a relational events. This is because humans are bonding mammals.
 - If your personal felt sense of this emotion doesn't result in the label "abandonment," that doesn't mean you won't ultimately tend to important emotions that revolve around loss, shame, or feeling unseen and rejected during relational events. Most of our strong emotions come back to these types of experiences.
 - The label is helpful for regulation
 - "name it to tame it" - Mark Brackett "Permission to Feel"
 - But don't get too hung up on the label.
 - See what you find when you use the downward arrow technique.
 - Label your concern, and then follow up with:
 - *"If that were true, then what?" - Anyone want to try? :)*
 - Continue to ask yourself this same question to each of your replies until you get a response from yourself that feels poignant, true, and like it's the core of what is driving your concern.
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ABANDONMENT IN ACA THE LAUNDRY LIST (TONY, A 1978)

- 1) We became isolated and afraid of people and authority figures.
 - 2) **We became approval seekers and lost our identity in the process.**
 - 3) **We are frightened by angry people and any personal criticism.**
 - 4) **We either become alcoholics, marry them or both, or find another compulsive personality such as a workaholic to fulfill our sick abandonment needs.**
 - 5) We live life from the viewpoint of victims and are attracted by that weakness in our love and friendship relationships.
 - 6) **We have an overdeveloped sense of responsibility, and it is easier for us to be concerned with others rather than ourselves; this enables us not to look too closely at our own faults, etc.**
 - 7) **We get guilt feelings when we stand up for ourselves instead of giving in to others.**
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ABANDONMENT IN ACA THE LAUNDRY LIST

8) We became addicted to excitement.

9) We confuse love and pity and tend to “love” people we can “pity” and “rescue.”

10) We have “stuffed” our feelings from our traumatic childhoods and have lost the ability to feel or express our feelings because it hurts so much (Denial).

11) We judge ourselves harshly and have a very low sense of self-esteem.

12) We are dependent personalities who are terrified of abandonment and will do anything to hold on to a relationship in order not to experience painful abandonment feelings, which we received from living with sick people who were never there emotionally for us.

13) Alcoholism is a family disease; we became para-alcoholics and took on the characteristics of that disease even though we did not pick up the drink

14) Para-alcoholics are reactors rather than actors.

HOW TO HEAL ABANDONMENT IN ACA HOW TO WASH YOUR LAUNDRY

- **Become your own loving parent—>BUT HOW???**
 - **Must revise the attributions made that led to the conclusion of“...it must be my fault that I was abandoned, neglected, abused, etc.”**
 - **The new, more accurate, narrative is then shared with the younger parts of you that endured the abandonment in a way that they understand.**
 - **I.E. how would a loving parent help their child understand why they were hurt, rejected, left behind?**
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RELATING TO AN INNER CHILD

- We sit with them in compassion and empathy - we see them and we normalize, contextualize, and relate to their feelings. We access our mature nervous system and use it to regulate their less mature nervous system. We are the safe container. The holding space.
 - This can be challenging and is part of the reason why psychotherapy, couples counseling, or community (like ACA) can be so supportive and healing.
 - We witness our past experiences form a place of self compassion
 - We tell ourselves what we needed to hear back then.
 - We give ourselves what we never got or got enough of. We envision bringing them to a safe place and giving them what they need.
 - Healing white light.
 - We help them grieve without rushing.
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ACA SAYS

“THE HEALING BEGINS WHEN WE RISK MOVING OUT OF ISOLATION. FEELINGS AND BURIED MEMORIES WILL RETURN. BY GRADUALLY RELEASING THE BURDEN OF UNEXPRESSED GRIEF, WE SLOWLY MOVE OUT OF THE PAST. WE LEARN TO REPARENT OURSELVES WITH GENTLENESS, HUMOR, LOVE, AND RESPECT.”

1ST ACA PROMISE

- **“We will learn to love and accept ourselves”**
- **What happens when we accepts ourselves? —>we change the way we see ourselves and we feel worthy of self compassion**
 - **This leads to a shift in paradigm**
 - **The shift in paradigm forces us out of comfort zone**
 - **Growth and healing can only happen outside our comfort zone**

SO...HOW DO WE HEAL?

When we talk about healing from abandonment, we are talking about trauma/emotional healing and relational healing.

Not either/or...both/and

We have to change both our view of self and view of other. This can't just happen cognitively, it needs to occur emotionally/in an embodied way in which our nervous system is engaged (aka limbic revision)

SO...HOW DO WE HEAL?

Eventually, a healed abandonment wound will feel like belonging, security, freedom, confidence in our ability to connect and have boundaries, all of which come down to... self-acceptance!

HOW TO TAP INTO SELF-ACCEPTANCE?

- **“We have to belong to ourselves as much as we need to belong to others. Any belonging that asks us to betray ourselves is not true belonging.” - Brene Brown**
 - **Self-abandonment is part of the journey from abandonment to self-acceptance. We need to learn the ways that we abandon ourselves in order to work on our internalized experience of abandonment.**
 - **Ask yourself about your boundaries. We betray ourselves and perpetuate abandonment wounds when we do not pay attention to our likes/dislikes and wants/needs and subsequently do not set boundaries.**
 - **Ask yourself: When I think about what I want and need in life, do I know what those things are? Do I know the signal my body sends me when I want to say yes and no? Can I show up for myself and say yes and no?**
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HOW TO TAP INTO SELF-ACCEPTANCE?

Understand abandonment & develop a self-compassion practice

- “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” - Marcel Proust
 - Learn about abandonment in general and how it is relevant to your story specifically.
 - Know the story of it’s origin as well as the perpetuating factors that deepened your abandonment wound.
 - Learn about it’s attendant biological and emotional experiences. Learn what they feel like in your body.
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HOW TO TAP INTO SELF-ACCEPTANCE?

Understand abandonment & develop a self-compassion practice

- Use this information to catch yourself when you use self-talk (internally and conversationally) like “what is wrong with me.”
 - Be audacious enough to doubt that the inner critic’s conclusion about you is accurate.
 - Maybe it doesn’t ultimately need you to believe it, maybe it needs you to understand why it is attacking you? What it is concerned could happen if it took the risk of not criticizing you?
 - Consider: the words it uses are it’s coping strategy - not the truth of you.
 - It’s message is “real but not true” (Tara Brach). It is real that you have felt his way, you believe this about yourself. But what if it’s not true? Truly consider that possibility.
 - Begin to see things for what they are - the harsh view of you will not be the truth. This is where we need to differentiate guilt and shame.
 - Guilt - the ability to judge and correct our behavior - is vital and leads to positive growth.
 - Shame - writing ourselves off and using abusive language - does not lead to improvements in self. It is associated with future behaviors that harm ourselves and others.
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HOW TO TAP INTO SELF-ACCEPTANCE?

Understand abandonment & develop a self-compassion practice

- Be willing to shift to a new practice.
 - When you are triggered, know you are triggered and take what you are going through as information that deserves curiosity and kindness: “I feel this lurch in my stomach and this overwhelming urge to _____(end this relationship, call this person 10x, sabotage things, share more and more and more about myself...)_____... I am aware that the fear of abandonment is moving through me right now, that makes sense, I get it.”
 - Resource: Kristin Neff’s Self-Compassion Practices
 - Offer yourself compassion instead of being harsh with yourself by saying something like, “hey, this is so hard...of course you want to cope in those ways, let’s pause here and notice your feelings and feel them for a moment...(pause)...and now...lets see...would it be helpful for us to mentally make sense of these feelings, to ask ourselves what we feel like we need right now? To journal? To do something kind for ourselves? To do something kind for another?”
 - If you don’t understand why you feel the way you do, be willing to be curious. Learn! Talk to someone.
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WAYS TO HEAL

Healing from the inside out (Internal Family Systems Therapy and ACA inner child work)

- Via inner focusing, encounter the parts of yourself that experienced abandonment, and feel compassion for those parts of you.
 - Do this by unblending (separating from) the parts of you that may intervene by trying too hard to heal/fix your pain or by criticizing your feelings of abandonment. Healing comes when we separate from both the agenda of rushing to fix and/or shaming and exiling.
 - Healing happens when we witness, acknowledge, and help our inner parts organize, and unburden themselves of the pain from a complex experience like abandonment (the scenario, the emotions, the physical feelings, all the details).
 - This is re-parenting.
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HEALING ABANDONMENT IN COUPLES THERAPY

- Emotionally Focused Couples therapy is an effective way to heal abandonment wounding.
 - In EFT, we see relational conflict as being the result of two bonding mammals doing their best to avoid emotional pain/disconnection. While this is understandable, couples do so in ways that are reactive, which result in a co-created cycle of disconnection and unmet needs.
 - What causes the cycle and what perpetuates the cycle are the ongoing attempts to get needs met via insecure attachment systems (anxious and avoidant), which produce self-protective “secondary emotion” and its attendant behavior in relationships (anxious - pursue/demand and avoid - withdraw/distance)
 - In EFT, we track the cycle of secondary emotion and behavior, and deepen emotion.
 - The way we share emotion is associated with our security of attachment. In EFT, we move towards ever-more availability, responsiveness, and engagement in partners. So the answer to partner’s ongoing question: “are you there for me?...can I be both close to you and independently me?” moves closer and closer to “yes.”
 - In this work, partners come to understand their partner’s behavior as being a function of their attachment -based fears and unmet needs. They have the opportunity to re-frame their view of the problem from “all of the things couples argue about” to this negative cycle of behavioral reactivity, overwhelming emotion - often rooted in ABANDONMENT and fears of loss of self/rejection, and unmet needs. The cycle takes on a life of its own and is the problem.
 - Partners, in the process of identifying their cycle and sharing the experiences that arise for them in their relationship, bear witness to one another’s inner worlds - especially to their view of self (often negative - the one who will be abandoned and cannot depend on X, Y, Z...) and view of other (unsafe, unreliable, abandoning). They can witness the pain of abandonment and rejection and the fears of embracing love with all of its vulnerabilities. They can understand and empathize with the feelings of fear, helplessness, the vulnerability of joy and loving playfulness, and other forms of emotional vulnerability and pain that arise in this important attachment bond.
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ABANDONMENT & EMOTIONAL HEALING

- › “Poetry transpires at the juncture between feeling and understanding - and so does the bulk of emotional life...” - Lewis, Amini & Lannon, “A General Theory of Love”
- › Grit.
- › Be creative - open yourself up to all the resources around you that invite you to be who you are.

- › Being in Nature
- › Art
- › Writing
- › Reading
- › Moving your body
- › Singing
- › playing

Love Sorrow, By Mary Oliver

Love sorrow. She is yours now, and you must take care of what has been given. Brush her hair, help her into her little coat, hold her hand, especially when crossing the street. For, think, what if you should lose her? Then you would be sorrow yourself; her drawn face, her sleeplessness would be yours. Take care, touch her forehead that she feel herself not so utterly alone. And smile, that she does not altogether forget the world before the lesson. Have patience in abundance. And do not ever lie or ever leave her even for a moment by herself, which is to say, possibly, again, abandoned. She is strange, mute, difficult, sometimes unmanageable but, remember, she is a child. And amazing things can happen. And you may see, as the two of you go walking together in the morning light, how little by little she relaxes; she looks about her; she begins to grow.
Mary Oliver

Wild Geese

Mary Oliver, 1935 - 2019

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

QUESTIONS?
