

All About Abandonment

Susan Anderson author of [*The Journey from Abandonment to Healing: Turn the End of a relationship into the Beginning of a New Life*](#) answers frequently asked questions about abandonment.

WHAT IS ABANDONMENT?

Many people ask me, “What is abandonment? Is it people in search of their mothers? People left on the doorstep as children?”

I answer, Everyday there are people who feel as if life itself has left them on a doorstep or thrown them away. Abandonment is about loss of love itself, that crucial loss of connectedness. It often involves breakup, betrayal, aloneness. People struggling with abandonment issues include those going through the ending of a relationship as well as searching adoptees, recently widowed, and those suffering the woundedness of earlier disconnections. Left unresolved, abandonment wounds can express themselves unconsciously, causing the person to develop deeply entrenched patterns of self sabotage.

Abandonment represents core human fear. We have all experienced it. When a relationship ends, the feelings harken all the way back to our lost childhoods when we were helpless, and dependent. Our adult functioning temporarily collapses. We feel shattered, bewildered, condemned to loneliness. As we apply the tools of recovery, at the bottom of abandonment’s pain, we discover a wellspring of positive change.

Abandonment is a cumulative wound containing all of the losses and disconnections stemming all the way back to childhood. Abandonment is:

- A feeling
- A feeling of isolation within a relationship
- An intense feeling of devastation when a relationship ends
- An aloneness-not-by-choice
- An experience from childhood
- A baby left on the doorstep

- A woman left by her husband of twenty years for another woman
- A man being left by his finance for someone 'more successful'
- A child left by his mother
- A friend feeling deserted by a friend
- A father leaving his marriage, moving out of the house, away from his children
- A child whose pet dies
- A little girl grieving over the death of her mother
- A little boy wanting his mommy to come pick him up from nursery school
- A child about to be 'replaced' by the birth of another sibling
- A child needing his parents but they are emotionally unavailable
- A boy realizing he is gay and anticipating the reaction of his parents and friends
- A teenage boy with his heart twanging, but afraid to approach his love
- A teenage girl feeling her heart is actually broken
- A woman who has raised a family now grown, feeling empty, as if she has been deserted, as if the purpose of her life has abandoned her
- A child stricken with a serious illness or injury watching his friends play while he must remain confined to braces, wheel chair, or bed
- A woman who has lost her job and with it her professional identity, financial security, and status. Now she is left feeling worthless, not knowing how to occupy her time – - feeling abandoned by her life's mission
- A man who has been 'put out to pasture' by his company, as if obsolete
- People grieving the death of a loved one report feelings of abandonment
- The dying fear being abandoned by their loved ones as much or more as they fear pain and death
- Suicide is an excruciating form of abandonment
- Abandonment is all of this and more. Its wound is at the heart of the variety of human experiences, and is found in the uniqueness of each person's life.

HOW IS ABANDONMENT DIFFERENT FROM OTHER TYPES OF GRIEF?

The feature that distinguishes abandonment grief from all others is the damage to self esteem. We turn our rage about being rejected against ourselves. This accounts for the severe depression and self-injury involved in abandonment, and the aftermath of self defeating patterns that often result.

Abandonment overlaps with bereavement in that they both involve loss. For the abandonment survivor, the loss is just as disruptive and painful as it is for any other type of grief. Closure is incomplete because the person has not died, but has chosen not to be with you. Rejection, withdrawal-of-love, criticism, and desertion create a devastating personal injury – a narcissistic injury. ‘Being left’ cuts us all the way to the core. We lose not only our loved one, we lose our sense of self. We abandon ourselves.

As abandonment grief progresses, it burrows deep within where it can silently leech away at our self esteem. But abandonment has not been legitimized as its own special type of grief. Everybody seems to know about the initial pain caused by abandonment. It is the latter stages of its grief that have gone unrecognized. Yet it endures, generating sadness, self doubt, insecurity, self sabotage, and fear – sometimes indefinitely. Unresolved abandonment can interfere in future relationships.

Understanding this grief and the wounding process you have been through helps you assess damages from previous losses. My books on abandonment provide in-depth discussion of Abandonment Grief. The exercises help you overcome your Outer Child patterns of self sabotage and find love and peace.

UNRESOLVED ABANDONMENT

Unresolved abandonment – the source of our insecurities, addictions, compulsions, and distress.

Unresolved abandonment - the insidious virus invading body mind and soul - the culprit for the anxiety we are forever trying to self-medicate with food, alcohol, shopping, people and a host of other self defeating behaviors.

Unresolved abandonment - the roadblock to reaching our potential - the invisible wound that drains self esteem from within – the hidden trap that keeps us stuck in patterns of self-sabotage.

Unresolved abandonment – the chronic insecurity that becomes the scourge of human relationship. Unresolved abandonment – the internal barrier to fully connecting to others. Fear short-circuits our attempts to find love – we struggle to

find and keep relationships. We become abandoholics. Abandoholics are those who are attracted to the unavailable and get caught up in cycles of abandonment.

Unresolved abandonment - the elusive grief so many seek therapy for and can't seem to overcome – an undifferentiated emptiness often mis-diagnosed as depression and inappropriately medicated. Sometimes its stress and agitation are persistent enough to create chemical imbalances that do, in fact, respond to drug therapy.

Unresolved abandonment - simplistic methods like 'positive thinking' or just going to therapy do not deter it. Programs like Co-dependency, Alanon, and Adult Child have attempted to assuage the erosion of energy and self worth caused by unresolved abandonment. But for all of their other positive benefits, like self responsibility and 'affirmations', they have not been able to repair the system of drainage that lies buried within.

Likewise, Alcoholics Anonymous, Alanon, and Over-eaters Anonymous, etc. have been extremely effective in dealing with the addictive and co-addictive problems secondary to abandonment, but are unable to go beyond the symptoms and treat the underlying abandonment wound itself.

Self-help books have tended to have a placebo effect. They offer reasonable enough sounding advice, like "Find happiness from within." But these truisms are easier said than done. Many abandonees feel inadequate when they try to perform them and are not able to "Just let go" and "Move forward."

Unresolved abandonment – people continue searching for one more book, one more lecture, one more CD that will finally free them. But all of the self-medicating and soothing words in the world will not eradicate the distress, disturbance and dysfunction caused by unresolved abandonment. For that you must go beyond insight. You must take action.

Abandonment survivors need more than symptom management and feel-good relief. They need an approach that facilitates not the illusion of change, but real change.

This can only happen when you realize that the magic bullet is not in any book or program. It is within you. It is your ability to integrate awareness with action — your ability to behaviorally reverse self abandonment.

WHAT IS AN ABANDONMENT SURVIVOR?

Abandonment survivors are those who have experienced the anguish of love-loss and have the courage to go on believing in life and in their own capacity for love. This is a select group of survivors, but membership is not restricted to those who have achieved success in their relationships. On the contrary, its members are those who continue to struggle to remove obstacles in the way of finding love. There are many crushing feelings rising out of the unresolved abandonment wound that make it difficult for many to get to a place of trust and security within a relationship. The membership also includes those who become securely and happily coupled. But for all abandonment survivors, the impact of abandonments past or present, is evidenced by the fragments of unlived life, unreached potential, and unfulfilled dreams still waiting to be redeemed through abandonment recovery.

WHY DO WE CARRY A TORCH FOR SO LONG WHEN SOMEONE HAS BROKEN UP WITH US?

Someone who leaves you becomes very powerful to your emotional brain. He or she becomes powerful simply by being able to inflict so much pain by being absent!

Being left is perceived by your mammalian brain as an attack upon your personal being. It etches an indelible impression in a primitive part of the brain that acts automatically to protect you. It conditions your mammalian brain to react with fear each time you encounter the person whose absence it perceives as dangerous to your well being. If your caretaker had left you all alone as a young child, you wouldn't have survived.

Acting beneath your conscious awareness, your mammalian brain maintains a constant vigil on your abandoner. You experience this as being temporarily obsessed with the person. Your nerves are set to 'go off' if you should

unexpectedly bump into them later on or see them with a new love. This makes you think they are very powerful indeed, that they, alone, hold the key to your wellbeing!

This enduring emotional reactivity toward the person is known as 'carrying a torch.' You are confused into thinking that if the pain can last that long and feel so strong, he or she must have been very special. But this is not so. You can feel this way over anyone, even someone who had nothing special to offer. It is just your mammalian brain efficiently trying to warn you not to make the same mistake again, to caution you in its primitive way that this person is dangerous (caused pain).

WHAT IS AN ABANDONER?

Abandoners come in every possible size, shape, shade, age, social form, and disposition. It is often difficult to tell who is safe to attach to and who is not capable of being emotionally responsible – who is worthy of trust, and who is an abandoner.

What complicates the picture even more is that one person's abandoner might be another's permanent partner. Also, many abandonment victims, depending upon certain conditions, go on to become abandoners themselves. The circumstances surrounding relationships are so complex and variable, that it is neither wise nor fair to make moral judgments, point fingers, nor draw generalizations.

But there are serial abandoners – abandoners who get secondary gain from inflicting emotional pain on someone who loves them. For them, creating devastation is their way of demonstrating power. They get off on it, whether consciously or unconsciously. At any rate, being the *abandonER* rather than the *abandonEE*, preserves their self esteem.

But even abandoners who are not motivated by the need to be on top, might experience a heightened sense of self-importance as an unintentional by-product. As regretful as they may feel about having to pull away, they can't help but go on an ego trip as they witness the protests and agony of the person who still wants to be with them.

In the light of the other person's pain, abandoners will not usually admit to feelings of triumph. Instead they tend to speak about their more humble feelings, like their regret over having caused another person to be disappointed. They are usually easily distracted from regret however, as they get caught up in their new lives with greater sense of freedom, perhaps with a new lover, and with a larger ego than before.

Many abandoners, however, are able to by-pass regret by remaining oblivious to the pain they have caused. They blame the other person for the break-up – attempting to justify their actions and avoid guilt. Their agenda is to sustain their image of themselves as a decent, caring person. This denial and blame often come across as callousness and cruelty to the one they left behind. The abandonee must grapple alone with the pieces of a broken relationship, further wounded by unjustified blame.

Let it be said that many abandoners do not set out to abandon, to hurt-by-intention. Many are just human beings struggling to find the answers to life's difficult challenges along with everyone else. None-the-less, to the extent that abandoners are able to blame, remain oblivious, or stay in denial of the other person's pain, abandonment recovery reaches out to them to increase their awareness as well. The program is devoted to the growth and development of all of those who struggle to sustain relationships – abandoners and abandonees alike.