

WORKING WITH ABANDONMENT AND ENGULFMENT FEARS

By: [VitalityLink Finder](#) Monday, 13 February 2012 12:50

Modalities: [Spiritual Growth and Well-being](#)

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Abandonment and engulfment are normal fears. Both arise in all of us—though one usually predominates in intimate relationships. It is only when these fears become so intense as to affect our judgment and behavior that they become problematic for us.

Adult relating is in the capacity to commit ourselves without being immobilized by the fear of abandonment if someone pulls too far away, or by the fear of engulfment if someone gets too close. It will seem as if these fears result directly from the behavior of our adult partner, but these are phantom fears from childhood. What is hurting us is gone but still stimulates. We are reacting to the inner landscape of our own past, a landscape ravaged by archaic plunder that has never been acknowledged, restored, or forgiven.

Fears of abandonment and engulfment are cellular reflexes, and we are wise not to take our partner's display of them too personally. These fears are not rational so we cannot talk someone out of them or blame someone for them. Compassion from one partner and work to change by the other partner is the most effective combination. Actually, an adult cannot be abandoned, only left, cannot be engulfed, only crowded! Once we live in the present, things become so much more matter-of-fact and we drop the blame-filled judgments.

FEAR OF ABANDONMENT

"THE PURSUER"

Fear of being alone so that one:

Cannot easily pull back when a partner needs space.

Clings or cannot seem to get enough contact.

Is overly attentive, overly accepting overly allowing.

Willingly shares about oneself.

FEAR OF ENGULFMENT

"THE DISTANCER"

Fear of closeness so that one:

Cannot easily make a commitment when a partner needs assurance.

Distances or cannot seem to get enough space.

Takes a partner's attentions for granted or feels smothered by them.

Maintains secrets or a secret life and

Takes more care of a partner than oneself.

Feels one can never give enough.

Goes along with a partner's agenda or timing.

Has poor boundaries and tolerates abuse or unhappiness or infidelity.

Is addicted to the partner and keeps giving more.

Yearns for continual affection and assurance.

Is encouraged by exuberance.

May settle for sex as proof of love or use it to purchase feelings of security.

May give up appropriate sexual boundaries to please the other and be defenseless against predation.

Needs a partner to be a constant companion: go:

"Stay with me."

Seeks connection **and** closeness.

Feels at a loss without the presence of the partner.

may become angry at being asked questions.

Feels entitled to be taken care of without reciprocation.

Construes giving and receiving as smothering or obligating.

Insists on being in control and on making the decisions.

Maintains rigid boundaries and has no tolerance for abuse, disloyalty, or deficiency.

Seduces the other and then withholds.

Is embarrassed or angered by such displays.

Is threatened or annoyed by exuberance.

May use frequent sex as a substitute for closeness or may withhold sex to manipulate.

May use sexual distance or lack of interest as a way of maintaining independence, a defense against vulnerability.

Needs a partner to stay put while I come and

"Let me be."

Seeks connection **not** closeness.

Becomes anxious with extended togetherness.

Rationalizes, i.e., makes excuses that enable coping.

Shows fear, hides anger.

Walks on eggshells, always compromising.

Has distress in comings/goings.

Lets needs become neediness.

Looks like the one reaching out and that looks like love but may really be fear.

May be the one more likely to leave!

Intellectualizes, i.e., substitutes feelings with logic.

Shows anger, hides fear.

Acts hostilely, creates uproar, or picks fights to establish distance.

Has distress in giving/receiving.

Makes needs into expectations.

Looks like the cold one and that seems unloving but may really be fear.

May be the one who feels abandonment fears when left.

The left side may indicate the co-dependent and borderline styles, the right side the narcissist style.

STEPS FOR WORKING WITH OUR ABANDONMENT AND ENGULFMENT FEARS.

Since every fear is maintained by a belief that we are victims, choice releases its grip. Jung describes the healing power of paradox in this way: "If there is a fear of falling, the only safety consists in deliberately jumping!"

- Admit your fears to your self and to your partner.
- Allow yourself to feel your fears fully, cradling them acceptantly.
- Act as if your fears were not obstacles to closeness or safety:
 - If you fear engulfment, stay a little closer and let a hug last a little longer for one minute more than you can stand each day. If you fear abandonment, let the other go a little farther away than you can stand for a little longer time than you can stand each day. Repeat this over and over, adding more time and more space each time.
- Bust yourself on despair:
 - This is how I am/or how he is.
 - This is how I always was/or how he always was.
 - This is how all my family is/or how he is.
- Say this to your partner: "I may not shield you from the fear of abandonment or engulfment and I do not ask you to shield me. Let's accept

such fears as conditions of human existence, as givens of relating. I choose to acknowledge fear of abandonment or of engulfment and work through them. This is how I go on living effectively rather than evading my fear and thereby go on fearing. Will you join me?"

- To fear engulfment is to believe that closeness takes something away from you. Deal with this fear of losing yourself paradoxically by freely giving yourself. Make a self-disclosure, admit a vulnerability, or show a feeling. Thus you stop losing by letting go.
- To fear abandonment is to dread being left alone. This is a fear not of loss of self but of gain of self by self-confrontation. Setting time aside for yourself daily means choosing the very thing you fear. This paradoxical reversal leads gradually to your enjoying your aloneness.
- The actual fears are not of abandonment or engulfment. You are really fearing the possibility of powerlessness in the face of them. But every time you choose to work on fear, you become defense-less and resource-full. This restores trust in your own organismic capacity for self-nurturance and safety when people get too close or go too far.

You know a relationship matters to you in a healthy way when you are willing to endure and even choose the awkwardness of the small but scary steps that lead to change. Commitment in a relationship means that we are willing to admit our fears and use state of the art techniques to get past them.

To have such willingness is to be ready for intimacy and to become more endearing to others. At the same time we feel better about ourselves because we have not been stopped by our fears but have passed through them. We are proud of ourselves and grow in self-respect. This is the connection between self-esteem and successful relating.

From: How Be To An Adult in Relationships

Author: David Richo.