



Confronting Your Inner Critic

Moving From Abandonment to Awareness to Awakening

BY CATHERINE CHAN



Attorneys must constantly focus on others, including our clients, decision-makers, and authority figures. Encountering the masses

provides perpetual lessons in anthropology and psychology. This outward focus can make us quick learners, and critics, of others. We spend endless hours agonizing about others and how they affect us. But we may want to consider redirecting those hours toward self-exploration and learning how to affect ourselves.

To explore and define oneself can be an evolutionary process. This path will necessarily

include assessing and addressing our self-esteem, limiting beliefs, judgments, and negative patterns. Extending empathy to ourselves can create space for us to exercise empathy for others.

The emotional bonds that we built as children, or their lack thereof, form our ability to regulate our emotions and interact with others throughout our lives. Traumatic life events, whether in childhood or afterward, can disrupt emotional stability and introduce long-term negative consequences in all areas of our lives.

The Stoic philosopher Seneca mused, “To bear trials with a calm mind robs misfortune of its strength and burden.” One must train the

mind toward calmness. To do so requires an intimate understanding of ourselves and the nature of others.

Attachment Styles and Patterns

Knowing our attachment style and its concomitant effects on our personality and life choices is a path to choosing awareness toward growth.

A childhood gift, or curse, sets our path. “Attachment theory is a lifespan model of human development emphasizing the central role of caregivers (attachment figures) who provide a sense of safety and security. . . . Attachment can be defined as a deep and enduring emotional bond between two people in which each seeks

closeness and feels more secure when in the presence of the attachment figure.”¹

The attachment patterns forged in childhood (secure, anxious, avoidant, or disorganized) affect our behavior, personality, proclivities, and life experiences. Children with secure attachment feel safe, valued, understood, and comforted by their primary caregiver. Anxious attachment results from inconsistent or unreliable caregiving in early childhood, leading to a fear of abandonment and distrust in relationships.² Avoidant attachment results when children learn that their emotions are not responded to empathetically. Disorganized attachment is the most extreme pattern, typically displayed by children exposed to a parenting style that does not allow them to develop a safe response to their attachment needs.³

The attachment patterns that we inherit in childhood determine our attachment style as adults (secure, dismissive-avoidant, fearful-avoidant, or anxious preoccupied). “Secure attachment is characterized by trust, an adaptive response to being abandoned, and the belief that one is worthy of love.”⁴ This style offers the healthiest outcomes, but it can be interrupted and shaped by traumatic life experiences later in life. The dismissive-avoidant pattern includes a “rigid self-sufficiency” that “may stem from viewing others as untrustworthy or undependable.”⁵ Fearful-avoidant patterns include both desiring and intensely fearing emotional closeness with others, leading to inconsistent patterns of behavior and lack of healthy coping strategies during times of stress.⁶ Anxious-preoccupied patterns are marked by low self-esteem and a more positive view of others.⁷

Our attachment patterns affect all our relationships. They affect how we manage conflict, anxiety, and disappointment. Becoming a student of our own psyche can help us learn new ways to navigate our proclivities and achieve healthier outcomes.

The Five Stages of Abandonment

If our negative attachment patterns stem primarily from a lack of secure bonding in childhood, as adults we can seek to understand the impact of that lack and develop healthy

strategies to address any emotional deficiencies we have identified.

In her book *The Journey From Abandonment to Healing*, author Susan Anderson identifies “five stages that accompany the loss of love”: (1) shattering, (2) withdrawal, (3) internalizing the rejection, (4) rage, and (5) lifting.⁸ “The injury to your sense of self is what sets abandonment grief apart from all others.”⁹

These same stages can accompany the growth necessary to acknowledge our emotional deficiencies stemming from childhood or subsequent trauma. In the shattering stage, a sense of security and self-worth have been lost.¹⁰ During “withdrawal, “[y]ou are coming down from the sedation of security to face reality.”¹¹ “Internalizing [the rejection] means incorporating an emotional experience, making it a part of yourself, and letting it change your deepest beliefs.”¹² “Rage is a protest against pain. It is how we fight back, a refusal to be victimized by someone leaving us, the way we reverse the rejection.”¹³ In the lifting stage, “[y]ou’ve lifted above the turbulence of rage, disarmed the outer child defenses, and found the way out of self-defeating patterns. . . .

Abandonment has awakened the child within. You’ve now comforted that child and cared for its long-neglected needs and feelings. No longer covered under layers of defenses, these needs and feelings are the bridge to greater love.”¹⁴

Breaking the Cycle

Merely acknowledging that our childhoods may have left us susceptible to deep-seated insecurities and anxieties in life is not enough. As adults we have the choice, and I argue, the obligation, to discover ways to build our emotional resilience to positively affect our relationships with ourselves and with others. We forego growth when we condone and endure repetitive negative patterns in our relationships. When we are mindful of our shortcomings, we can communicate our needs and desires clearly. When we exercise empathy toward ourselves and others, we can build a bridge to better behavior and better outcomes. When we can release the grief of our abandonment by our primary caregivers, or in later traumatic experiences, we can regain a positive sense of self that will lift us in our lives and in our relationships. CL

NOTES

1. McLeod, “Attachment Theory in Psychology,” Simply Psychology (updated Jan. 17, 2024), <https://www.simplypsychology.org/attachment.html>. See also Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (Basic Books 1969).
2. “Attachment Styles,” Cleveland Clinic, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/articles/25170-attachment-styles>.
3. Elliott, “Attachment Theory,” Child Psychology Service, <https://thechildpsychologyservice.co.uk/theory-article/attachment-theory>.
4. *Id.*
5. Brant, “Overcoming Unhealthy Attachment Styles: Coping with Anxious-Avoidant Attachment,” Better Help Editorial Team (updated Feb. 6, 2025), <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/relations/unhealthy-attachment-styles-types-definitions-and-therapy>.
6. “Fearful Avoidant Attachment Style: Causes and Impact on Life,” Attachment Project (updated Aug. 14, 2024), <https://www.attachmentproject.com/blog/fearful-avoidant-attachment-style>.
7. “Anxious Preoccupied Attachment,” Integrative Life Center (June 11, 2021). <https://integrativelifecenter.com/mental-health-treatment/anxious-preoccupied-attachment>.
8. Anderson, *The Journey From Abandonment to Healing: Turn the End of a Relationship Into the Beginning of a New Life* (Berkley 2000).
9. *Id.* at 123.
10. *Id.* at 21.
11. *Id.* at 73.
12. *Id.* at 116.
13. *Id.* at 158.
14. *Id.* at 209.