

How to Understand Fear of Abandonment With BPD

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It's one of the first things you read when you figure out that borderline personality disorder (BPD) is what's wrong with your head: fear of abandonment. Not just fear; debilitating terror that everyone you know will leave. As soon as the opportunity arises, they will be gone. This was the nail in the coffin for me pursuing BPD as a diagnosis, because I finally had words to explain what had been happening in my head for so long.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) describes it as frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment. I think frantic as a good word, although it doesn't even come close to accurately describing the level of intensity happening in my head when this is going on.

I want you, my non-BPD reader or fellow BPD warrior, to put yourself into a scenario, for a moment.

You have a really wonderful group of friends who hang out together frequently, and all of you really enjoy spending time together. There may be times you hang out without one or two people from the group, but life happens.

Then, one day, you just stop hearing from them. Your texts to both the group and individual friends are left unanswered, read with no reply. A few weeks later, You run into one of them in the grocery store and he acts like he's really uncomfortable seeing you. You still have no idea why. You find out they have deliberately been leaving you out of plans, slowly trying to remove you from the group and from their lives without saying a word to you about it.

How would you feel? Not what would you think, not what would you do, not what would you say. How would you *feel*? A combination of sad, angry, wondering what you did wrong?

Now. Take that exact feeling, and multiply it by about 100, to the point where it's physically painful and you're pretty sure you're about to die.

Now imagine you experience that exact emotion at that level of intensity. Every. Single. Day.

It doesn't have to be about something big. It could be your best friend for the last 20 years forgetting you made plans to work out, and making plans with someone else to go out to dinner. It could be looking forward to spending a nice evening with your husband, and him having to work late. It could even be you thinking the evening will involve time with someone, and for whatever valid reason, you end up alone instead.

The gears start spinning your head. The truth starts to be less and less relevant when you experience this level of emotion. Do they even like me anymore? Did they ever? Have they been doing everything they can to show me they don't want me around, and I've just been missing it? I hurt one of them the other day, saying or doing something careless based on too much emotion, like I usually do. Was that the final straw? Are they finally done being able to forgive me like I always knew they would be?

You start to push them away — protect them from yourself and from all of the huge feelings. If one of them is your “favorite person,” someone you have become enmeshed with and have taken on their emotions as if they were your own in a really unhealthy fashion, it gets even more intense and complicated.

This is the fear of abandonment someone with BPD feels, on some level, every single day. It's not them being dramatic. It's not them looking for attention or trying to isolate you. It's a level of emotional pain most people will never experience or will experience so infrequently that it stands out in their mind as a terrible day in their life.

Be gentle to the BPD person in your life struggling with abandonment. Remind them frequently that you do want them around, even if they protest or clearly don't believe you. Don't surrender yourself totally to them, have boundaries, set them, keep them, don't lose yourself to fix them. Just say it and hope some of it sinks in. Hope that, eventually, we will be able to rest and know we are loved and wanted, even when our heads are telling constant painful lies. Even when the monsters we fight every day are ourselves.

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