

The origins of the Abandonment Lifetrap

1. You may have a biological predisposition to separation anxiety difficulty being alone.
2. A parent died or left home when you were young.
3. Your mother was hospitalized or separated from you for a prolonged period of time when you were a child.
4. You were raised by nannies or in an institution by a succession of mother figures, or you were sent away to boarding school at a very young age.
5. Your mother was unstable. She became depressed, angry, drunk, or in some other way withdrew from you on a regular basis.
6. Your parents divorced when you were young or fought so much that you worried the family would fall apart.
7. You lost the attention of a parent in a significant way. For example, a brother or sister was born or your parent remarried.

Certainly, loss of a parent at an early age is the most dramatic origin of the lifetrap. Perhaps a parent became ill and had to be away from you for a long time. Perhaps your parents divorced, and one parent moved away and gradually forgot you. Death of a parent, illness, separation, and divorce are all in the same category of important relationships that end in separation. Loss of a parent is particularly devastating in the first years of life. Generally, the earlier the loss, the more vulnerable the child, and the more potent the lifetrap is going to be.

How deeply the loss of a parent affects you depends upon a number of other factors. Of course, the quality of your other intimate connections is important. If you are able to establish a connection with a substitute for the lost parent, such as with a stepparent, that can help as well. And it can help if the lost parent is restored to you in some way, such as when an ill parent recovers and comes home, or separated parents reunite, or an alcoholic parent becomes sober. Many kinds of experiences can help heal your lifetrap. However, the memory of being abandoned still remains. If you have had a large amount of healing experience, it might require dramatic events to trigger your lifetrap, such as the actual loss of a loved person. If you lost a parent at a young age, you are acutely aware of what it can mean to suffer loss, and the prospect of being thrown back into that pain is frightening.

Aside from the loss of a parent, another origin for Abandonment is the absence of one person who consistently serves as a maternal figure for the child. Children whose parents have no time for them, who are raised by a succession of nannies or in a succession of day-care centres, or who are raised in institutions where the staff constantly changes are examples of this origin. Particularly during the first years, the child needs the stable presence of one caretaker. The caretaker does not necessarily have to be the parent.

However, if there is constant turnover in who serves as that person, it creates disruption. To the child, it can seem like living in a world of strangers.

The next origin is more subtle. You may have a stable mother figure, but there may be instability in the way she relates to you. For example, Patrick's alcoholic mother could be very loving and connected one moment, and then totally indifferent within a matter of a few hours. And Lindsay's mother, perhaps reflecting the same biological predisposition as Lindsay herself, was subject to intense mood swings. She was physically there, but the way she related to Lindsay was unpredictable.

LINDSAY: My mother was there for me, or I should say she was present. Sometimes she was happy and excited and interested in me. Other times she was deep in depression, lying in bed all day and not responding, no matter what I did.

This origin reflects the moment-to-moment interactions that pass between mother and child. If these interactions are unstable, then the child can develop the Abandonment lifetrap.

Patrick's mother was not abusive when she drank. She was indifferent. It is not necessarily abusive parents who give rise to the Abandonment lifetrap. If you have a parent who, because of drug abuse or temper problems, was alternately loving and abusive, you may or may not have developed the Abandonment lifetrap. It depends on whether you experienced the abuse as a loss of emotional connection. To a child who can get little else from a parent, even punishment can be experienced as a connection. Abusive parents can be either connected or withdrawn. This explains why Abuse and Abandonment are not necessarily the same issue.

There are other childhood situations that foster the development of the Abandonment lifetrap. Perhaps your parents were continually fighting, and you felt the family was unstable and might dissolve. Or perhaps your parents divorced and one or both remarried into families with other children. You may have experienced your parent's involvement with the new family members as an abandonment. Or perhaps your parent withdrew attention and nurturing from you to give it to a younger sibling. Of course, not all new births in a family are traumatic for the older child. These events do not always create the lifetrap. It depends upon the degree of disconnection. To create the lifetrap, the events must trigger powerful feelings of abandonment.

Often, a child who feels abandoned by a parent will follow that parent around. The child will shadow the parent, watch the parent, stay near the parent at all times. To an outside observer, it might seem as though the parent and child have a strong connection. In fact, the connection is not strong enough, so the child must always keep the parent in view to make sure the connection is still there. Maintaining the connection with the parent can become the most important thing in the child's life and can sap the attention the child has for other people in the world.

Other children respond to the loss of a parent by becoming more autonomous. Since no one is taking care of them, they learn how to take care of themselves.