



# Next Level Practitioner

## Week 133: How Abandonment Fears Can Rob Clients of a Sense of Self

Day 1: When Strong Emotions Get Tied to Abandonment

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Week 133, Day 1: Shelly Harrell, PhD



## When Strong Emotions Get Tied to Abandonment

**Dr. Buczynski:** Last week Dr. Shelly Harrell shared a specific time when she worked to normalize a client's feelings of numbness so that the client could begin finding safe ways to connect with others.

Today, we're going to take a deeper dive into Shelly's approach as we look at the different ways people might experience abandonment. And we'll explore the feeling that often hides behind this particular fear.

Here's Shelly.

**Dr. Harrell:** One of the first things that comes up for me with this issue of fear of abandonment is how it speaks to this fundamental need that we all have as human beings for connection and belonging. That is so just fundamental across multiple theories, regardless of our theoretical orientations. I think it's one of the most robust findings in our research. The variable social support, sense of community, or interpersonal closeness, whatever we want to call it - we do have as human beings a fundamental need for connection and belonging.

"We all have this fundamental need for connection and belonging."

To me, this fear of abandonment is so common in many ways. It certainly can have very significant behavioral and clinical presentations, but I also think it is a common human experience when we feel those connections and our sense of belonging is threatened in some way.

One of the things that is part of my way of working with clients in general is to help them feel their humanness - help them feel their sense of being part of the human community - and begin to reduce some of the stigma they may feel about their experience and behavior. This is one of those areas where I feel that is particularly important.

"Help them feel their humanness and begin to reduce some of the stigma they may feel about their experience and behavior."

One thing I do with clients is normalize some of those feelings and the protection that sometimes we cut off or we try to shut down - that need for a relationship - because of the fear that we are going to be hurt or left rejected in some way. That's one piece of the way I work. With that said, of course people have tremendously horrific

experiences of abandonment that present themselves to us clinically.

I think abandonment is not just being physically left in some way; people can be in relationship and be abandoned emotionally. A relationship that we're in abandons the emotional caring and concern - that can be experienced very significantly as abandonment. Someone checks out in a relationship with us or disengages, withholds love, or withholds care in some way. That's abandonment as well even if this person hasn't physically gone.

"Abandonment is not just being physically left in some way."

I think abuse is abandonment, right? We can think of abuse as abandoning the contract of safety in a relationship. One can feel abandoned when there is abuse in a relationship. The ability to feel safe, and the ability to care for one's sense of physical wellbeing or the integrity of one's body, has been abandoned. That

emergent lack of safety and lack of security in a relationship is a form of abandonment.

I think it's pervasive. A part of doing the work and assessment is understanding what has been abandoned. Is it emotional connection that the person feels was abandoned for them? Was the sense that "I'll protect you," - which is another kind of contract we have in close relationships - that we'll protect each other - was that abandoned? Or was there a physical abandonment? Did someone just leave? Someone just left who is important to them. I wanted to bring up that piece a little bit.

The other thing that stands out for me in my experiences clinically working with abandonment is its connection to betrayal. So often a sense of being abandoned is walking closely with the sense of betrayal.

There's often a feeling of abandonment when we're in relationships when we have a feeling of expectation.

"Often a sense of being abandoned is walking closely with the sense of betrayal."

If it's in the context of a parent-child relationship and let's say the parent leaves or is abusive. [There is a] sense of betrayal that someone who was supposed to care about me and protect me, didn't. Betrayal goes hand in hand. A close friend or an intimate partner leaves us or breaks off the friendship or intimate relationship.

There's often a sense of betrayal that some kind of contract, spoken or unspoken, or some kind of assumption that "we're in this together," gets betrayed. Often abandonment experiences are accompanied by betrayal.

Working with abandonment experiences is also about working with experiences or feelings of betrayal which are really, really challenging. When I hear the term fears of abandonment, again, where I go often is where did that come from? Usually there's some defining experience or incident that serves as a trigger for that fear. Then that historical defining experience gets represented in current ongoing relationships and experiences. Somebody may say something, or in the context of an intimate relationship, not text back or not call back, and that triggers that fear of abandonment. "Do they not want me anymore? Are they going to leave me? Do they not care about me anymore?"

Those things can come up when an experience represents the possibility of abandonment. I think understanding what the original experience is, and then helping clients identify where that gets triggered in their current relationships and what behaviors trigger that fear of abandonment, is an important part of the initial work.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As Shelly just said, by helping a client identify their first experiences of feeling abandoned, that can help them make sense of what might be triggering this fear in their current relationships.

Tomorrow, we'll take a look at how to work with a client when their fear of abandonment has trapped them in a cycle of putting the needs of others before their own.

But right now, I'd like to hear from you: How will you use what you just heard today in your work with clients? Please leave a comment below, and I'll see you tomorrow.