



Next Level Practitioner

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

Day 2: Reducing Codependency Sparked by Abandonment Fears

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Week 133, Day 2: Joan Borysenko, PhD



Reducing Codependency Sparked by Abandonment Fears

Dr. Buczynski: When a client has a pervasive fear of abandonment, it can sometimes lead them to sacrifice their own needs in favor of someone else's.

Dr. Joan Borysenko had a client like this. Joan's client was constantly obsessing over making herself "worthy enough" for her partner.

So Joan worked with this client on strengthening her sense of self. Here, she'll tell us how she did it.

Dr. Borysenko: I had a really beautiful client I'm going to call Nancy. I think she was probably in her early thirties – I'd say 32/33/34 when I first met her. She was always very self-effacing and literally apologizing for everything she said and assuming whatever she said was never quite good enough. I could see how that might make her partner a little bit crazy. It was such a sense of, "Oh, my goodness. I'm not worthwhile."

With her partner she was always afraid he was going to abandon her. Even though she was young and beautiful, she went for Botox around her eyes every six months because little smile lines were developing. She was afraid if she got old her partner would abandon her.

The partner, meanwhile, was addicted to multiple things. He was addicted mostly to prescription drugs but also to alcohol. He was a difficult person to be with, but he was a very functional addict. He had a very big job - an important person. She was just afraid, "He's going to meet somebody at work. He's going to end up sleeping with his secretary. I'm not good enough. He's going to find someone else." She was incredibly jealous. She was making him *crazy* all the time by literally snooping on his cell phone and making sure he wasn't seeing anybody.

*"She was able to do so much healing within herself and realize, **You know, I don't have any power over external circumstances. I have no power over my own codependency.**"*

Finally, what we did in that case, I said, "You know, you need to go to Al-Anon. You can't control him. You can't control his addictions. You can't control whether or not he leaves you. You need, number one, to be able to control yourself," because these patterns of boundarylessness and jealousy were really ruining her life. She was a very talented artist, but she could hardly concentrate on doing her art. So, she went to Al-Anon.

She was a person who was like *taylor-made* for a 12-step program. She was able to do so much healing within herself and realize, "You know, I don't have any power over external

circumstances. I have no power over my own codependency. I have no power over my husband's various addictions or over whether or not he's interested in other women or anything like that."

She really began, through that, a tremendous journey to recognizing she needed to develop her own authentic sense of self and her own center. We were able to work on the mindfulness, meditation, and the awareness training, together, in that larger format. That was really *very* transformational to her. I just want to say to people that

"She needed to develop her own authentic sense of self and her own center."

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in terms of abandonment issues, and issues like that, very often addiction or codependency arises with those issues.

I think we *all* have a fear of abandonment [laughs]. It’s more pervasive in some people than it is in others. That’s our basic need for survival - that we *won’t* be abandoned, because we are born helpless. I think of all species we are the most helpless, and we need that sense of secure attachment. Obviously, some people have more secure attachment than

other people, but nonetheless all of us crave deeply the very same thing: to be loved, valued, and seen.

When the fear of attachment certainly gets pervasive it creates such anxiety and often depression. Often the fear itself undermines the very relationships that we’re so dependent upon as social animals.

“All of us crave deeply the very same thing: to be loved, valued, and seen.”

The issue of boundaries is so very important. I remember this Woody Allen movie. He was like a chameleon - whatever somebody else wanted he would be. *Zelig*. That was an amazing movie because that was the prime example of being *so* needy - *so* needing others to be there with you and not abandon you, that you will be *anything* they want you to be.

I find problems with boundaries frequently take quite a bit of coaching to get over. I always laugh. I give a workshop with my friend Karen Drucker called *Learning to Love Ourselves*. As part of the write-up we say, “You’re going to get a refresher of *Better Boundary School*,” because the idea of a boundary is that it gives you a sense of self.

The chameleon, the Woody Allen character Zelig, *had* no sense of self. There was no one to see. The real question is: Who are *you*? What are your needs? This is the most important thing, I think, in boundaries: to be able to look and say, “What are my needs to feel safe, to feel loved, to feel valuable, to get my work done?” And it’s very simple. I think we all deal with boundaries all the time.

For example, you’re seeing me in my home office which also happens to be the front hall of our home. It’s an old Adobe built in 1879 and it has this great big room with no door on it. I had to put in a door in order to have a boundary. I also had to put notes on the outside door: “Do not disturb because I’m filming.”

This is an example of a physical boundary, because I have a need for silence while I film. But we have to negotiate boundaries with the people we work with and live with. It’s very important, I think, for people who really have this sense of “I’ve got to please everybody,” to learn, “What *do* I need, to please myself?” When we’re able to do that, we’re able to self-regulate better and be more effective with other people. Your own needs matter.

“When we have boundaries, we’re able to self-regulate better and be more effective with other people.”

Dr. Buczynski: As Joan pointed out, when a client with abandonment issues is struggling with codependency, learning to set boundaries can be crucial.

Tomorrow, we’ll look a little more deeply into how we can help clients who fear abandonment develop more secure attachment.

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