



# Next Level Practitioner

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

Day 4: When Abandonment Fears Stem From Trauma

with Steven Hayes, PhD and Ruth Buczynski, PhD

National Institute for the Clinical  
Application of Behavioral Medicine





Week 133, Day 4: Steven Hayes, PhD



## When Abandonment Fears Stem From Trauma

**Dr. Buczynski:** According to Dr. Steven Hayes, when a client's fear of abandonment is associated with trauma, it can be particularly challenging to help them open up to their own experience.

Here, Steven teases apart his approach for helping a client with a history of trauma come to terms with a fear of abandonment.

**Dr. Hayes:** An ACT or acceptance and commitment therapy approach for people who have a fear of abandonment depends on the exact details of the case because abandonment can show up in different parts of the psychological flexibility model that underlies ACT work.

“Abandonment can show up in different parts of the psychological flexibility model.”

The psychological flexibility is composed of acceptance and diffusion methods applied to emotions and thoughts; [it's] attentional flexibility and awareness enhancement that's focused on your ability to be centered in them now consciously, and on our qualities of being and our values -how we build committed action around that.

A fear of abandonment can show up with distorted flexibility processes in all six of those areas. The most common ones usually begin in the sense of self area, especially if fear of abandonment is associated with early breaches of attachment without right trauma, for example as a child. It'll show up also on the emotion of thought side around issues of the pain of loss.

For example, children who've been left alone too early or who have been through moves from one language community to another, disruptions in a family environment or later on in life (but these tend to be fairly early), or actual deaths or abandonment by a parent or later in life by partners and friends.

Let's take the one where it really is affecting the sense of self with early trauma. What's tricky about that is that normally from an ACT point of view, belonging is going to be solved by finding belongingness inside the continuity of consciousness and the interconnection of consciousness of you, as part of the human community. It's solved by awareness and connection and awareness to the awareness of others.

“Early trauma sometimes leads people to fear abandonment.”

The early trauma though sometimes leads people to fear abandonment and these issues show up in ways in which the continuity of consciousness itself is undermined, for example through dissociation or splitting of various kinds.

There's something self-soothing about avoiding, let's say, a memory of a trauma or by attacking the continuity of consciousness by pretending to be somebody else by dissociating from your own experience. You're not going to be able to then use this sense of self and the peace of mind that it can provide as an ally. Instead it's going to have to be something more like your graduation exercise.

With cases of those kinds what you're left with, I believe, is primarily walking into the costs of emotional

avoidance and to skills that are helpful to be able to feel deliberately on purpose in a whole way. In other words, we're not going to walk right into abandonment feelings, but we can walk into negative feelings more generally and then in very small ways into abandonment to open up to your own experience.

When that has occurred for clients who've had this sense of self breach it becomes more possible to be yourself more fully and be more open to your memories and experience in the present - as the ebb and flow of life happens and as abandonments happen. Abandonments, to some degree, are part of life for everyone. People will die and you will feel abandoned when that happens, for example. Things will change.

“Abandonments are part of life for everyone. People will die and you will feel abandoned when that happens. Things will change.”

If the continuity of consciousness is not a problem— it generally happened a little later or not as severe, whatever has led to this fear of abandonment. In those cases, you can go to sense of self as an ally to help people walk into the pain of their own history.

“I want people to see that it's possible to *feel* on purpose and to expand your capacity to feel.”

I'm going to walk people into painful histories if it's really difficult for them to get a running start. I want people to see that it's possible to *feel* on purpose and set limits that are healthy, and not limits that are not, and to expand your capacity to feel.

For example, I might start with bodily sensations and feeling those on purpose. I might deliberately create a bit of negativity in bodily sensations such as holding out your arm with a small weight on it - a pound let's say - and within about 30 or 40 seconds it's going to really hurt. [Have them] notice that and see what it would be like to experience that, so we can start to work on feeling itself.

As we then move into areas where abandonment has happened, you can find examples that are small enough that the person is willing to feel - such as a minor slight that happened during the day; that's connected to a fear of abandonment.

Let's say somebody is sitting down and somebody else comes by and decides to sit at another table at the lunchroom cafeteria and you can kind of sense that little sense of, "Why didn't they choose to sit with me? They know me." I might walk inside that and start with the body, recreate the memory, see if you can attend to in a way that's flexible, fluid and voluntary. What is your body doing? Then expand out into emotions and then thoughts. If I have some momentum, I might even go into memories and then memories are going to start pulling the sequence into things that are gradually more difficult.

What we're trying to do is open people up to a capacity to feel what they feel, when they feel abandoned, and to still be present with themselves as whole human beings. Also, to orient towards what they care about and build that. That includes caring about relationships and trying to build more successful and stable relationships, but not in the grabby clingy drama-filled way as the people who are really attached to a fear of abandonment sometimes produce. That actually drives people away rather than pulls people close.

One step at a time, expand out the capacity to feel and to attend, and to be with a pain that's difficult. Gradually move that closer and closer

“We're trying to open people up to what they feel when they feel abandoned, and to still be present with themselves as whole human beings.”

to areas that are similar to places where the fear becomes overwhelming, and the sadness and other emotions cause the person to kind of freeze in place.

I would walk up a hierarchy essentially not so much because the hierarchy is necessary to outcomes, but because it's a compassionate way that the clients understand. They're more likely to buy into a hierarchy of what it feels like to walk through this.

There's a graduation exercise clients like this are going to give you as well. Sooner or later you're going to terminate, especially if you've done good work and really reached inside the defensive and walked somebody into consciousness and to letting go of the avoidance agenda. That means you're important, and the client cares about you. That means it's going to hurt to end even if it's a success.

I would not forget to treat the termination process with the dignity and wisdom clients like this really deserve. Allow a period of some sessions to walk through it. Use it as an example to see it as a kind of success and realize that if you can't end things, then you really can't start things naturally. Use the therapeutic relationship as a place where you can finish by choice and experience in a more open way these fears of abandonment; allow yourself to be with those. Helping a client in those later sessions as a kind of graduation exercise is an important part of your treatment planning if you have the opportunity in terms of the number of sessions and access to walk through that.

**Dr. Buczynski:** As we just heard, when a client's fear of abandonment stems from some kind of trauma, it can be crucial to take a gradual approach.

Now tomorrow is Friday, which means it's time for our Critical Insights session with Drs. Kelly McGonigal and Ron Siegel, where the three of us will take a deeper dive into the ideas we heard this week.

But until then, I'd like to hear from you: How are you going to use the techniques you just heard in your work today? Please leave a comment below, and I'll see you tomorrow.