

CARING LESS ABOUT ABANDONMENT

The natural direction of psychological growth is toward discovery of uniqueness and self-rule. When this process threatens families, people must abandon desires for self-definition and independence to avoid abandonment by caretakers at too early an age. This rejection of self-sufficiency becomes a vicious cycle of transferring power to others (that had to be given to caretakers), and trying to gain strength from others that is imagined to be lacking in oneself. By losing all sense of self-support, people seek attachment and believe that their problems can be resolved only if others change. Six or more items marked in either column below suggest that the self has become a clinging vine instead of the freestanding individual it was meant to be.

Personality Types	
Dependent Personalities ¹	Erratic Personalities ²
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Need advice and reassurance about everyday decisions and can be gullible. ___ *Feel helpless and inadequate when alone. ___ Need others to take responsibility for major areas of their lives. ___ Lack confidence. May be underemployed. ___ *Often think relationship problems are due to their inadequacies. ___ *Try to fix others to be able to lean on them or to avoid abandonment. ___ *Avoid disagreements due to fear of losing support. Will take the blame and cover up for others to avoid conflict. ___ *Are too tolerant of abuse or neglect. May constantly give or do things they don't like in hope of being cared for in return. ___ *Urgently seek another relationship when one ends to gain care and support. ___ *Are preoccupied with fears of disapproval or being left to care for themselves. ___ Can appear docile, *controlling, or nice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ___ Avoid real or imagined abandonment but can switch from clinging to distancing. ___ *Easily feel empty or bored (when alone). ___ Have unstable and intense relationships with extreme changes in perceptions: others are wonderful or terrible. ___ Are uncertain about themselves—their goals, values, or even sexual orientation. Often fail when on the verge of success. ___ Are impulsive in two or more ways that could be self-damaging: spending, sex, recklessness, drug use, or binge eating. ___ Repeat suicide attempts, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior. ___ Have rapid mood cycles (excitement, despair, anxiety) lasting hours or days. ___ *Have intense (inappropriate) anger, constant irritability, or repeated arguments. ___ Can be violent, feel unreal, or believe people are against them under stress. ___ Can appear oppositional or passionate.

Starred items suggest the well-publicized problem of co-dependency. At the time of this publication, the American Psychiatric Association had not listed separate criteria for this pattern of behavior.

¹ Adapted from criteria on pp. 672–673 with permission from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition. Copyright 1994, American Psychiatric Association.

² *Ibid.* p. 654.

ORIGIN OF PROBLEMS

People with the above characteristics may have had overinvolved, intrusive parents who imply “You can’t do it by yourself” or “If you grow up, bad things will happen (to me).” Dependent personalities may have had good parenting in the dependent phases of their lives but felt squelched when it was time to pull away as 2-year-olds and teens. Erratic people often had inconsistent support when they needed it and too much control when they tried to explore their environment or the world. There may have been actual abandonment (due to death, divorce, or desertion) or abusive intrusiveness, including incest.

People can be predisposed toward dependency by sickly constitutions, low energy, timid temperaments, and difficulties handling peer taunting that elicits parental (over)protection. Erratic

personalities may have physical deficits in emotional regulation or may have been irritable, difficult-to-soothe infants who taxed caretakers' abilities to nurture.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE

Disagreeing with or letting go of others can be frightening. You may literally feel you will die on your own. For some people, the only way to become freestanding is to live alone and discover the universe of friends and organizations that are ready to offer support. One's (true) self can only be found through a variety of experiences. The goal is interdependence in which time is spent apart to discover interests and values that can later be shared with others. Dependent or erratic people often feel powerless, frustrated, or resentful. Use these reactions to identify the thoughts that actually cause your distress and limit you.

Directions: Mark any thoughts you get about yourself or others in your worst moments. Then, identify beliefs you would like to have and affirm these new ideas regularly.	
Turn Defeating Thoughts into	... Beliefs That Promote Change
<input type="checkbox"/> I can't . . . , shouldn't have to	<input type="checkbox"/> I can take care of and speak up for myself.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm not able to . . .	<input type="checkbox"/> I can succeed step by step.
<input type="checkbox"/> I'm helpless, powerless or trapped.	<input type="checkbox"/> I have choices now. I can recover.
<input type="checkbox"/> I can't stand it or handle it.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can stand it, handle it, and trust myself.
<input type="checkbox"/> I cannot show emotions.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can show emotion, ask, and set limits.
<input type="checkbox"/> I don't matter. Others come first.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can decide what's right for the situation.
<input type="checkbox"/> If others leave me, I'm flawed.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can start over when relationships end.
<input type="checkbox"/> I can't find love, caring, or a purpose.	<input type="checkbox"/> I can find love, caring, and a purpose.
<input type="checkbox"/> People are all good or all bad.	<input type="checkbox"/> Each person has both good and bad qualities.
<input type="checkbox"/> I am empty, alone, or abandoned.	<input type="checkbox"/> I'm fulfilled, connected. I belong.

BEHAVIOR EXPERIMENTS

It will be easier to identify your defeating thoughts by intentionally creating situations that bring them to the surface. Pick any of the following exercises that sound hard or distasteful. Find a family member or friend to be your coach.

- Spend time alone and log any feelings of inadequacy or emptiness you have. Ask yourself "What would I like to do by myself?" Include things you avoid doing alone but enjoy. Gradually increase the amount of time and things you can do on your own.
- Notice every time you ask for advice or help. Encourage others to give you feedback. Make an agreement that they will not give input until you have expressed your own ideas or made an attempt to tackle a task yourself.
- Purposely disagree or make requests every day. Use the phrase, "I would like to . . . ," "I believe . . . ," or, "Would you . . . ? Make a contract with others to say your opinion first.
- Designate a posture to sit in when you feel helpless or alone. Exaggerate feelings of inadequacy and desertion. Designate a posture for the independent you and act as if you were competent. Switch postures and have a dialogue between your two parts.
- Draw a picture of the independent you and spend increasing amounts of time acting as if you were that person. Log any discomfort you have. Have the clingy you tell the independent you, "I won't let you succeed because . . ." and listen to the response.
- Make good-bad lists. Include wonderful and awful qualities about significant others. Make additions to the lists any time your feelings change. When you are idolizing a person, study his or her "awful list" and vice versa. Start with a list about your coach.