



The Journey from Abandonment to Healing: Revised and Updated: Surviving Through and Recovering from the Five Stages That Accompany the Loss of Love

By Susan Anderson

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The fear of abandonment is one of our most primal fears, and deservedly so. Its pain is often overwhelming, and can leave its mark on the rest of your life. In the midst of the hurt, it's hard to see an end to your feelings of rejection, shame, and betrayal.

In this updated edition of the groundbreaking book, Susan Anderson, a therapist who has specialized in helping people with loss, heartbreak, and abandonment for more than thirty years, shares recent discoveries in neuroscience that help put your pain in perspective. It is designed to help all victims of emotional breakups—whether you are suffering from a recent loss, or a lingering wound from the past; whether you are caught up in patterns that sabotage your own relationships, or you're in a relationship in which you no longer feel loved. From the first stunning blow to starting over, it provides a complete program for abandonment recovery.

Going beyond comforting words to promote real change, this healing process will help you work through the five universal stages of abandonment—shattering, withdrawal, internalizing, rage, lifting—by understanding their biochemical and behavioral origins and implications. New hands-on exercises for improving your life will teach you how to manage the inevitable pain, then go on to build a whole new concept of self, increase your capacity for love, and find new love on a deeper and richer level than ever before.

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Editorial Review

Review

“If there can be a pill to cure the heartbreak of rejection, this book may be it.”—Rabbi Harold Kushner, bestselling author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* and *How Good Do We Have to Be?*

About the Author

Susan Anderson has devoted more than thirty years of clinical experience and groundbreaking research to helping people overcome abandonment and its aftermath of self-sabotaging patterns. A pioneer in the Abandonment Recovery movement, she is author of *Black Swan*, *The Journey from Heartbreak to Connection*, and *Taming Your Outer Child*. In addition to conducting lectures and leading workshops, she continues private practice in Manhattan and on Long Island.

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Akeru

ONE day, leafing through a Japanese dictionary, I came upon a word that caused me to marvel because it had so many different meanings—and ALL of them pertained to abandonment. The word is *akeru*. It means “to pierce, to open, to end, to make a hole in, to start, to expire, to unwrap, to turn over.” When someone leaves, *akeru* refers to the empty space that is created, the opening in which a new beginning can take place. I was amazed at the power of a single word that could suggest that to begin and to end are the same—part of one never-ending cycle of renewal and healing. I was excited to discover this concept and began to use it immediately in my work in abandonment recovery, delighted to see how readily people responded to its wisdom.

I am not trying to cash in on Eastern philosophy or establish a new martial art. I am grateful to be able to borrow the wonderfully fluid, many-faceted meaning of a single word plucked out of its context from an enlightened tradition.

1. The Five Stages of Abandonment
2. Stage One
SHATTERING
3. Stage Two
WITHDRAWAL
4. Stage Three
INTERNALIZING THE REJECTION
5. Stage Four
RAGE
6. Stage Five
LIFTING
7. Making a New Connection: A Five-Point Action Plan

Preface

“WHAT is abandonment?” people ask. “Is it about people in search of their mothers? Or people left on someone else’s doorstep as children?”

I answer: Every day there are people who feel as if life itself has left them on a doorstep or thrown them away. Abandonment is about loss of love itself, that crucial loss of connectedness. It often involves breakup, betrayal, aloneness—something people can experience all at once, or one after another over a period of months, or even years later as an aftershock.

Abandonment means different things to different people. It is an extremely personal and individual experience. Sometimes it is lingering grief caused by old losses. Sometimes it is fear. Sometimes it can be an invisible barrier holding us back from forming relationships, from reaching our true potential. It can take the form of self-sabotage. We get caught up in patterns of abandonment.

This book provides real help for those who have searched but found nothing to ease the pain of abandonment or hasten the speed of recovery. It guides you through what I've observed in years of practice as five universal stages of abandonment. As you continue along this journey, you will perhaps be surprised to discover that the pain you feel when a loved one has left is not an end but the beginning of a time of personal growth.

I may refer to a breakup but the effects of abandonment apply to all types of loss and disconnection, whether it's loss of a job, a dream, or a friend. It may be a loss of one's home, health, or sense of purpose. Abandonment is a psychobiological process. I'll share with you recent findings from the field of brain science that shed new light on the biological and chemical processes that underlie our emotional response to loss and the most effective path to restoring our emotional balance.

People going through the anguish of love loss often feel that their lives have been permanently altered, that they will never be the same, will never love again. I'm writing to assure you that as devastated as you may be right now, your feelings of despair and hopelessness are in fact temporary, and they are a normal part of grieving over a relationship. In fact, only by grappling with the feeling that your life is over can you cleanse your deepest wounds from past and present losses and build anew.

Those of you who have been left to pick up the pieces may wonder about your lost partners, who have already replaced you with new lives and new relationships. You've been left to do the soul-searching. You are a part of the chosen group able to undertake this journey. As you continue with the book, you will discover that the pain you are feeling is real, it is part of life, and it is necessary.

Anyone who feels this pain is in a legitimate emotional crisis. Many feel as if they have been stabbed in the heart so many times that they don't know which hole to plug up first. But these overwhelming feelings do not in any way imply that you are weak, dependent, or undeserving. In spite of the intensity of your feelings, you are still the competent, responsible person you thought you were. Your breakup, with all of its emotional excess, has not diminished you. In fact, being able to feel so deeply is a testament to your strength and tenacity. People are strongest where the breaks are. Only by giving yourself over to your feelings can you find your way out of them.

This is a time of personal reckoning, but this soul-searching can also lead to extreme self-doubt and scathing self-recrimination. When someone we love rejects us we often turn the anger we feel toward that person against ourselves and blame ourselves for the loss. In this way, abandonment acts like quicksand, miring us in feelings of worthlessness and despair. No matter how hurtful or demoralizing the circumstances may have been, you are not a victim or undeserving of love. The fact that someone has chosen not to be with you says as much about your ex as it does about you and how well you functioned in the relationship. You may be humbled for the moment, but you have not been vanquished.

Facing these issues and putting what you have experienced into perspective prevents you from turning your anger inward. As you learn to resist the gravitational pull on your self-esteem, you gain strength and

emotional endurance. Rather than feeling defeated by your experience, you emerge from it wiser, more self-reliant, and more capable of love.

Without guidance, many people don't completely recover from the loss of a love. Their fears and doubts remain unresolved. True recovery means confronting uncomfortable feelings, understanding what they are, and, most importantly, learning how to deal with them.

There are some feelings no one wants to talk about because they involve fear, despair, and self-doubt so intense that you're naturally humiliated and ashamed by them. This shame is not just about the embarrassment you may feel over having been rejected; it is about feelings that bewilder you with their potency, induce panic, and have you believing you are weak, dependent, unlovable, even repulsive.

Until these intense feelings are addressed, people tend to suffer them in silence or try to deny them. Eventually, these forgotten, deeply buried feelings are transformed into an elusive grief. Many seek therapy for this grief but can't seem to overcome that undifferentiated emptiness so often misdiagnosed and treated as depression. (For some people, this persistent grief can involve chemical imbalances that, in some cases, respond to medication.)

Abandonment is a complex issue, and its wound can be deeply entrenched. It is important to realize that your feelings, no matter how intense, do not signify a lack of will or frailty of character. They are normal and part of a process that leads to renewal and change.

The healing process I'll describe doesn't limit itself to your current loss. It gets to the heart of your cumulative wound—the one that contains all of your disappointments and heartbreaks that have been bubbling beneath the surface of your life, perhaps since childhood.

Unresolved abandonment may be the underlying issue responsible for most of the ailments you have been struggling with all along: the insecurity that plagues your relationships, depression and anxiety, obsessive and compulsive behaviors, low energy levels, and the loss of self-esteem that have been holding you back. Yet often people who have been abandoned can't name what they are going through. They may have grown up with an alcoholic parent or felt excluded from their peer group at crucial moments, just as their sense of self was beginning to develop. However detached they may be from the root of their distress, they spend their life energy bargaining with fear and fighting insecurity.

Having lost touch with the source of their wounds, many resort to quick fixes and gratify themselves with food, alcohol, shopping, or other people. Or they become addicted to self-help lectures, books, and tapes. But all of the self-medicating and soothing words in the world will not erase the distress. In order to do that, you must embark upon a journey that addresses the underlying cause—the abandonment wound itself. This is a journey from which all people can benefit.

Through my own experience and through my years of work with others, I have seen how helpful it is to come out of isolation and commune with others as we learn about the grief process that has gripped our lives. For this reason, in addition to running abandonment recovery workshops, I developed an easy format and help to set up ongoing abandonment support groups throughout the country so that you can join together in your local communities and enhance one another's recovery. (See my note section for information.)

Wherever you are in the five stages this book describes, you are not alone. It is a revelation to discover that the pain debilitates the strongest, smartest, most self-sufficient among us; that it cuts across all ages, cultures, and status levels; and that it ultimately is a universal human experience.

This book is designed to serve as your companion and guide, addressing your most difficult feelings,

validating your experience with research from related scientific fields, and giving you the tools you'll need on your journey toward a new outlook and new love.

What Is Abandonment?

A feeling

A feeling of isolation within a relationship

An intense feeling of devastation when a relationship ends

A primal fear—the raw element that makes going through heartbreak, divorce, separation, or bereavement cut so deep

An aloneness not by choice

An experience from childhood

A baby left on the doorstep

A divorce

A woman left by her husband of twenty years for another woman

A man being left by his fiancée for someone “more successful”

A mother leaving her children

A father leaving his children

A friend feeling deserted by a friend

A child whose pet dies

A little girl grieving over the death of her mother

A little boy wanting his mommy to come pick him up from nursery school

A child who feels replaced by the birth of another sibling

A child feeling restless because of his parent's emotional unavailability

A boy realizing that he is gay and anticipating the reaction of his parents and friends

A teenager feeling that her heart is actually broken

A teenage boy afraid to approach the girl he loves

A woman who has raised now-grown children feeling empty, as if she has been deserted

A child stricken with a serious illness watching his friends play while he must use a wheelchair or remain in bed

A woman who has lost her job and with it her professional identity, financial security, and status

A man who has been put out to pasture by his company, as if he is obsolete

A dying woman who fears being abandoned by loved ones as much as or more than she fears pain and death

Abandonment is all of this and more. Its wound is at the heart of human experience.

Chapter One

WHEN a relationship ends, it is painful for both people, but the pain is especially debilitating for the one left behind.

“In my case, it happened out of the blue,” said Marie. “One night, Lonny didn’t come home from work. When I didn’t hear from him after only an hour, I started jumping to the worst conclusions—car accident, heart attack. Never mind how much worse these visions got when he still wasn’t home six hours later. The last thing I imagined was that he was with someone else. Why would he want to be? We were lifelong companions and lovers, best friends, and happily married for over twenty years.

“Finally, I heard his footsteps crunching along the gravel driveway. I ran to meet him at the door. ‘What happened?’ I asked. My heart was in my throat.

“There was a pause.

“‘I’m not happy,’ he said flatly.

“‘Happy?’

“He vaguely said something about how things were different between us.

“‘Different?’ I asked.

“‘Don’t interrupt me,’ he said. ‘That’s one of the problems. You always interrupt.’

“My face was suddenly hot and pulsating. This was not Lonny.

“Then he uttered the words that turned my stomach upside down and left my mouth dry.

“‘I’m leaving,’ he said.

“I stopped breathing. It was hard to collect a single coherent thought. The only logical explanation I could come up with was that he must have had a head injury sometime during the day. Why would he say what he was saying? I thought briefly but seriously about calling an ambulance.

“When I finally managed to speak, my voice came out deep and hollow, like it belonged to someone else.

“‘You don’t really mean this,’ was all I managed to say in my strange, unsteady new voice.

“‘I’m leaving this weekend.’

“I leaned on the kitchen table for support and tried to catch my breath from the dagger thrust into my gut. ‘Is there someone else?’ I asked, my voice coming in a whisper.

“He flatly and angrily denied this. But a month after he actually moved out, I was to learn that in fact there was someone else—another teacher from his school. It lessened the bewilderment but not the wrenching pain.

“I spent the first few weeks alone, trying to grapple with the immensity of it all. This was a man I’d loved with all my heart and soul. He’d always been so tender, his goodness always shining right through. For me, loving him had almost been a religious experience. I’d had such reverence for how he lived his life. He was a kind and caring father, both wise and sensitive.

“At night, I’d attempt to put the agony to rest and go to bed. But sleep was out of the question. I would be tortured by the empty space next to me in the bed. How I loved to hold Lonny, my beautiful, sensual Lonny. I hugged my pillow instead, weeping, sometimes screaming into it, because the torment was so unbearable. I had every right to hate him for what he was doing, but all I could do was miss him and damn myself for letting this happen.”

Abandonment’s devastation can stem from many different circumstances, many different types of relationships. There are a variety of factors affecting the way we react to the loss: the nature and duration of our relationship, the intensity of the feelings, the circumstances of the breakup, and our previous history of losses. Being left by someone we love can open up old wounds, stirring up insecurities and doubts that had been part of our emotional baggage since childhood.

Almost all of us have experienced Marie’s feelings. Someone has chosen not to be with us, not to “keep us.” We feel suddenly cut off, alone, sent into emotional exile. Being alone isn’t bad when it is something we choose for ourselves. When someone decides to leave us, it is a different story. Bewildered, confused, outraged, we feel as if we’ve been handed a life sentence to which we’ve been unjustly condemned by virtue of some invisible defect. We yearn and ache for someone who has abandoned us, as Marie does.

Abandonment is our first fear. It is a primal fear—a fear universal to the human experience. As infants we lay screaming in our cribs, terrified that when our mothers left the room they were never coming back. Abandonment is a fear that we will be left alone forever with no one to protect us, to see to our most urgent needs. For the infant, maintaining attachment to its primary caretaker is necessary for its survival. Any threat or disruption to that relationship arouses this primal fear, a fear that is embedded in the hardware of our brains, a fear we carry into adulthood. When children experience feelings of disconnection, they do not have the defenses to fall back on that we as adults do. Their wounds may not heal but instead float beneath the surface of their lives right into adulthood.

Emotional experience is more painful when it echoes an episode from the past; that’s especially true when it comes to rejection and loss. The relationship that ended today may be the fulfillment of your worst nightmares from childhood. Grieving over that lost love opens a primal wound.

Someone deciding to leave you awakens this primal fear, and out of it rises intense anger. You feel angry for having to feel so much fear and desperation. You feel frustrated with yourself for being powerless, for not being able to hold on to another’s love. You feel utterly and helplessly defeated over the circumstances of losing that love. You fear you are not attachment-worthy.

In some cases your grief may not come from a recent breakup; sometimes it is rooted in the residual insecurity and fear stemming from long-lost loves that interfere with relationships you’re struggling with today.

You may still be with your partner, but you understand that he or she no longer loves you. Though physically present, you grieve the loss. It’s a steady throb tinged with feelings of personal failure: “Why can’t I make it

work? Am I not lovable? Why can't I get him to love me?"

In other cases, like Marie's, a partner leaves you for someone else, in which case your grief is complicated by feelings of betrayal and jealousy.

Sometimes there is no one else; your mate left because he just stopped wanting to be with you, needed his space. Your grief becomes fraught with feelings of self-reproach, anxiety, and lack of closure. You wonder: Are you so very horrible that you deserve this punishment—that your partner would rather be alone?

Or your relationship may have simply fallen apart—perhaps you weren't ready, or you two just didn't seem to be able to make it work. Perhaps the relationship was so painful that initially you were relieved by the prospect of separation. Feelings of inadequacy came as an aftershock. In these cases, grieving may be complicated by a profound sense of personal disappointment. You may feel remorseful, uncertain about your future.

Sometimes you were the one initiating the breakup because you felt abandoned during the relationship.

Or the abandonment was sudden and unexpected, in which case shock and disbelief took over. You must first address the desperate pain and debilitating panic before you can begin to grieve.

The grieving process is similar to bereavement over a death: Loss is loss. But abandonment grief has a particular life of its own, stemming from the circumstances that led up to it and from the feelings of rejection and inadequacy that often accompany it.

It is because abandonment's knife cuts all the way through to the self that it is so painful. You lose not just your loved one but your core belief in yourself. You doubt that you are lovable and acceptable as a mate. These feelings can become deeply inscribed, creating an invisible wound that causes you to turn on yourself.

Sometimes people feel the loss of a loved one so deeply and question their own worth so profoundly that it is as if there's an invisible drain deep within that works insidiously to siphon off self-worth, like a slow, internal bleed. The paradox for these folks is that when they try to rebuild self-esteem by doing esteemable things, their deep wound is always draining it away.

This drainage of ego strength is crucial to understanding and working through the abandonment cycle. In fact, it is hard for me to understand why its special type of grief had gone virtually unrecognized, unstudied, and untreated until this book. Mental health professionals generally interpret the feelings of abandonment as a symptom of depression or anxiety. But abandonment grief is a syndrome of its own. It is the way in which your fear and anger are turned against yourself that gives abandonment grief its particular character.

The tendency toward self-attack and self-recrimination represents the midway point in the grieving process. But injury to self (or internalizing the rejection, as I call it) is interwoven into all of the stages of abandonment. It is a persistent, ongoing process that causes us to abandon ourselves over and over.

WHAT IS AN ABANDONMENT SURVIVOR?

Abandonment survivors are those who have experienced the anguish of lost love and have the courage to go on believing in life and in their own capacity for love. Some are celebrities who have told us their childhood stories; others never make a public disclosure. Some are therapists—probably the majority of therapists have their own abandonment histories. But most are everyday people. There is an abandonment survivor in just about everyone, though some may not acknowledge it. The insecurity, longing, and fear associated with the loss of love are universal.

People struggling with the abandonment syndrome are plagued by insecurity and self-sabotage, yet many manage to lead productive, even stellar, lives in spite of it. Others find the chronic insecurity too disabling to fully express their talents.

Abandonment survivors are sensitive, caring, and primed for love. But membership to this venerable group is not restricted to those able to achieve success in their relationships. Many continue the struggle to resolve the old abandonment wounds that stand in the way of finding love.

For all abandonment survivors—those who've found love and those still seeking it—the impact of losses past and present can be found in the fragments of unlived life, unreached potential, and unfulfilled dreams still waiting to be redeemed through the process of abandonment recovery.

WHAT IS ABANDONMENT RECOVERY?

Abandonment recovery involves a program of five exercises outlined in this book. I call the program Akeru. You take action to heal the underlying wound of abandonment from past and present losses. You gain new information, identify unfinished business from the past, and practice hands-on exercises for improving your life. Anyone can benefit from this process.

Abandonment recovery provides a new language and approach compatible with twelve-step recovery programs. Its program is specifically designed to deal with unresolved abandonment—the underlying source of your addictions, compulsions, and distress. Abandonment recovery is based on the most recent information from brain science and years of clinical experience working with the victims of abandonment trauma. The program empowers you to overcome your primal abandonment and its aftermath of self-defeating patterns—and to reach your goals for greater life and love.

If you've been holding out for the right words or the ultimate insight that will finally free you, beware. The magic bullet is not in any book or program. It is within you. It is that untapped energy that you will learn to redirect. Abandonment recovery is easy, even pleasurable. You must do more than read this book. You must put its wisdom into practice.

WHAT IS AN ABANDONER?

Abandoners come in every possible size, shape, shade, age, gender, and disposition. It is often difficult to tell who is or isn't capable of being emotionally responsible—who is worthy of trust, and who is an abandoner.

What complicates the picture even more is that one person's abandoner might be another's lifelong partner. The circumstances surrounding relationships are so complex and variable that it is neither wise nor fair to make moral judgments, point fingers, or draw generalizations.

Let it be said that many abandoners do not set out to intentionally hurt someone. Many are just human beings struggling to find the answers to life's difficult challenges along with everyone else. But there are some who are callous, leaving a trail of discarded lovers along heartbreak's Appian Way. And there are serial abandoners, those who get some reward from inflicting emotional pain on those who love them. For them, creating devastation is their way of demonstrating power.

Even those who are not motivated by this need might experience a heightened sense of self-importance when the one they leave behind seems so desperate to have them back. In the light of the other person's pain, these folks usually don't admit to an ego boost or feelings of triumph. Instead, they air more humble feelings, like the guilt they feel over having caused you pain. They are usually easily distracted from this guilt as they get caught up in their new lives and new loves with greater gusto than before.

Some abandoners are able to bypass these pangs of guilt by remaining oblivious to the effect they have on others. They're in a general state of denial about the devastation they've caused. This denial helps them maintain an image of themselves as decent, caring human beings. It often comes across as callousness and cruelty to the one who was left behind to pick up the pieces.

Some abandoners insist they feel as badly as you do. But the difference is, they don't have all of those rejection stingers piercing deeply into their psyches like poison arrows.

Other abandoners, however, unable to deny the pain they've caused, endure their own genuine grief and remorse, parallel to yours, over the failure of the relationship.

Abandonment recovery is dedicated to all of those who struggle to sustain relationships, abandonees and abandoners alike.

You are about to discover the benefits of working through the various stages of abandonment. As grief stricken as you may feel right now, the process will help you avoid the pitfalls of suppressing and avoiding the pain. Burying your feelings leaves them unresolved. Unless you face them, they continue to interfere from within, and you may find yourself caught up in self-defeating relationships that end in abandonment over and over again. Unresolved abandonment is the root of self-sabotage.

The recovery process that I've come to call Akeru is designed to reverse this injury. It provides a program of five exercises described in this book. Abandonment recovery helps you gain something from the intense emotions you are feeling, so that you can turn one of life's most painful experiences into an opportunity to grow and change.

What follows is a bird's-eye view of the stages that will help you get started on your journey. Being able to see the stages as one process will, I hope, give you some insight on where you are, where you've been, and what to expect.

SHATTERING

In this devastating first stage, you are in shock, pain, and panic, suddenly bereft of life's worth and meaning. You try to keep the shards of yourself together, but in spite of all your efforts, your faith and trust have been shattered. The severing of this important emotional bond makes you feel (temporarily) that you can't live without your lost love. Suicidal feelings are normal to this period. They are caused by despair that is overwhelming but only temporary. Old feelings of helplessness and dependency intrude into your current emotional crisis. Akeru provides a pain management technique that will help you get through the most difficult periods as quickly as possible and gain strength from them, allowing you to enter a time of rebirth.

WITHDRAWAL

Love withdrawal is just like heroin withdrawal, involving intense craving and agitation for the love you are missing. You ache, throb, and yearn for your loved one to return. Human beings are genetically heir to a powerful need for attachment; severed relationships do not end your need to bond. In fact, losing your relationship tends to intensify the clingy, needy feelings. The emotional tear triggers a psychobiological process that can include wakefulness, weight loss, anxiety, and emotional and physical fatigue. Akeru will show you how to work with the bonding instinct that is responsible for the wrenching pain. You can redirect its energy toward making a significant new connection to yourself, which has ongoing healing benefits.

INTERNALIZING

During this critical third stage of abandonment, your emotional wound becomes susceptible to infection, which can result in permanent scarring in the form of damage to your self-esteem. This is when you suppress your anger toward your lost partner and beat up on yourself instead. You tend to idealize your abandoner at your own expense. Any implicit or explicit criticism from your ex is taken to heart. You become preoccupied with regrets over the relationship, agonizing over what you should have done or what you could have done to prevent the loss. No matter how hard you try to fight back, your sense of self takes a beating. Akeru provides the tools to help you access internal energy and build a new whole new concept of self. The exercise is designed to open new windows in your awareness, allow you to make new decisions, and set new goals.

RAGE

Rage is not the first time you encounter anger in this process, but during the first three stages, your anger was victim rage, that useless flailing in space or stabbing your pillow to death. It is not until this fourth stage that your beleaguered sense of self, under siege from self-attack, is ready to stand up and fight back, to take on the challenge of the outside world. Only then is your rage of the self-empowering, healthy kind. Its aggression can help you rehabilitate your life.

Rage provides the energy you need to defend your newly born sense of self and to ensure your continued survival. Some people have difficulty expressing anger and need help to avoid turning their anger inward into an agitated depression. Sometimes you are afraid to express anger toward your lost partner for fear of losing any more love than you already have. Instead, you take your anger out on those closest to you. You can have unrealistic expectations toward others at this time; you expect them to replace the love and nurturance you are so sorely missing. When they fall short, you explode. Fantasies of retaliation and revenge toward your abandoners are also common to this stage, but there are better alternatives. The old saying is true: The best revenge is success. Akeru uses the energy of anger to help you turn your abandonment experience into a triumph of personal growth.

LIFTING

Because rage has helped direct the energy outward, it helps to lift you back into life. You begin to experience a levitation of spirit and intervals of peace and freedom. You feel stronger and wiser for the painful lessons you have learned. Life in all of its fullness begins to distract you. You let go of anger. Akeru provides the tools to help you enhance your capacity for newness and love.

The first letters of each of the five stages spell SWIRL. The word swirl echoes the cyclonic, continuous, flowing nature of your grief. Like any natural life process, the five stages are circular rather than linear. They represent a single process that is overlapping and recurrent, a process that can take place within an hour, a day, a month, or a period of years—cycles within cycles. You swirl through them over and over, until the tornado begins to weaken, and you emerge a changed person.

Yes, there is life after abandonment—full, rich intense life—but you will have to work to get there. The guiding hand is there to help you get through the pain, learn from it, and experience a stronger connection to yourself. You will never be as conscious, as acutely alive, as you will once you have applied the principles in this program to your daily life.

Chapter Two

WHAT IS SHATTERING?

Shattering is a tear in the dense tissues of human attachment.

It is a feeling of devastation, unbearable pain.

It is a powerful neurobiological process.

It is the birth trauma revisited. It is rebirth.

It is the breaking up of the storm clouds, the clearing of new sky.

It is an epiphany of insight, an awakening of the emotional core.

Shattering is a bottom—a transforming bottom—the same bottom from which people over the ages have found redemption.

All of our lives we have been overprepared for a shattering—for an event that is capable of ripping us away from what we hold most dear—attempting to ward off circumstances beyond our control. Most of our life energy is spent making ourselves safe so there won't be a shattering. Then, when it happens, it knocks the wind out of us. But once we catch our breath, we are in a position to rebuild our lives and not just to self-medicate with the illusion of security.

Shattering releases the primitive defenses that have become counterproductive, holding us back. The armor that was once protective becomes restrictive and uncomfortable. For the person no longer crippled, the casts must come off or they become a hindrance.

Shattering is what we feel when a relationship first ends, but it can also be the aftershock of earlier experience, an eruption of old, forgotten feelings. These eruptions are often reported by people who have gone through twelve-step programs to fight addictions. They discover, most frequently in the second year of the program, that their addictive behavior served as a primitive defense. It takes that long for the old defenses to break away and for true rehabilitation to take place.

Shattering is not a new phenomenon, but by isolating it, we can better deal with it.

We must honor the power of the shattering and harness that power in a disciplined way to create a truly healing environment.

THE FIRST STAGE OF ABANDONMENT: SHATTERING

ROBERTA'S SHATTERING

Roberta is a sensitive person, intelligent and versatile. She has a gifted sense of irony, which she displays with brilliant timing and subtlety. She has a serious side, too, and loves to intensely debate political issues. She has a mane of golden hair and large, pale green eyes. All of it helped her captivate Travis, a conductor of a city orchestra.

Roberta's main drawback, as her friends would tell you, was her choice in men. Travis was no exception. He claimed possession of the artist's temperament. That was how he rationalized his domineering ways and need for control. He could be demanding at times, highly critical, and self-centered. Roberta had to exercise all of her diplomatic skill to keep their relationship on an even keel.

She agreed she'd probably be making a mistake to marry him, which paradoxically was exactly what she found herself probing him about one night at dinner. "What do you think?" she'd asked, looking down at her plate.

Travis hadn't responded right away. "I'm not ready for that," he finally said. "Roberta, you know I'm just trying to have fun, have a good time." He muttered an apology about how shallow that sounded, while Roberta's heart sank. Why did I have to bring that up?

For the next month, Roberta tried to cajole Travis back into the hot and heavy relationship they'd had. But he had become gradually more and more absorbed in his career. He began limiting their time together to once a week and could be seduced into sex only with effort. Roberta sensed she was losing Travis. Her friends told her it was the best thing, but she couldn't bear to let go. She couldn't bear going back out in the world without him, hated the idea of being alone. I'm too old to be going through this, she told herself. She was thirty-five.

Then it happened. She saw him with another woman.

Roberta walked up to them and hit Travis in the chest with her bag. They exchanged words, his last being, "But, Roberta, I was going to tell you. I just didn't know how."

Roberta showed up for therapy, crying and blowing her nose into tissue after tissue. "I never believed anything could be this painful," she said, holding her head in her hands. "It feels like my whole life is over."

Shattering is not unique to abandonment. It is the initial stage of all types of grief where significant loss is involved. But the shattering of abandonment is special. Your loss was not due to a death but because someone acted on free will not to be with you. In fact, if rejection, desertion, or betrayal played a part in your loss, it is not just your sense of security that has been shattered but your belief in yourself, your sense of self-worth.

"I feel like a complete failure," said Carlyle, his eyes swollen and bloodshot. He had lost nearly ten pounds in a little over two weeks and claimed not to have slept in days. "When I finally do fall asleep," he said, "I just wake up to the reality that it's over. And then my heart starts pounding, and all I can think of is to end it—just do away with myself. The only thing that stops me is my kids.

"My wife wants me to leave by the end of the month. But how can I leave my family? They are what I've always worked for. They are my life. What have I done to deserve this? Why didn't I see it coming? I just can't face it all. I am too numb to know what to do about any of it—to know what I'm feeling. It's overwhelming."

Roberta and Carlyle are experiencing many of the "S" words common to this stage: the shattering of hopes and dreams, the sinking feelings, the sleeplessness, the soul-searching, the suicidal feelings, the shock. The important thing to bear in mind is that the intense feelings of shattering are temporary. In fact, shattering is the most short-lived of the five stages.

Shattering is a necessary part of the healing process because it brings you to terms with the fact that your relationship is ending. The pain is wrenching because it represents a tear in dense tissues of an intense emotional bond. It is as if you have to be torn apart before you can rebuild a new self.

For most people shattering is a time of reexperiencing. Any old or lingering losses flood into your current wound. If you have been through a similar breakup, memories of that earlier loss come to the surface, forcing you to deal with not just your current loss but the whole issue of loss in your life. Your whole being is thrown into a kind of emotional time warp. Past, present, and future are thrown into the emotional turbulence. As one of my workshop members from the Esalen Institute testified, "Someone absconded with my safety net and I shattered to the floor."

Shattering brings you in touch with feelings that may seem pathological when taken out of the context of grief. Freud, in one of his early monographs, *Mourning and Melancholia*, emphasized the difference between grieving and depressive illness. The intense emotions of shattering can sometimes even shake the clinician who hasn't come to appreciate the intensity of the abandonment experience.

Alby reported that his therapeutic relationship fell apart soon after his experience of shattering.

The love of his life had just left him. Later, he went to his therapist's office and released his anguish in deep sobs. He reported feeling like a black tar ball long nestled within him finally broke up and melted away. His therapist, agitated by the display of the intense emotions, tried to refer him for medication.

Alby had a stable job where he was highly regarded, was involved in creative arts and stable friendships, and showed no other signs of psychiatric distress.

Ironically, Alby's ability to withstand the intensity of his feelings was a testament to his emotional health. As one abandonment workshop member put it, coming to Alby's defense, "Only the strong can endure the shattering; the weak need their defenses."

At first, people tend to swirl through all of the stages at once. You may go from the shock and devastation of shattering, to the withdrawal feelings of desperately needing a love fix and not being able to get it, to the shame and self-condemnation of the internalizing stage, to the burning anger of the rage stage, to moments of hope and clarity of the lifting stage, and then back again, over and over, one stage following another in rapid succession.

I have experienced every one of these feelings myself during different phases of my life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. My lifelong mate left me in the midst of what I had perceived to be a loving, successful, twenty-year relationship. His leaving was sudden, without warning.

The irony that I had devoted my clinical practice of more than twenty years to treating abandonment survivors was not lost on me. Suddenly, all of those years of experience, research, and study were put to the ultimate test; I'd been abandoned.

Somehow, I had chosen to put all of my trust in a person who, after twenty years—after I had grown accustomed to a deep sense of security—suddenly one day said, "It's time for me to go." I found it hard to accept that I had been in the arms of someone who would abandon me after all of those years together. I knew that in my case, it was no random event, no mere coincidence. I knew that it had something to do with old losses, losses from as far back as my childhood. I would have to reach inside myself and find that last remaining seed, the hardy one that managed to lie dormant for nearly twenty years, and then spread its painful roots in my life again. I had to reach inside, find it, examine it, and uproot it once and for all.

It was hard work, but it helped me to reach a new level of understanding and find a better path to recovery, not just for myself but for those who sought my help. True to my work with my clients, I faced my own abandonment honestly and openly.

AKERU

Through my own experience and in working with others, a conceptual truth has emerged. It is that for all of its pain and intensity, abandonment serves as a catalyst for profound personal growth. To explain this notion, I borrow the Japanese word *akeru*.

Akeru is a word with many meanings, among them "to pierce, to end, to open." It helps to describe the

hidden opportunity in abandonment. Shattering involves a painful transition from oneness with another to a state of sudden and involuntary separateness. You are left to experience the powerful forces that are at play as you strive to regain your balance. That a single word, *akeru*, embraces the concepts to end and to begin, helps us to recognize that there is a positive application for the energy created by shattering.

Shattering, in fact, is an explosion of separateness. Abandonment cuts us to the core, but a piercing awareness survives. The stabbing pain lets you know you are alive. The ego is cracked open, the defenses torn away. All that remains is raw sensation and the body's own urge to survive. Rather than try to submerge, deny, or ignore its discomfort, the task of the *Akeru* process is to go with it, take advantage of this raw sensation, and make it work for you.

Shattering creates an opening. Its throbbing lets you experience the very center of yourself as never before. You are finally feeling your yogic center, which allows you to bring healing energy directly to the source of your deepest wound.

The secret is to get into the moment and stay there as often as possible. This helps you work with the energy rather than against it, to experience this time of stark, naked separateness for all that it's worth. In the moment, you experience the intensity of life as a separate human being, a tingling, throbbing speck of awareness in the universe.

Getting into the moment involves opening up your senses and focusing your attention upon the sights and sounds and smells and other sensations within your immediate environment. It means using your eyes and skin and ears to experience the moment in a very conscious way. Many call this mindfulness. Others call it Zen. Abandonment recovery calls the moment a natural refuge from emotional pain, and a chance to create lasting changes.

SHATTERING IS A PERSONAL JOURNEY

My own breakup has taught me never to underestimate the intensity of another's experience but to listen closely and learn from it. Shattering is unique to each person. Its intensity cannot be measured by the length of a relationship. It is something that each of us finds our own way through.

"But why must it be so painful?" some ask. "Where does the intensity of its pain come from?"

I am going to take you on a journey through the shattering stage, exploring answers to that question. I will explain how losing a loved one activates the body's automatic system of self-defense and what this means in terms of stress. I will cover feelings common to this stage, such as suicidal thoughts, symbiotic feelings, shame, and the need for self-nurturance. I will help you identify unfinished business that may be amplifying what you feel right now, and describe childhood losses that may have stayed with you into adulthood. I will share relevant information from the field of brain science that will explain why memories of old losses reemerge during your current crisis, and how stress hormones can affect your childhood memories. I will define some of the characteristics of a syndrome that plagues many abandonment survivors—post-traumatic stress disorder of abandonment—and discuss the shock, disorientation, and numbness that are common to this disorder. The journey through the shattering stage will conclude with step-by-step instructions to help you to incorporate into your life the *Akeru* exercise for staying in the moment.

Shattering is a time of stark separateness and, although painful, offers the opportunity for tremendous personal awareness. At no other time are you better positioned to come to terms with your reality as a separate human being. This is why shattering, for many, becomes an epiphany, a portal to a whole new level of awareness, self-reliance, and connectedness.

THE ANATOMY OF SHATTERING

SUSTAINING THE HEART WOUND

During this critical first stage, people often feel they have truly sustained a heart wound. Shattering is when the wound is initially inflicted—the point at which you feel the knife that severs you from your heart's attachment. Your whole body reacts in protest.

Anatomy of shattering

You may feel an aching or jabbing in your heart, a feeling of constriction, or a rush of anxiety across your chest. At first you may experience the frequent need to sigh or catch your breath. Your heart pounds when you come up against the reality of your loss. You may wake during the night in a cold sweat of panic and get up each day with a knot in your stomach. In fact, the stress of heartbreak and loss can trigger weakness of the heart muscle, a condition known as Takotsubo cardiomyopathy, also dubbed broken heart syndrome. Believe it or not, taking aspirin (and other heart medications) is known to help with heartbreak in some cases.

YOUR SELF-DEFENSE SYSTEM HAS BEEN AROUSED

All of your physical reactions are the result of your sympathetic nervous system's response to your very real injury. Your body prepares you to fight, flee, or freeze in order to protect you from what it perceives as imminent danger. A rush of stress hormones flows through your body to keep your self-defense system aroused, to sustain your alertness, to keep you on edge and in a state of action readiness. Adrenaline is released, heightening your brain's level of reactivity, supercharging your sensory apparatus to defend against the threat.

It is no wonder that people refer to abandonment as a knife wound to the heart. Physiologically, your body reacts as if your heart had truly been stabbed.

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

Shattering indeed brings you in touch with the visceral forces of life. It exposes your core, arousing your most basic and urgent needs. Like childbirth, abandonment forces a separation; you're suddenly much more alone than you were before.

It is possible that this experience is powerful enough to activate emotional memories stemming all the way back to your birth—bits and fragments of which have been encoded within the deep structure of your brain. The brain of a newborn does not yet have the fully developed structures it needs to record images of the actual events of birth. But the brain's emotional memory system is relatively intact at birth and lays down traces of early experience in the form of feelings and sensations. These feelings may be reactivated when an experience in your adult life bears an emotional resemblance to your birth.

For most of us, birth involved a sudden drop in temperature, glaring lights, noise, and perhaps a spank to get us to take our first breaths. When a loved one leaves you, a different kind of umbilical cord is cut. As when you were an infant, you've been suddenly disconnected from everything that gave you comfort, warmth, and sustenance.

The infant calms when it is wrapped snugly—first in someone's arms and then in warm blankets; it reminds the infant of the warmth of the mother's womb. But what about you? You have been cut off as well. Are you in no less need of the comfort and human warmth you are suddenly missing? Some abandonment survivors in the throes of a shattering crisis report wrapping themselves in a blanket and even rocking themselves to

and fro.

The tendency even for adults is to cry out for what is lost as if your very life depends upon it. For an adult, of course, this desperation is a feeling, not a fact. Your life does not depend upon your lost partner. It only feels that way.

Shattering has indeed delivered you to a state of stark separateness. But who is there to receive you this time? Who remains to answer the urgent needs that have been activated?

Only you.

There is no nurse, no caretaker this time. Just you. You are just like the snail out of its protective shell, the cold and hungry infant.

The recovery task for this stage is to take hold of yourself one moment at a time, to recognize that you are a separate person, a fully capable adult, responsible for your own self-care. It is no one else's responsibility to meet your emotional needs; only you can do that. Emotional self-reliance involves accepting the intense feelings of the experience, taking stock of your present reality, and assuring yourself that you will survive.

SPLIT THINKING

Characteristic of the shattering stage is a feeling of hopelessness, an aspect of always-and-never thinking. Things will never be the same; you will always be alone; you will never be able to repair the damages; you will always be broken. The always-and-never thinking is part of a catastrophic mental process that represents a temporary return to the concrete either/or thinking patterns of your childhood. Shattering has temporarily thrown you into a time warp. Like a newly developing child, you have no real sense that you will live through this crisis and move on with your life's work or onto other loves. Instead, you are caught in a temporary double exposure. Your childhood perspective is superimposed over your adult self's more mature outlook, blurring your vision. You consequently see your current condition as a child would: ever-present, permanent.

You may apply the same either/or thinking to the person who has left you, perceiving him or her as all good one minute and all bad the next. One moment they seem entirely irreplaceable, and the next you are saying, or at least trying to convince yourself, that you didn't need them anyway. On one hand you see your lost partners as completely justified for having left you; in fact, you have never respected them more or felt more awestruck by their fortitude of character now that they have dismissed you. On the other hand, you believe your partners have proven themselves to be morally corrupt cowards—that abandoning you was a dastardly deed.

This split thinking also applies to the way you view yourself. One minute you are a worthless failure for having lost the most important person in your life. The next you feel a sense of righteous indignation that someone would have the audacity to dismiss someone of your value. Maintaining a balanced perspective about yourself, your lost partners, and the healing process of life is difficult at this stage.

Getting into the moment provides an immediate respite from the always-and-never perspective. When you are in the moment, this catastrophic thinking has no place. There is only now—a sacred place that you can create out of the bounty of life around you.

SYMBIOTIC FEELINGS

We have seen that during shattering we are flooded with feelings we knew best in our infancy, when we

began as helpless, dependent children. The reawakening of these feelings has brought you in touch with the oldest, most long-forgotten part of yourself. In fact, the severing of your attachment has reactivated your emotional memories and has brought your most primitive feelings to the fore.

Symbiotic feelings are the ones you experienced prenatally and during early infancy when you were in a state of oneness with your mother. You were inseparable, in fact, incapable of surviving without a caretaker. These feelings of dependency, triggered during the shattering stage, place abandonment survivors in a painful emotional paradox: The more you experience the impact of your loss, the more you are compelled to seek your lost partner.

“I never wanted my wife so badly until she left,” said Carlyle. “I felt I couldn’t live without her!”

Your friends and family may wonder how you could want someone so badly who has treated you poorly. What they don’t understand is that your partner’s leaving automatically aroused symbiotic feelings that had been stored deep in your emotional memory. You are left to cope with feelings that stem from psychobiological processes that operate independently of your conscious thought and beyond your immediate control.

It’s common, for example, to become temporarily overreliant upon friends, family, and professionals for nurturance. Some people seek sympathy in ways uncharacteristic of them. Some develop unrealistic expectations toward others, driven by an internal craving for nurturance they can no longer find in their lost partner. Sometimes a mere perception of being slighted by a friend can cause them to overreact because it triggered symbiotic regression.

However independently you may have functioned within your relationship, during the shattering stage you may find being alone intolerable. Especially difficult to face are blocks of unstructured time, especially weekends, major holidays, or anniversaries. At these times, it is especially important to seek the company of others. Abandonment recovery workshops and ongoing abandonment support groups (which you can read about at www.abandonmentrecovery.com) can help you get through these difficult milestones. Be assured: Your overreliance on others eventually subsides as you begin to heal.

Chronic Symbiotic Issues

The symbiotic paradox helps to explain why many tend to become emotionally trapped within a relationship in which their partners repeatedly abandon them on either physical or emotional levels.

“I can’t seem to leave Barry,” said Patricia. “I know he is no good for me. I know that he’s a prop covered with warts and barnacles I’m holding on to, just to ward off the pain of being separated and all alone. I know all of this on one level, but for some reason, I just can’t let him go. The worse he is to me, the more desperately I hold on.”

For those struggling with a situation like Patricia’s, symbiotic feelings are reactivated again and again, each time you experience a break in an important bond, even if it is with the same person over and over again. Your neediest feelings—the ones that leave you emotionally helpless—keep flooding your consciousness with primal urgencies. You feel—albeit temporarily—that you can’t survive on your own. Each tear in your relationship arouses a new round of intense insecurity. The infant in you cries out to be held and loved—paradoxically, by the very same person who keeps betraying, deserting, and abandoning you.

Abused children tend to reach out to the very person who abused them for comfort. The same is true in other species. A researcher who studied imprinting in ducks noticed that when he accidentally stepped on the feet of a duckling that was imprinted on him, the duckling followed him more closely than ever. Researchers

investigated this phenomenon and it turns out that pain, whether emotional or physical, causes the body to release endogenous opiates that create a tenacious type of addiction to an object known as traumatic bond (see my note section for more information).

Shattering rekindles symbiotic urges, but it also provides you with an opportunity, now as an adult, to finally break them. When all else is ripped away, it is your true self crying out—raw and entirely vulnerable. Your task is to bring your helpless feelings with you into the moment, to give life to your newly awakened internal core.

SUICIDAL FANTASIES AND THOUGHTS OF DEATH

MICHAEL'S SHATTERING:

When Michael's lover first threatened to leave him six months earlier, he tried everything to hold on. He felt like he was fighting for his life. He'd made every possible accommodation to save his failing relationship, even gone into couples therapy and laid bare his emotional soul, but to no avail. One agonizing day, his lover packed up and left. Michael wanted to die.

In spite of all the dread and anxiety leading up to the end, Michael had not begun to let go. In fact, faced with the specter of loss, he'd clung tighter than before. Now alone, he could not find the will to go on living.

A friend urged him to sign up for abandonment recovery workshops. He arrived unshaven and rumpled. Speaking in a monotone, he explained that he had taken a leave from his job so he could "crawl into a hole and stay drunk as much as possible."

He talked at length about his suicidal thoughts. At one point, the members interrupted.

"Do you really want to die?" they asked, "or do you just want the pain to go away?"

"I want the pain to go away," he answered listlessly. "I'm only happy when I'm asleep," he continued. "And I only fall asleep after I've drunk myself into a stupor."

"There are ways to manage that pain," we told him.

He waved that off. "It's too far gone for all of that," he said. "The fact is, except for the pain, I've already died. You can't save somebody who's already died."

It is common for people to describe their abandonment as a kind of death. They report feeling dead, or wanting to be dead, or going through a spiritual death. As you follow Michael into the next chapter, you will see that it is important not to act upon these feelings. As intense as they are, they are temporary and will dissipate as you progress through the stages that follow. During the shattering stage, the hopelessness you are experiencing is a feeling, not a fact.

Many also experience their abandonment as a physical, even a mortal wound. They make frequent references to words that describe critical injury and destruction to vital organs, references to broken hearts, stabs in the gut, knife wounds to the heart.

"After Lonny left, my house had become a tomb, a torture chamber of loneliness. So I headed for anywhere but home," said Marie.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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