

How To Tell If You're In a Trauma Bonding Relationship—and What To Do About It

Jo Yurcaba · October 12, 2020

Seven years ago, I was in what you might call a hot-and-cold relationship. It felt emotionally intense really quickly. From the start, we spent almost every night together, and I stopped seeing friends to the extent that I even ended some friendships because the relationship was so consuming. But after that initial period of naive-but-happy codependency, he became distant and even abusive. I would wake up to the toxicity and danger of this situation, but then he would pull me back in, telling me that he didn't deserve me and promising to be different. What we had was a trauma bonding relationship.

A trauma bonding relationship is reflective of an attachment created by repeated physical or emotional trauma with intermittent positive reinforcement, according to licensed psychologist [Liz Powell, PsyD](#). Put simply, in a relationship with trauma bonding, there's "a lot of really terrible stuff happening and then occasionally really great stuff happening," they say.

Trauma bonding isn't limited to happening in just romantic relationships, either. It can also happen in dynamics that include fraternity hazing, military training, kidnapping, child abuse, political torture, cults, prisoners of war, or concentration camps, Dr. Powell says. “In cases of domestic violence or abuse, a lot of people have difficulty leaving abusers, because they have a strong connection to them that is able to keep them there even when things are very bad,” they say. “Within military training [or other group-centric situations], you're placed in these stressful situations as a way for you to bond with your fellow service members so that you can trust people who you don't know anything at all about in a life-or-death situation.”

Why does trauma bonding happen?

Trauma bonding relationships take shape due to the body's natural stress response. When you become stressed, your body activates your sympathetic nervous system and your limbic system—or the part of the brain that regulates emotions and “motivated behaviors,” like hunger or sexuality. This activation is commonly known as the “fight or flight” stress response. “When that sympathetic activation is in control, the parts of our brain that do things like long-term planning or risk analysis in our prefrontal cortex are shut off,” Dr. Powell says. “They're not able to be as effective because our brain is focused on just getting us through this trauma.”

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This helps to explain why it is so easy to become attached to anything that helps you get through a traumatic event: your brain associates that thing or person with safety. So, when an abusive person decides to comfort you or apologize—even for a trauma they, themselves, put you through—your brain latches on to the positive reinforcement rather than thinks through the long-term effects of staying with the abuser.

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Cycles of abuse and manipulation also sometimes result in a chemical bond between the abuser and the victim, says [Jimanekia Eborn](#), a sex educator who

specializes in trauma. Hormones bond people in relationships, but in abusive unions, these chemicals aren't properly regulated. The brain can become so overexposed to some of these hormones—like oxytocin, the cuddle hormone, and dopamine, the “feel-good” hormone associated with cravings and motivation—that it actually becomes chemically dependent on them. As a result, even when someone treats you poorly time after time, your brain won't want to leave because it felt so wonderful when they were nice to you.

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How the COVID-19 pandemic can contribute to trauma bonding

The pandemic itself is causing a form of collective trauma, Dr. Powell says, because there's a very real threat of death or long-term disability from just leaving your house. To survive this threat, we've isolated without seeing friends or family for weeks or months at a time, but since, as they say, “that is not how humans are designed to operate,” the dynamic has allowed for trauma bonding relationships to crop up.

For those looking for a partner, when they find a connection, the relationship can become serious very quickly, in part because the easiest and safest way to see someone during the pandemic is to live with them. “When we're in a trauma state, we're profoundly vulnerable,” Dr. Powell says. And in the case of

developing new relationships during this time, we might not reinforce the boundaries that we usually would when we first start dating someone.

The accelerated pace of certain pandemic relationships—or turbo relationships—can result in missing red flags or manipulative behaviors, and then, once toxic or abusive behavior unfolds, not reacting like they usually would. “Due to the pandemic and folks feeling more isolated, there... has been an increase in abuse within relationships,” Eborn says.

How to recognize trauma bonding, and what to do about it

What's key to understand about a trauma bonding relationship is that it can't be healthy because it is not equal. “Oftentimes when folks are trauma bonding, it may look and feel safe for some,” says Eborn. “But there is a lot of inconsistency within the relationship, and it can be extremely dysfunctional. There is always a form of manipulation that is involved.”

It also bears mentioning that while relationships with trauma bonding always feel very intense, relationships that feel intense aren't all unhealthy and don't always include trauma bonding. And remember, trauma bonding can present in various forms of abuse: physical, emotional, and psychological. Here are some other signs that a bond might be forming through trauma:

- The relationship is moving at an accelerated pace
- You feel very close even though you haven't known each other for very long
- You make huge life changes for a relatively new relationship

- You put time and effort into the romantic relationship at the cost of friendships and family and other relationships
- You have an extreme fear of leaving the relationship
- You feel like they're the only one who can fulfill your needs

While these factors being present, whether in isolation or grouped together, don't automatically mean a relationship is bonded by trauma, if you have a sense that such is the case, it might be time to consider leaving the relationship—which is no small task. It can “feel like pieces of you are being ripped out in hugely violent ways,” Dr. Powell says.

To mitigate this effect and help you stay firm in your choice, surround yourself with a support system of friends, family, and mental-health professionals who can assist you through the process. “Trauma bonding can cause us to question our own reality or to trust someone else's reality more than our own,” Dr. Powell says. “So, coming out of it often is a process of rediscovering who you are and rediscovering what reality is for you and figuring out how to trust that for yourself.”

If you are experiencing or have experienced domestic violence and are in need of support, please call the [National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233](tel:1-800-799-7233) or TTY 1-800-787-3224.