

The 7 Stages Of Trauma Bonding: Explained For Dummies

Abusers build strong emotional bonds with their victims. Their seven stages of trauma bonding train victims to crave [toxic relationships](#) after breakups.

Sometimes, people feel stuck in a bad relationship. They go through putting up with it, trying to leave, and then returning, without realizing they have been trauma bonded.

What is Trauma Bonding? When a person is mostly treated badly but sometimes treated nicely by the same person, they can build an emotional bond.

Trauma bonds make it difficult to leave and stay out of [an abusive relationship](#). It's like a rubber band that keeps pulling them back to their abuser.

The victims don't realize they have been trained in stages. They now want to please their master and get their praise at the cost of enduring insults and torture.

Let's explore how the seven stages of abuse, neglect, and punishment create an emotional attachment between the abuser and the victim.



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The 7 Stages Of Trauma Bonding: A Simplified Overview

Dutton and Painter (1981) first proposed the theory of "traumatic bonding" to explain how powerful emotional attachments can form in abusive relationships due to:

1. **Power imbalances:** Most [trauma-bonded relationships](#) have a power imbalance. The more powerful partner exploits and assaults the vulnerable victim.
2. **Intermittent good-bad treatment:** Traumatic bonding is fostered through cycles of abuse in which abusers alternate aversive arousal

(punishment) with relief (reinforcement).

These are the 7 stages of trauma bonding in a relationship:

1. Love Bombing Stage: Creating The Illusion Of Perfect Relationship

In the first stage, the abuser showers the victim with love, attention, gifts, and compliments, creating an illusion of a perfect partner.

This stage, known as [love bombing](#), doesn't look to feel like abuse on the surface.

On the contrary, it makes the unsuspecting victim feel special, valued, and important.

However, it is the most strategic move that lays the foundation for trauma bonding the victim.

This stage may vary in intensity and duration, depending on individual dynamics and cultural context.

(Find out [how long can love bombing last in narcissistic relationships.](#))



The Sinister Core of Love-Bombing Explained...



The Core of Love Bombing


2. Trust And Dependency Stage: Building A Strong, Unique Connection

Once the person targeted has been completely charmed by the abuser's love bombing, they begin to grow a deeper trust in the abusive person.

The abuser skillfully manipulates the situation, giving sympathy, support, and understanding to solve the victim's problems, making the victim feel dependent on them.

The trust and dependency stage often involves subtle coercion or gestures of "loving" control. They target making the victim slowly dependent on the abuser for making all their decisions and choices.

For example, they may say, *"I won't have my lunch unless you eat something."*

This dependency isn't just emotional; it may extend to financial or other ects. Even if someone leaves the relationship, they might go back just

because they need money, not because they want to.

That is one reason we must have [financial boundaries in our relationships](#).

The abuser creates a seemingly strong and unique connection, making the victim believe they've found an irreplaceable relationship.



3. The Abuse Cycle Stage: Start Of Control, Devalue, Gaslighting, Discard

This stage marks the beginning of the [cycle of abuse](#), where the victim experiences intense and repeated emotional or physical trauma.

Control

In the beginning, the abuser subtly takes control over various aspects of the victim's life.

The first abusive incident might seem like a one-time mistake, happening during a time of novelty and optimism in the relationship.



Its relative lack of severity, coupled with the abuser's remorse, can actually strengthen the emotional connection.

The victim may **not** yet believe that the abuse will be repetitive and inescapable, even when the abuser tells them something like:

"Why did you have your lunch when you know I haven't eaten anything since morning?"

Devalue

As the relationship progresses, the abuser begins to devalue the victim. They may belittle, criticize, or demean them, eroding their self-esteem.

The constant belittling lowers the victim's self-esteem, making them more self-critical and giving negative self-reinforcement.

Repeated incidents of greater severity shift the victim's thinking into believing that the violence will never stop unless they do something to prevent it.

But by then, they have already been trauma bonded.

Discard

Once trust and dependency have been established, the abuser may suddenly become distant, cold, and controlling.

This sudden shift creates a lot of distress and confusion in the victim. Yet, they stay optimistic that their abuser will revert to their earlier, loving behavior.

This stage can further deepen the trauma bond, as the victim clings to the hope of a return to the loving phase.

Gaslighting

Alongside control, devaluation, and discard, the abuser uses **gaslighting**.

It is a cunning plot to gradually make the victim doubt their own memories, feelings, perceptions, judgments, and interpretations.

Gaslighting degrades the victim's mental balance and sanity. They become overreliant on the abuser to grasp their own reality, which further cements the trauma bond.

The cycle of abuse, often marked by *intimate partner violence*, can have long-lasting effects on the victim's psyche, making them behave like [helpless dogs that whimper when electrically shocked](#).



4. Intermittent Reinforcement Stage: The “Slot Machine” Effect

This stage involves *intermittent reinforcement* or inconsistent reinforcement, a powerful tool in trauma bonding, leading to a hard-to-break emotional connection.

Intermittent Reinforcement Tactics



Intermittent reinforcement is a psychological tactic where the abuser alternates between kind and cruel behaviors. This binds the victim to the abuser.

- Think of a dog that is given a treat when it fetches a ball, *but not every time*.
- So, it keeps wagging its tail expecting to be given the chance to get the ball.
- Now, the dog's main goal becomes retrieving the ball, rather than getting the treat.

Similarly, the victim's addiction to the rare shows of kindness keeps them dutifully serving their abuser, overlooking the frequent cruelty.

Trauma bonding appears to be most potent when physical punishment is given at random intervals and mixed with moments of kindness and permission.

Fischer (1955) conducted an experiment with young dogs to suppress their social responses and found that the indulged-punished group showed 231% more human orientation than a consistently indulged group.

Rajecki and his team concluded that inconsistent treatment, meaning both abuse and love from the same source, leads to a heightened desire to be close to the object of attachment (Rajecki, et al., 1978).

“Slot Machine” Effect

Intermittent reinforcement keeps victims engaged, as the unpredictability of rewards and punishments creates a “Slot Machine” effect.

It is how gambling houses create intermittent reinforcement by allowing near-wins, occasional wins, and “timed” payouts.



The uncertainty of the next win keeps players engaged and motivated to keep playing.



How do slot machines use psychology?

Emotional Toll On The Victim

The victim's emotional health worsens as they work harder to gain the abuser's affection, only to be met with unpredictable responses like "half-praises" and "half-apologies."

Feelings of helplessness and [hopelessness become pervasive](#), leading to depression, anxiety, or other mental health symptoms.

The combination of isolation, self-blame, and intermittent reinforcement creates a toxic environment where the victim feels trapped, dependent, and emotionally broken.

Scientific Insights

- Intermittent reinforcement occurs when a reinforcer is *not* given (the reward) every time the desired response occurs (Rollinson, 2011).

- When something has been learned because of intermittent reinforcement, the response seems to be remembered better and is more vigorous (Mills & Nankervis, 2013).

Gender And Cultural Factors

Gender and cultural factors may add layers of complexity to this stage, and **male narcissists** and patriarchal societies are more likely to trauma bond women in their relationships.

Victim's Response And Behavior

The abuser keeps acting in an unpredictable, irregular way to punish or reward certain behaviors. This randomness makes the victim's person-pleasing behavior more persistent, and resistant to break away from.

As a result, the victim has no idea when they will receive praise again, nor how long they will have to endure the ill-treatment. They eagerly look forward to the reward for acting like a slave to their master.

The uncertainty and inconsistency in the abuser's responses create a cycle where the victim becomes increasingly desperate for approval, further deepening their dependency on the abuser.

5: Submission Stage: Resignation To The Abuser's Will

“By the time the woman realizes that the abuse is inescapable, the traumatically produced emotional bond is quite strong.” – Dutton & Painter (1993)

In the submission stage, the victim may become resigned to their situation, feeling totally dependent, trapped, and helpless, making it almost impossible to break free.

The abuser has, or will soon have, systematically isolated the victim from friends, family, colleagues, and other social support systems. This might

be subtle and gradual, with them criticizing, belittling, or gossiping about the victim's friends or family.

It can also get more overt, and the abuser can start to dictate what the victim may wear, go, buy, eat, talk to, or socialize with.

They ultimately start controlling their victim's whereabouts and communications, dictating to be always location tagged, all passwords revealed, and sharing every detail of their day.

Of course, this 24/7 monitoring comes with scoldings for doing the wrong things or doing things wrongly.

A wife struggled to please her narcissistic husband at breakfast. If she made an omelet, he'd demand a poached egg, and vice versa. One day, determined to satisfy him, she made both. As he sat down to eat, he looked at the two eggs and said, "You poached the wrong one."

This [social isolation](#) increases dependency on the abuser, making the victim feel like there's no one else to turn to.

Over time, the victim starts blaming themselves for the abuse, internalizing the abuser's criticisms and accusations.

They may believe that they are at fault, that they deserve the abuse, or that they can change the abuser's behavior by being "better."

This internalization of blame intensifies the abuse cycle, further deepening the trauma bond and making it more challenging to recognize the abuse for what it is.

Overall, this stage increases the abuser's control and decreases the victim's autonomy.





6: Autonomy Erosion Stage: Loss Of Sense Of Self Identity

In this stage, the victim's sense of self becomes profoundly eroded. It seems as if their entire existence revolves around their abuser.

They lose the ability to recognize or express their needs, desires, or boundaries. They are always trying to satisfy and outdo their "service" to their abuser.

Their identity becomes enmeshed with the abuser, and they prioritize the abuser's needs and feelings over their own.

This loss of self is not merely a fading away of individuality; it's a transformation where the victim's thoughts, feelings, and actions become dominated by the abuser's influence.

Leaving the relationship becomes nearly impossible without significant outside intervention or support.

Even when the abuser's true nature is revealed, the victim may be reluctant to break up, and they may return to the relationship if they manage to break

away.

This stage represents the completion of the trauma bond, where the victim's autonomy is lost, and the bond becomes a defining aspect of their identity.

It's a profound and tragic loss of a person's self that often requires intensive support and therapy to overcome.

What is loss of self?



7: Emotional Addiction Stage: Loyalty-Seeking Abuser Alignment

In this final emotional addiction stage, the victim's attachment to the abuser becomes more entrenched as they start to seek their abuser's approval and validation.

They may begin to believe that they deserve the mistreatment or that the abuser's actions are justified.



This loyalty is not merely passive acceptance; it's an active alignment with the abuser's worldview.

The stage is often compared to [Stockholm Syndrome](#), where kidnapped victims sympathize with and support their captors.

The abused person becomes extremely loyal to their abuser, rationalizing their actions, protecting them from criticism, and even participating in their abusive behaviors.

They adopt the abuser's distorted view of reality, accepting claims that the hurtful actions are beneficial and protective.

This alignment solidifies the trauma bond, making it more challenging to recognize the abuse and seek help.

Moreover, cultural contexts and faith-based dynamics can make things worse for trauma bond victims.



FAQs

- [How Can I Break A Trauma Bond Quickly?](#)

Trauma bonding can be quickly broken by an abrupt, clean break from the abuser, blocking them from your online access, finding a safe place where they cannot reach you, getting supportive people to shield you, and seeking professional help.

The first thing to do would be to reach out to your trusted circle of friends, family, and colleagues who understand your situation. Tell them about your plans to leave your abuser, so that they know about your whereabouts and can keep you hidden and safe from [your abuser's rage](#) or revenge.

However, completely distancing yourself may be difficult if they work in the same place as you. In such cases, inform your colleagues and bosses about your possible safety concerns. Involve law enforcement if necessary.

2. **What Are The Common Signs Of Trauma Bonding?**

Here are the main signs of trauma bonding:

1. **Intense Emotional Attachment:** Feeling a strong connection to the abuser, even when faced with ongoing abuse.
2. **Addiction-Like Need:** Craving the abuser's approval, attention, kindness, and love, almost like being addicted to "your bad daddy/mommy."
3. **Rationalizing Abuser's Behavior:** Making excuses or justifying their harmful actions, to yourself as well as to others.
4. **Confusion and Powerlessness:** Feeling confused, hopeless, and helpless within the relationship.
5. **Difficulty Establishing Boundaries:** Struggling to set and maintain healthy boundaries with the abuser, despite being constantly abused.
6. **Going Back To Them:** Trauma bonding is a "psychological spell" that makes you crave going back to them, with the *false hope* that they



will understand their heinous mistakes, sincerely apologize to you, and change themselves for the better.

3. **How Does A Narcissist Trauma Bond With Their Victims?**

In a [trauma-bonded narcissistic relationship](#), the narcissist may use the following tactics on their victim partner:

Love Bombing: Showering the victim with affection, gifts, and attention to make them feel special and valued. This initial phase can create a strong emotional connection and trust.

Playing the Victim: Portraying themselves as misunderstood or victimized to gain sympathy and trust, making the victim feel responsible for their well-being.

Promises of Change: Making false promises to change or improve, giving the victim hope that things will get better, only to revert to abusive behavior.

Isolation: Gradually cutting the victim off from friends and family, making them more reliant on the abuser for social interaction and support.

Gaslighting: Making the victim question their memories, feelings, and perceptions, leading to confusion and a reliance on the abuser for their understanding of reality.

Exploiting Vulnerabilities: Identifying and using the victim's weaknesses to create dependency.

Inconsistent Reinforcement: Alternating between kindness and cruelty to keep the victim on edge.

Control Over Finances: Taking over financial resources to increase financial dependency.

Withholding Affection: Controlling the victim by withholding love and approval.

Threats and Intimidation: Creating fear and compliance through threats or violence.

Monitoring and Surveillance: Keeping tabs on the victim's activities



to create a sense of control.

Emotional Blackmail: Using guilt and emotional manipulation to control behavior and decisions.

4. **Can Trauma Bonding Occur Without Abuse?**

Trauma bonding can form in relationships without overt abuse, especially when there is a power imbalance or dependency issues. In a power imbalance, the victim is bonded by an impending threat of abuse or violence. In dependency situations, the victim may feel the threat of being abandoned by the person they are overly dependent on.

5. **What Does Withdrawal From A Trauma Bond Feel Like?**

Withdrawal from a trauma bond may feel similar to the withdrawal experienced during addiction recovery.

Some common feelings during this process include intense emotional pain, anxiety, feelings of loss, physical symptoms such as headaches or fatigue, and a strong desire to reconnect with the person from whom you are detaching.

6. **Is There A Test To Determine If You Are Experiencing Trauma Bonding?**

There are various assessment tools and psychometric scales that mental health professionals may use to evaluate trauma bonding or related symptoms:

Trauma Bonding Scale (Reid, 2023): This scale specifically targets trauma bonding and measures the attachment and loyalty to a person who is destructive or abusive in various relationships, including romantic, familial, or professional.

Stockholm Syndrome Scale (Graham, 1995): While not specifically designed for trauma bonding, this scale can assess symptoms that overlap with trauma bonding, such as loyalty to an abuser.



Dissociative Experiences Scale (DES): This scale can be used to assess dissociative symptoms, which may be present in individuals experiencing trauma bonding. Dissociation can be a coping mechanism in abusive relationships.

Complex PTSD Questionnaires: Since trauma bonding is often associated with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), assessments designed to evaluate C-PTSD may also provide insights into trauma bonding.

Individual Therapy and Clinical Interviews: Sometimes, standardized scales may not capture the nuances of trauma bonding. In such cases, individual therapy sessions and in-depth clinical interviews conducted by mental health professionals can provide a more personalized assessment.

What Are The 3 Signs Of A Trauma Bond?

Trauma bonds can be complex, but its three more easily recognizable signs are:

1. **Emotional Dependence:** A strong attachment to the abuser, even when aware of the harm they cause. This can manifest as a constant need for the abuser's approval and attention, resembling an addiction.
2. **Rationalizing Abuse:** Making excuses for the abuser's behavior or minimizing the impact of the abuse. This might include blaming oneself or external factors for the abuser's actions, rather than holding them accountable.
3. **Difficulty Establishing Boundaries:** Struggling to [set or maintain healthy boundaries](#) with the abuser. This can lead to a cycle where the victim continues to endure abuse, feeling powerless to stop it or leave the relationship.

What Does Trauma Bonding Do To A Person?



Trauma bonding can have deep effects on a victim, affecting many aspects of their life:

1. **Emotional Impact:** It can create intense emotional dependence on the abuser, leading to confusion, anxiety, and depression. The victim may feel trapped and unable to break free from the relationship.
2. **Erosion of Self-Worth:** Trauma bonding often erodes self-esteem and self-worth, making the victim believe they deserve the abuse or cannot find better. This can further entrench the craving for the abuser's validation.
3. **Difficulty in Relationships:** The victim may struggle to establish healthy boundaries and may have difficulty trusting others. This can affect not only the relationship with the abuser but also relationships with friends and family.
4. **Physical Health Issues:** The constant stress and anxiety associated with trauma bonding can lead to physical health problems, including sleep disturbances, headaches, and other stress-related ailments.
5. **Impaired Judgment:** The manipulation and control exerted by the abuser can impair the victim's ability to make sound judgments. They may rationalize the abuse or make decisions that prioritize the abuser's needs over their own well-being.

How Does A Trauma Bond Begin?

A trauma bond begins through a complex process that typically involves the following stages:

1. **Initial Connection:** Often, the relationship starts positively, with the abuser showering the victim with affection and attention. This "love bombing" stage makes the victim feel special and valued.
2. **Trust and Dependency Development:** The abuser skillfully manipulates the situation to create trust and dependency. They may



exploit vulnerabilities and create a seemingly strong connection, making the victim feel reliant on them.

3. **Inconsistent Reinforcement:** The abuser begins to alternate between kindness and cruelty. This inconsistency keeps the victim on edge, wanting to work harder to gain the abuser's affection. It can lead to addiction-like symptoms, where the victim craves the abuser's validation.
4. **Manipulation and Control:** Tactics like gaslighting, isolation, and control are used to further cement the bond. The victim may start to question their memories, feelings, and perceptions, becoming reliant on the abuser for their understanding of reality.
5. **Erosion of Self-Worth:** The victim's self-esteem and self-worth may be eroded, leading to a belief that they deserve the abuse or cannot find better. This mindset further entrenches the trauma bond.

The formation of a trauma bond is a gradual and insidious process, often happening without the victim fully realizing what's occurring. The combination of emotional highs and lows, manipulation, and control creates a powerful connection that can be challenging to break.

Final Words

Leaving a bad relationship is hard. The longer you are in a trauma-bonded relationship, the harder it might be to leave. You might keep going back to the same person who hurt you.

So, as soon as you realize you have been trauma-bonded, do these two things:

1. Stop justifying their behavior (doing so makes you an *enabler*), and
2. Distance yourself from the relationship with help from supportive people.



Reach out to therapists and counselors who specialize in relationship trauma.

Please tap into social support groups (even if it means talking to your local Alcoholics Anonymous), if you do not have the money. They can guide you on how to support yourself as you break out of your trauma bond.



*Researched and reviewed by **Dr. Sandip Roy** — medical doctor, psychology writer, and happiness researcher.*



- [How To Break A Trauma Bond After A Breakup With An Abuser?](#)
- [Narcissistic Shame: Why & How Do Narcissists Feel Shame?](#)
- [10 Signs of A Narcissistic Husband: Spot The Red Flags](#)



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Dr. Sandip Roy is a medical doctor and psychology writer, with a unique focus on mental well-being, positive psychology, narcissism, and Stoicism. His warm-hearted expertise has helped many mental abuse survivors find happiness again. Co-author of '[Critique of Positive Psychology and Positive Interventions](#)'. Find him on [LinkedIn](#).



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