

A person with curly hair is hugging a child from behind. They are standing on a wooden pier or dock, looking out over a body of water towards a distant shoreline under a grey, overcast sky. The scene is dimly lit, suggesting dusk or dawn.

Trauma Bonding

Created with integrity for 42nd Annual Statewide: Child Abuse & Neglect Conference

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My WHY

15 year old who
died due to her
maladaptive
attachment to
her trafficker.



Learning Intentions for Trauma Bonding Course

Trauma Bond Defined

The Science of Trauma Bonding

Trauma Bonding & Trafficking

Intervening in the Cycle of Trauma Bonding

Trauma Bonding (TB)

“Trauma Bonding is the attachment an abused person feels for their abuser, specifically in a relationship with a cyclical pattern of abuse.”

(Marsh, 2022; Psychology Today, 2021)

When the abuser is some form of relief, the abuser is also associated with safety.

It’s a hormonal attachment (a.k.a. biological) sprinkled with rescuing “sometimes” or “just enough,” to keep the survivor hooked.

The bond is created due to the cycle of abuse and positive reinforcement.

Trauma Coerced Attachment

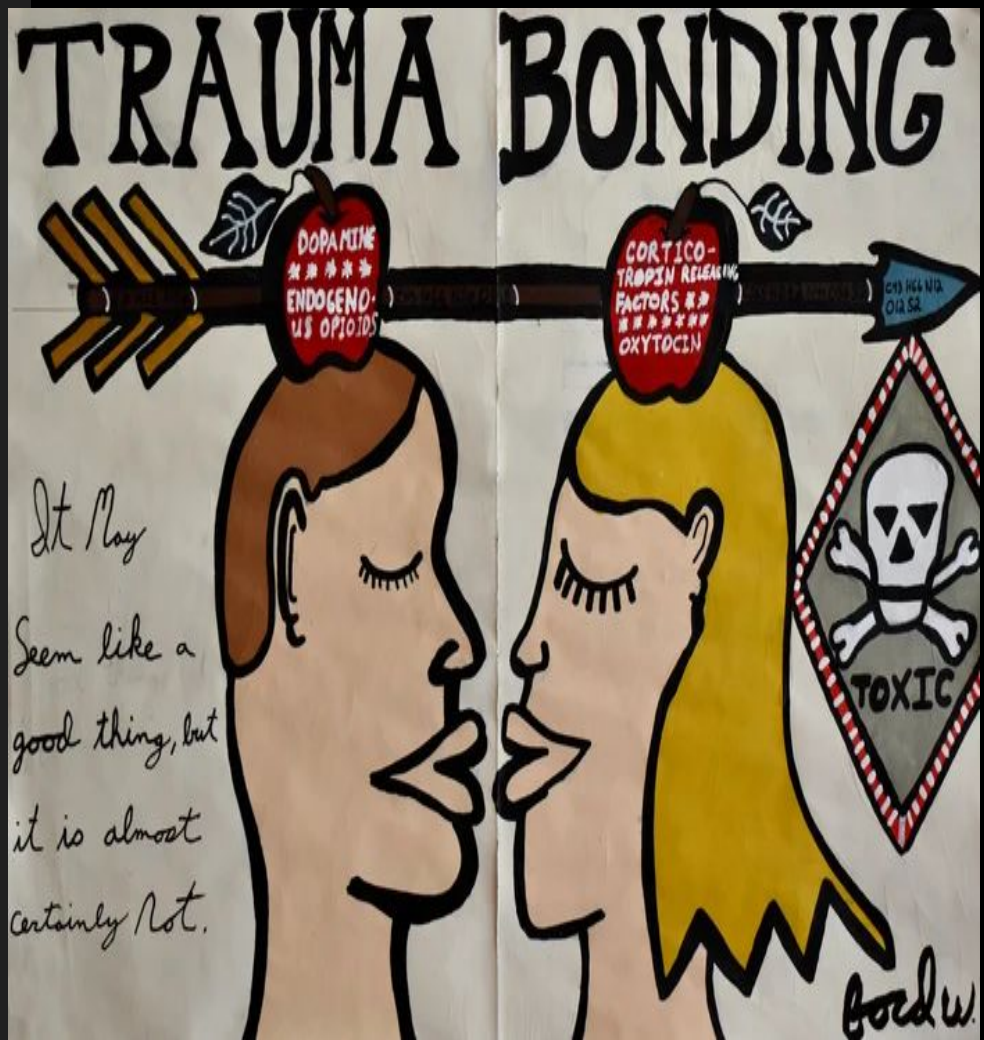
Stockholm Syndrome

Battered Person Syndrome

Battered Woman Syndrome

Victim Syndrome

Trauma Coercive Bonding



(Art by Ford William, unknown date)



Stockholm Syndrome - often reciprocal attachment, based on period of confinement, such as kidnapping, hostage taking, prisoner of war, etc.

Trauma Bonding - can be reciprocal attachment, often not reciprocal, can be in child abuse, IPV, human trafficking, family violence, intermittent cycles of positive reinforcement with abuse.

(Bailey, Dugard, Smith & Porges, 2023)

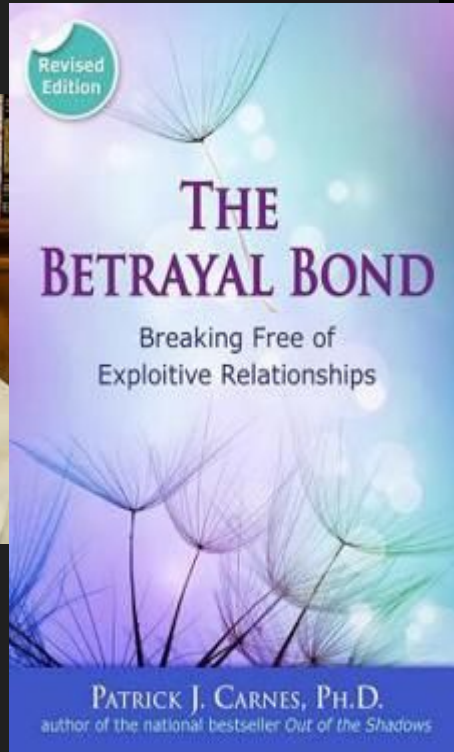
Foundation of Trauma Bonding

Based in study from Don Dutton &
Susan Painter (1981):

**Key criteria = Power Imbalance +
Intermittent Abuse**

Abusers alternate abuse (arousal)
with relief/lack of abuse/safety
(reinforcement)

Arousal + reinforcement creates TB



Patrick Carnes coins the term, “trauma bonding,” from his work with people experiencing abuse in the context of their addiction recovery.

Five Signs of Trauma Bonding (TB)

1. **Attraction to/staying with untrustworthy people**
2. **Not facing the facts**
3. **Secret keeping**
4. **Fear as motivator**
5. **Rumination**

(Carnes, 2020, YouTube Series: Five Signs of Traumatic Bonding)

Family Violence/IPV

Sexual Abuse

Elder Abuse

Immigration Abuse

Human Trafficking

Kidnapping

Religious Extremism

Ritual Sexual Abuse/Cults

(Medical News Today, 2023)



Four Stages of TB

Build up (tension)

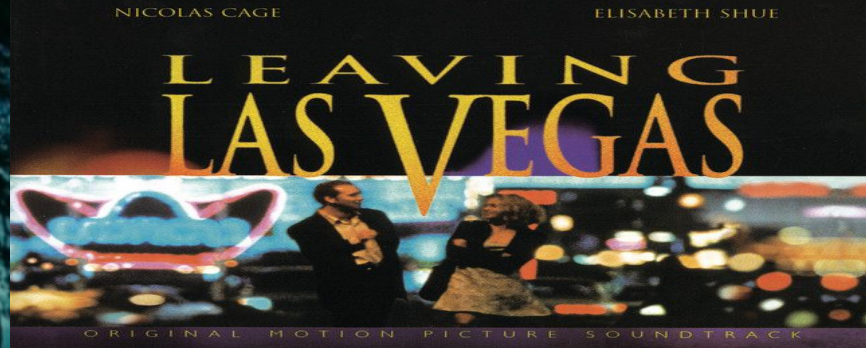
Incident (violence/emotional abuse)

Reconciliation (guilt/shame/"love bombing")

Calm (honeymoon)

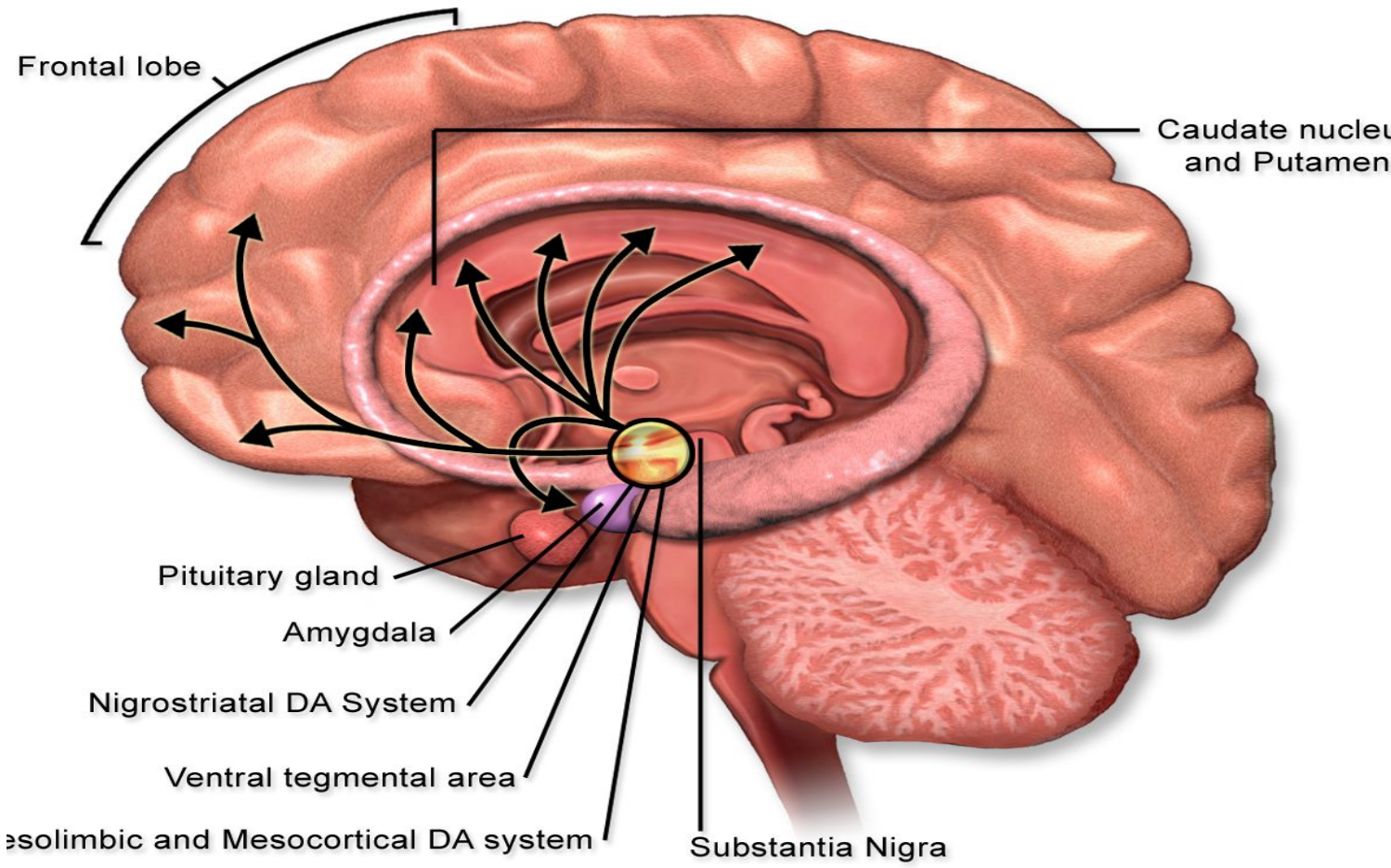
(Chelsea Psychology Clinic, 2023, PsychClarity, 2024)





Dopamine Pathway

The Reward System: Trauma Bonding



(Simply Psychology, 2023)

The Mohawk of Self Awareness

Midline Structures of the Brain

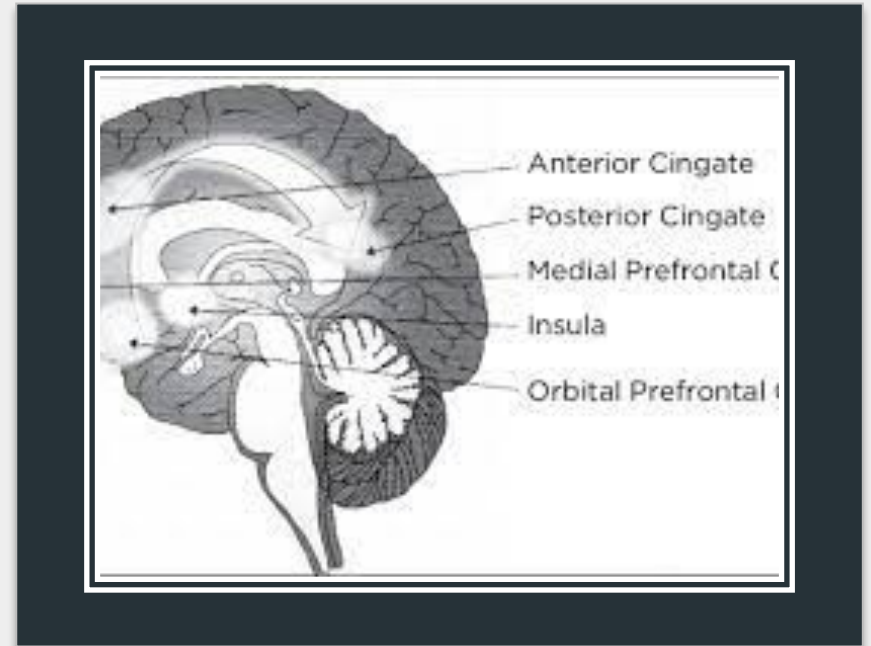
Is the “SELF” of the brain

Orients us to where we are

Is the thinking for one’s self

Is not activated when someone is in a trauma bond relationship

(Bessel van der Kolk, 2014)



Get ready to ride the roller coaster!

Highs are really HIGH

Lows are really LOW

Survivor is confused about self/identity

Frontal Lobe may be offline completely

Amygdala is over activated

Survival instinct is in overdrive

(PsychClarity Health, 2024).



Trauma Bonding

Comes down to the reward system in the brain

Can literally feel intoxicating or “like home” for trauma survivors/victims

Perfect cocktail of hormones: oxytocin (bonding), opioids (pleasure, pain, withdrawal) and dopamine (reward)

Cortisol levels can be HIGH due to fear of abandonment

Person affected wants a dopamine hit which may only be supplied by abuser’s re-engagement or love

(Chelsea Psychology Clinic, 2023)



Girls weren't drug addicted, they
were love addicted, and that, I'll
learn, is far harder to treat.

— *Rachel Lloyd* —

AZ QUOTES

Making of a Girl (a voice of a survivor)

“One day you are coming out of school and there’s a guy outside in a cadillac and he’s nice looking. He’s got the baseball cap and the jeans and the tims. And he tells you how pretty you are and how pretty your hair looks. And it has been a while since anyone has really noticed you. And for the first time, you feel like someone is interested in you, and because now all of a sudden he’s asking for your hopes and your dreams and where’s your daddy at? And he’s telling you he can be a daddy for you.”

“And that night he takes you to the club, he puts you up on the stage, and he gives you a few drinks, and it’s scary but all the time you are looking at his face in the back of the room, and he’s telling you go ahead baby, you are doing it for daddy”

“And you feel proud.”

A woman with long blonde hair, seen from behind, holding a hand in a forest setting. The background shows trees with autumn foliage and a bright sky.

Trafficking & Trauma Bonding

Grooming: the long game.

Guilt/Shame from being bought and sold

Force, Fraud and Coercion Present

Complex Trauma History for “victim”

May be reinforced by system due to “saving” or “rescuing”

Increase in violence with TRUST

Substance Use/Abuse as the ultimate control method

Some may be “saved” by a sex buyer

(Howser, 2023)

Features of Trauma Bonding in Trafficking

1. Pimps deliberate use of negative/positive reinforcement
2. Victim's gratitude for positive interaction
3. Victim's self-blame for negative interaction
4. Victim's internalization of pimp's perspective

(Casassa et. al., 2023)





Facts from adjacent field (IPV/DV)

6 to 8 attempts to leave an abuser

Leaving is the **MOST DANGEROUS** time

Everyday in the US, 3 women are murdered by an intimate partner

Survivors of violence are 3x more likely to experience MDD, GAD, PTSD, BPD, DID

(Respond, 2016)

it was when i stopped searching for home within others
and lifted the foundations of home within myself
i found there were no roots more intimate
than those between a mind and body
that have decided to be whole

- rupi kaur



Amara's Story Continued

Fawning response

Substances as a tool of control

Belief her trafficker was God

Voice, Choice, Empowerment

Hope is on the way.

Trauma, including trauma bonding, is ALWAYS “cured” in healthy, consistent, appropriate relationships that rewire the brain’s capacity to imagine a world where love can happen without pain.

(Howser, 2023)





The number one
antidote to Trauma
Bonding is
Empowerment.

Intervening in the cycle of Trauma Bonding

Removal from stimuli (including perpetrator)

Informed consent/assent

Active Listening (listening to understand, not to judge or to “get information”)

Consistency and clear expectations

Mental Health Stabilization (including 48 hours of sleep)

Boundaries, Boundaries, Boundaries

In the moment of DOUBT, educate about HT/TB/IPV, etc.

Minimize Negative Self Talk (TF-CBT, CBT)

Normalize the cycle of feeling guilt/shame

A lil' about Safety Planning

Social Media exclusions/breaks may be protective

Removing a minor's cell phone may not be protective

Continued reinforcement about 911, 311, hotlines

Education about human trafficking or stalking or presenting problem

Identifying “safe” people in community or home

Reporting can place a person at increased risk

Protective Orders/Restraining Orders

Motivational Interviewing as a tool for safety planning, harm reduction

My Story

As a thirteen-year-old girl, I experienced sexual assault by multiple perpetrators while on runaway status. With resilience and fortitude, I finished three degrees and vowed to spend my adult life working with survivors of sexual violence. To this day, I will not tell my “story” of my first abuser because of my trauma bond.





Seeds of Hope.

(Photo credit: name_gravity, 2017, found on Unsplash)

What if?

We educated youth

We held perpetrators
accountable

We worked together

We didn't reinforce "saving"

We spent the time

We retained staff with self
preservation

