

Self-Abandonment and the Clinical Treatment of Couples

Barbara Kiao

As a clinical counsellor who often works with couples (particularly cross-cultural couples) I often see my clients long for healthier, more loving relationships, yet, find themselves overly focused on seeking approval from others or meeting another person's needs leading to frustration and resentment. They are often dissatisfied with their partner's ability to "meet" and provide them with the love they so desire. I call this dynamic: *self-abandonment*. I wish to use the hypothetical case of Amy and Jake from the first year of the television series called *In Treatment* to illustrate self-abandonment and to suggest ways in which this dynamic can be addressed in psychotherapy.

What does it mean to abandon yourself? And why does self-abandonment wreak so much havoc in Amy and Jake's relationship? I believe there are many ways that they abandoned themselves:

- ignoring their feelings
- judging and criticizing themselves and each other
- turning outward to regulate their uncomfortable feelings (work and affairs)
- blaming each other for not making them feel safe, loved, and desired, etc.

It is precisely when we abandon ourselves in relationships, we are expecting others to give us what we don't give to ourselves, and more likely what we didn't receive growing up. The truth of the matter is we actually attract people who meet our same level of self-abandonment. They are unable to give us what we are looking for. Similarly, we can't possibly give them what they may desire in a partner. All of this self-abandonment generates anger, stress, depression or anxiety, and feelings of emptiness, disconnection from ourselves and the other person; and Jake and Amy have demonstrated that in their relationship.

Paul's Viewpoint

Here is what I believe the therapist Paul, as portrayed in the TV series *In Treatment*, would view their challenges:

- Jake & Amy are to face their fears.
- Paul also thinks their inability to accept each other is bringing out the worst in them.

- Amy's behavior sometimes encourages Jake's suspicion of her.
- Paul also went on to educate them that relationship is not about "yes" or "no" to their abortion; it is more complex than that.
- It is quite possible that Jake believes with Amy's pregnancy it could be a form of control over her.
- They are trying to force their perspectives onto each other and after a while becomes a power struggle and that has become the dynamic between the two.
- Paul's most poignant point is that it seems Jake and Amy's intimacy was created with a conspiracy between them (Amy was married to Nick when they first met) and when Amy tries to step out of the house to break up that conspiracy, it made Jake uptight, therefore, the conflict between them intensifies.
- Paul suggested that sometimes ending a conflict between them may not be a good thing for the relationship because they are so used to that and when the conflict stops the interest stops.
- Paul also realized that both Jake & Amy have little boundaries.
- Amy claims Jake is pathetic so she does not have to look at her own insecurities.
- It is highly possible that Jake married his "father".

An Alternative Viewpoint

I have a different perspective in viewing this couple's relationship challenges. I have already mentioned earlier of the concept of self-abandonment. In my opinion, it is more about the treatment of neurotic conflicts. As Paul mentioned, they do not realize that their relationship deeply provokes each other and leads them into an encounter with those aspects of their family histories, of themselves (immature defenses) and their experiences that are most painful for them (childhood wounds).

In Amy's case: She feels disregarded, judged, disrespected or outright shamed or abandoned; her feelings that are familiar to her:

- to be emotionally alone in the face of "helplessness"
- identified with "toxic shame" for her father's death and she thinks her mother has never forgiven her; she's overweight when young; and she was triggered by her recent miscarriage and affair
- behavior of self-hatred & self-abandonment

- she demonstrated behaviors that illustrated by Karen Horney's 'Self-Theory' – vacillating between despised self and ideal self.

In Jake's case: He too is deep in his own old wounds because his father being a narcissist and a "know-it-all" he criticizes Jake frequently and so with absence of attention, approval and validation, Jake also feels judged, inadequate, jealous and distrust. Similar to Amy, the feelings that are familiar to him is to be emotionally alone in the face of "neglect" and "helplessness". His career is regarded not as successful when compared to Amy's and by his parents and the society's standards. He's after all an under achiever because he is a well-read man. My point of view is that he too has identified with 'toxic shame' for his lack of ambition and self-hatred and self- abandonment.

Toxic Shame and the Art of Loving

Their love according to Eric Fromm's theory of Love is considered immature. Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving* describes immature love is symbiotic love, transitory and illusory. Mature form of love is attained through the retention of the individual self rather than like Amy and Jake loss through symbiosis. It is out of the desire for human connection comes a desire to fuse with another person, for the two to become in essence one. Fromm claims that the deepest, most pressing need of mankind is to overcome a sense of loneliness and separation.

My assessment is that both Amy and Jake have identified with their 'toxic shame', I think it is important for me to explain the two concepts of toxic shame and self- abandonment here. Shame is one of the most debilitating emotional reactions we have, it can literally suck the living day lights out of us from living our lives. However, shame is a learned behavior, or what's considered right or wrong based on our cultural or family messages. Shame is always a reaction to judgment either from someone else or ourselves. Toxic shame is a long-standing shame that kind of bleeds into how you see yourself, others and situations. This is the type of shame that is common in a lot of individuals who have identified themselves with it and as in Amy and Jake.

Dr. Brene Brown (researcher on vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work) ... she indicates that shame is the most powerful, master emotion. It is the fear that we're not good enough or that something's inherently wrong with us. Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we are capable of change.

While there are many kinds of relationship challenges (on the surface), I do believe they are generally caused by one thing and that is self-abandonment. Self-abandonment is at the core of so much that people are suffering from --- the anxiety and depression; guilt; shame and anger; relationship problems and all variations of addictions; all come from self-abandonment & self-rejection.

I think both Amy and Jake are no exception:

- As I mentioned from the start that they make each other responsible for their feelings of safety, happiness and self-worth that they created a lot of problems in their relationship.
- There is self-judgment --- Amy and Jake are self-critical and fault finding.
- They abandon themselves by making somebody else (each other) responsible for their feelings. And so, when they are ignoring their feelings and staying in their head not being in their body and turning to their self-judgment, is it any wonder why they blame each other for their feelings? Is it any wonder why the “victim” archetype is constantly at play?

Treating Jake and Amy

The goal to achieve true healing and connectedness with Jake and Amy is paramount—first and foremost, is to continue excavating their individual underlying belief system that are governing their relationship (i.e. habitual assumptions; premises and attitudes that determine the way they respond to each other & life events dealing with infertility; mismatch of life goals, temperaments; and infidelity.)

Using MiCBT (integrating mindfulness with traditional Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) to raise their consciousness and to pay attention to all distressing feelings rather than protect against them. Also to educate them on healthy communication skills; containment skills; Gottman’s 4 Horsemen of the Apocalypse; Sternberg’s Triangular Theory of Love; Chapman’s Five Love Languages and provided other practical tools and exercises to help them not only to stop creating the drama but more importantly to treat each other with respect if not love. To help them set the intention to learn to be a loving adult rather from the old operating systems that are operating from their shame-based ego wounded self (i.e. teach them to welcome, embrace and process all their uncomfortable feelings with compassion); guide them through a step-by-step process to explore the thoughts & distorted beliefs from their wounded selves that may be causing them shame, fear and pain so to release anger and pain in healthier ways

When watching Paul (the therapist) working with Jake and Amy, I also saw some of the sources of their disagreements and differences are not just based on behavioral and communication levels rather it goes

deeper than that — the powerful beliefs, myths and themes which inform the behavior. In helping them to unearth all that, I must make sure their themes must be co-evolved by me and Amy and Jake; to make certain that the theme does not end up laying blame on one partner (the process has to be non-blaming); and continuously to challenge their beliefs which are constricting or impoverishing to them both. (i.e. Personal beliefs, what the beliefs do in the primary couple relationship; how these beliefs play out in other relationships and, finally, how they manifest in the family of origin and culture.)

In all of my therapy and training, not one therapist or teacher had told me I am supposed to be responsible for my own feelings or taught me how to love myself. It took me years to learn and now my core work is just that — additional to the conventional therapy, I also coach my clients to take responsibility for their feelings and to learn to love themselves so they could share their love (instead 'to love to get love') with their significant other.

Last and not least, based on Karen Horney's three Personality Types of neurotic people, I will use the HDS (Hogan Development Survey) to help Amy and Jake to further develop and grow. By doing their own individual work it resets everything, once they learned to take responsibility for themselves, the whole energy changes between them and the good news is it does not take very long.

References

Adshead, G. & Jacob, C. (2009). *Personality Disorder (The Definitive Reader)*. Philadelphia, PA, USA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Burger, J.M. (2008). *Personality (7th Edition)*. Belmont, CA, USA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Mobley Group Pacific (2009). Hogan Assessment Inventories. <http://www.peterberry.com.au/hogan-assessments>