

THE SEARCH FOR A NURTURER

THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD ABANDONMENT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SEVERE ATTACHMENT ISSUES AND PERSONALITY DISORDER

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Introduction

The experience of childhood abandonment can determine the course of someone's whole life, with extremely damaging results. Many children go on to develop borderline personality disorder (BPD) accompanied by severe attachment issues. Some become obsessed with and stalk people they feel a connection to, and with whom they hope for a loving but platonic relationship. This is a much misunderstood and stigmatised consequence of childhood abandonment that deserves further study.

Methods

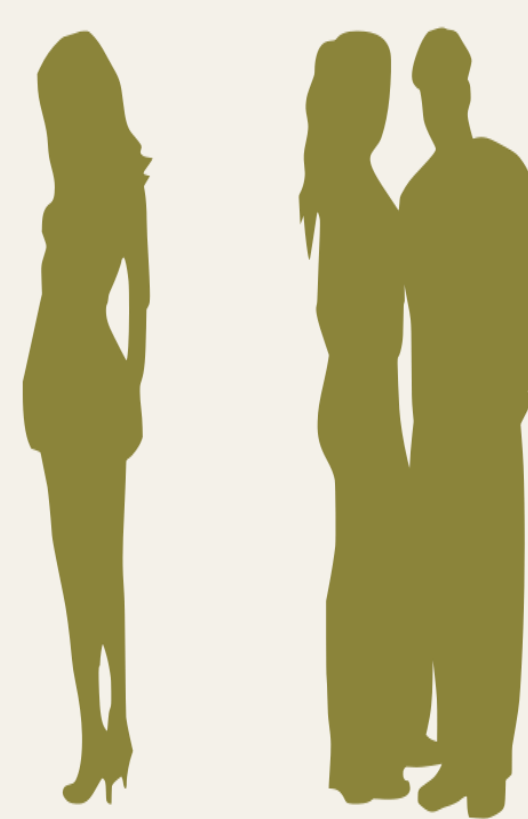
Steph (not her real name), has experience of both BPD and severe attachment. She has given permission to share her story to highlight how the effects of childhood abandonment can manifest, especially in a world where understanding and compassion is not always forthcoming. Steph undertook a series of interviews, with all relevant safeguards being implemented. Certain behavioural aspects, such as stalking and obsession, were backed up with the available literature.

BPD

Symptoms of BPD can include intense feelings of anger, fear of abandonment, suicidal thoughts and self-harm, as well as mood-swings and impulsivity. Those affected tend to be hyper-sensitive to rejection and to have an extreme fear of endings from those they have grown close to. Thought to be caused largely by childhood trauma, the symptoms can mirror those associated with severe attachment.

Attachment

The origins of attachment styles and personality lie in John Bowlby's and Mary Ainsworth's early works on attachment theory. Their attachment types of 'secure', 'anxious' and 'avoidant', and later 'disorganised', lay the foundations for broader definitions, including **anxious-ambivalent attachment**, with which Steph identifies.



Those with anxious-ambivalent attachment often feel unable to interact competently with others. They will be wary of their motives, sometimes leading to feelings of paranoia, and they will almost expect to be **rejected**.

This results in them blaming themselves for their own poor communication skills, leading to a lack of confidence and often, to their withdrawal from meaningful interactions. In time, they will learn how to **pretend not to care** when, in fact, they may yearn for some kind of closeness. Steph learned early on, how to hide her desires for attachment to others. Unfortunately, this only led to her developing unhealthy attachments.

Steph's Attachments

The Social Worker

I was 14 years old and met her after I had taken overdoses and run away from home. She didn't talk down to me; she asked me questions about how I felt. She seemed to genuinely care. This was new to me, and I liked it. She left her job without warning; I was devastated and felt abandoned. I felt lost and extremely lonely, and wanted to know where she was, but at that time there was no social media to help me find anything out. Obviously, I couldn't tell anyone how I felt; I thought I was the only one on earth to feel like that, and I was embarrassed and ashamed.

The distress felt by Steph when her social worker left would be repeated through all her future attachments when the relationships, inevitably, came to an end.

The GP

It was a warm feeling; knowing where she was if I needed her. Then, one day she said she was leaving, to spend more time with her family. After she left, I became consumed with the desire to know where she was.

Through methods available online Steph found out everything she could about her GP and her family, including where they lived. She was hurt and wanted the GP to feel some of that hurt. She didn't go near the GP's house much because she didn't want to be seen. Instead, she started to park near to where the GP's parents lived, not directly but a place where she could see their house. She would sit and fantasise about harming them, just so that the GP would feel the hurt that Steph did. This fantasy went on, periodically, for several years and ended only when she became attached to someone else.

The Psychotherapist

One day, I told her I was attached to her. She looked uncomfortable and even angry. She ended the session early and she said we could discuss it the next time we met. But a few days later, I received an email from her to say she was ending our therapy for my wellbeing. I was devastated; I sent many emails begging her to change her mind but received no response.

Steph says that the moment she realised the relationship was truly over, her feelings of hurt switched to hate. She experienced narcissistic rage, needing revenge before she could calm down. She spent the next two days on social media telling everyone how bad the therapist was and warning people against her.

The Probation Officer

I knew where she lived, simply by googling her. I just needed to know where she was. I had no intention of knocking on her door while she was there, but I did once go to the back of her house and look through the window. All I saw was her kitchen, but I can't tell you how happy and comforted that made me feel. Sometime previously, I had been outside in my car when she was having CCTV installed, so I knew what the consequences of being there could be, but the temptation was too great.

After Steph's probation ended, she continued to make occasional drives by the probation officer's house to see if her car was there. She says she just needed to know where she was. This is the closest Steph came to being arrested for stalking.

Stalking

In the UK, the act of stalking is defined as:
...a pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive behaviour which is intrusive. It can include harassment that amounts to stalking or stalking that causes fear of violence or serious alarm or distress.

By this definition, Steph's behaviour could not be classed as stalking because the subjects were unaware of what she was doing. She did not, therefore, harass or cause fear of violence, serious alarm or distress. However, if the probation officer had played the CCTV back and became distressed at what she saw, she would have had a case against Steph for stalking. Steph could then be classed as a **'simple obsessional stalker'**, a label given to those who are in a relationship unequal in status, such as patient-client etc.

Discussion

There is always going to be an imbalance of power between two people when one of them is regarded by the other as being of a higher status, and when attachment issues come into play, the imbalance is likely to be even greater. The common thread in Steph's attachment figures is the professional 'nurturing' element and, as we have seen, those professionals have had the power to create a sense of warmth and safety, but also to hurt, humiliate, embarrass and shame.

Steph's reactions to each relationship coming to an end is not that unusual among people who did not have a nurturing figure as a child. The attachment figures are, effectively, nurturing surrogates for the inner child, who then struggles to cope when the relationship comes to an end.

Conclusion

I asked Steph to be part of this study because she has incredible insight into her issues with attachment. She has come to realise that her search for a nurturer, a care-giver for her inner child, can never be fulfilled. However, with the help of a new therapist she has learned how to achieve a 'good enough' relationship with her attachment figures and so avoid the extreme reactions of endings. There is still much to be learnt on this subject, and personal involvement like this can provide valuable understanding of why certain people behave the way they do.

References

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Acknowledgment

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