

Trauma bonding happens when an abuser uses manipulation tactics and cycles of abuse to make the victim feel dependent on them for care and validation, causing a strong attachment or bond. This often occurs in narcissistic relationships, but can also occur in families, friendships, or work relationships.

Whether the abuse is purely psychological or a combination of the two, it may feel impossible to simply "walk away" even when you are being harmed.

WHO IS SUSCEPTIBLE

Risk Factors for Trauma Bonding

- People with relational and emotional trauma
- Anyone who puts a lot of value on 'the good times' and is quick to forgive
- Anyone with a history of being abused in childhood or past relationships
- People with disorganized, anxious, or avoidant attachments
- People with the tendency to question themselves, even despite strong evidence
- Existing mental health concerns such as depression, BPD, and anxiety
- People who are sensitive to rejection

THE 7 STAGES

How Trauma Bonding Develops

1. Love Bombing

The sudden, intense attempt to create closeness through high praise and excessive flattery. The abuser preys on the victim's emotions, hopes, and desires — causing them to lower their guard and trust the abuser's intentions.

2. Trust & Dependency

The abuser tests the victim's trust, making them feel guilty for questioning the relationship. The dependency built during love bombing makes it difficult to see through the illusion.

3. Criticism

Once trust is established, the abuser begins picking apart the victim's qualities. This feels sudden — but is by design. The cycle of harsh criticism and over-apologizing forms the glue of the trauma bond.

4. Manipulation & Gaslighting

Gaslighting makes victims question their own reality. The abuser never fully takes responsibility and shifts blame onto the victim — often remaining calm precisely when the target reaches their breaking point.

5. Resignation & Giving Up

Victims begin giving in to avoid conflict. They may have some awareness of the manipulation but feel unable to leave — fearing the abuser's reaction or blaming themselves for the dynamic.

6. Loss of Self

A progressive loss of identity, confidence, and connection to the outside world. The psychological destruction built over time can lead to complete loss of confidence and profound isolation.

7. Addiction to the Cycle

After conflict, a honeymoon period may follow — the abuser apologizes and love-bombing restarts. This cyclical pattern positively reinforces the dependency, making the bond feel real and even loving.

BREAKING FREE

Breaking free from a trauma bond requires support. Make a plan with trusted people, access a reputable crisis hotline, and consider trauma-focused therapy. Recovery and post-traumatic growth are possible.

- National Domestic Violence Hotline — 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)