



# Understanding the Self-Abandonment Pattern

How We Learn to Leave  
Ourselves Behind.  
How We Find Our Way Back.

A guide to recognising the patterns of self-abandonment,  
and beginning the process of returning to yourself

## **Why Certain Patterns Keep Repeating**

Why do certain patterns keep repeating? Why do small conversations replay in our minds long after they are over? Why does conflict feel disproportionately uncomfortable? Why do we feel responsible for other people's emotions, reactions, or wellbeing?

These patterns are often interpreted as personality traits. We describe ourselves as overthinkers, people-pleasers, or "the reliable one." Sometimes we see these tendencies as personal shortcomings, something about ourselves that's overly sensitive, overly accommodating, or difficult to change. These patterns are the way our nervous system has learned to maintain connection, reduce tension, and stay emotionally safe within the environment we grew up in.

They're not flaws; they're adaptations.

## How These Patterns Begin

Children are highly sensitive to the emotional climates around them. Long before they have the language to explain what they feel, they're already reading the room. They register tension between adults. They notice disappointment, withdrawal, approval, frustration, or relief - even when those signals are subtle and never openly discussed.

Because connections with caregivers are essential for safety, belonging, and survival, children naturally begin adapting themselves in ways that help preserve these connections.

Sometimes that means becoming easy-going, or helpful, or becoming the one who keeps things calm. And sometimes it means learning to keep certain feelings quiet.

These responses are small emotional calculations that happen automatically as a child learns what maintains a connection, and what threatens it.

Over time these small adjustments accumulate. Our developing emotional self begins to organise itself around an unspoken rule: **maintaining connection matters more than expressing myself.**

## **When Adaptation Begins to Shape Identity**

For some children, this rule becomes particularly strong. They learn to anticipate reactions, soften their responses, and forget their own needs to keep relationships steady. They become attentive to other people's moods and needs before noticing their own.

At the time, these strategies make perfect sense - after all, they're intelligent responses to environments that require awareness, flexibility, and emotional restraint. But adaptations that help us maintain connection can also come with a cost. Patterns that once helped us stay close to others can slowly begin to distance us from ourselves.

## **The Quiet Imbalance That Appears Later**

Many people only begin to notice an imbalance later in life. From the outside they appear thoughtful, reliable, and supportive. They're often the people others turn to when something goes wrong – the ones who listen carefully, smooth over tension, and try to make things work. But inside something feels out of balance - not because they care too much, but because somewhere along the way they learned that maintaining connection sometimes means putting themselves second.

Sometimes third.

Sometimes not in the picture at all.

## **Recognising the Pattern**

As this pattern develops, we become highly skilled at staying connected to others but slowly lose contact with emotional parts of ourselves in the process. We may override internal signals that something feels uncomfortable, struggle to recognise our own needs clearly, or we may adjust our reactions to maintain harmony, even when something inside us disagrees.

Because these patterns develop slowly and often bring social approval – being seen as kind, thoughtful, and dependable – they don't feel like a problem at first. They simply feel like an identity.

"I'm just someone who helps."

"I'm agreeable."

"I'm not a confrontational person."

But beneath this there are often other patterns quietly operating:

- a tendency to prioritise other people's needs before our own
- a habit of replaying conversations
- worrying we might have said the wrong thing

- an instinct to keep the peace even when something inside us feels uneasy
- a feeling of responsibility for other people's emotions or reactions
- difficulty saying no or expressing disagreement
- feeling uncomfortable when asking for what we need, without guilt
- minimising our feelings so others feel more comfortable
- worrying that expressing our needs might make us seem difficult, selfish, or "too much"

Many of us who recognise these patterns are emotionally exhausted from constantly adapting our own emotions to maintain harmony.

We notice resentment appearing in moments when other people expect generosity, we feel a sense of emotional fatigue after interactions where we've spent most of our energy reading the room, anticipating reactions, or making sure everything stays calm.

This realisation can feel confusing; after all, kindness, attentiveness, reliability are usually seen as positive qualities. But resentment begins to creep in when caring for others consistently requires abandoning ourselves.

## **Naming the Pattern: Self-Abandonment**

Self-abandonment develops gradually through repeated situations where expressing needs, emotions, or boundaries feels uncertain, risky, or unwelcome. Our nervous system adapts and suppresses its needs.

- we become agreeable
- understanding
- low maintenance
- we learn to read the room
- we soften our reactions
- we keep the peace

The responses that once helped maintain connection and stability follow us into adulthood long after the original need for safety, approval, and acceptance have passed. Over time our nervous system has internalised a simple rule: **keep the peace, even if it costs you mentally and emotionally.**

What begins as a useful adaptation slowly becomes a habit, and habits, repeated often enough, become an identity. This is why we don't recognise the pattern for years. From the outside - and often from the inside - it simply looks like being helpful, reliable, lenient, or considerate. But what looks like

co-operation and perfection on the outside is often self-protection on the inside.

Beneath the surface something debilitating is forming. When our internal signals – our needs, instincts, and boundaries – are repeatedly softened, postponed, or overridden to maintain harmony, a cycle begins to form. Over time that cycle becomes a familiar way of moving through relationships.

1. A quiet loop emerges.
2. We sense tension.
3. We adapt ourselves to prevent it.
4. Connection is maintained.
5. But something inside us is left behind.

The relationship remains stable, so the adjustment feels successful and the nervous system learns that this strategy works. The loop repeats and gradually the pattern becomes automatic. This cycle is called **The Self-Abandonment Loop**.

## **The Self-Abandonment Loop**

Many people move through a repeating cycle that looks like this:

### **1. Adaptation**

Something in the early environment taught the nervous system that maintaining connection required us to adjust our needs.

- Emotions may be dismissed.
- Conflict may feel dangerous.
- Approval may feel conditional.

The brain learns strategies to keep connections stable.

### **2. Self-Abandonment**

To maintain harmony or approval, we begin adjusting ourselves.

- We might say yes when we mean no.
- Minimise our feelings.
- Prioritise others' comfort.
- Suppress disagreement.

These behaviours protect connection in the moment.

### **3. Short-Term Stability**

The strategy worked!

- Conflict is avoided.
- Approval is maintained.
- Relationships remain intact.

The nervous system interprets this as proof that the strategy is correct.

So, it keeps using it.

### **4. Long-Term Cost**

Over time the pattern develops deeper consequences.

- Emotional exhaustion.
- Resentment.
- Confusion about personal needs.
- Feeling invisible in relationships.

But because the pattern feels familiar, it continues.

### **5. Awareness**

Eventually something interrupts the loop:

- Burnout.
- Repeated relationship problems.

- Therapy or self-reflection.
- Encountering language that explains the pattern.

We notice when we're leaving ourselves behind.

## **6. Reconnection with ourselves**

Small new choices begin appearing.

- We express our needs.
- Set a boundary.
- Tolerate mild conflict.
- Allow ourselves to take up space.

These moments gradually weaken the loop.

## **The Hidden Structure of Self-Abandonment**

### **1. Adaptation Is Not Dysfunction**

Many behaviours we criticise in ourselves began as adaptive responses to difficult environments. People-pleasing, overthinking, hyper-awareness of others, conflict avoidance, emotional shutdown...these are not random personality flaws; they're strategies our nervous system learned so we could maintain connection and safety. Understanding **that** removes shame and replaces it with curiosity. Instead of asking, what's wrong with me? the question becomes, what did my nervous system learn to do?

### **2. The Nervous System Learns Through Experience**

The nervous system does not operate through logic alone. It learns through repeated emotional experiences. If certain environments required constant vigilance, the body learned to stay alert. If emotional expression led to criticism, the body learned to suppress feelings.

These responses continue into adulthood not because we're irrational, but because the nervous system is doing what it was trained to do.

### **3. Connection Is a Primary Human Need**

Human beings are wired to seek connection. Because of this, the brain often prioritises maintaining connection over maintaining authenticity. **This is where self-abandonment begins.** We learn that staying connected sometimes requires adjusting or suppressing emotional behaviours in ourselves.

### **4. Self-Abandonment Happens Gradually**

Very few people consciously decide to abandon themselves. It happens through small adjustments repeated over time.

- Not saying something we want to say.
- Softening a reaction.
- Prioritising someone else's feelings.
- Allowing a boundary to blur.

Each moment seems minor but repeated often enough, they slowly shift the person's centre of gravity away from their own internal experience.

### **5. The Cost Appears Later**

Self-abandonment often works well in the short term.

- It keeps relationships stable.
- It reduces conflict.
- It maintains approval.

But the long-term cost appears later:

- exhaustion
- resentment
- emotional confusion
- difficulty recognising one's own needs
- feeling invisible or disconnected

Many people only recognise the pattern when these costs become impossible to ignore.

## **6. Awareness Is the Turning Point**

The most important shift occurs when someone begins seeing the pattern in real time.

- They notice when they silence themselves.
- They notice when they prioritise someone else's comfort automatically.
- They notice the moment their needs disappear from the conversation.
- This awareness creates a pause where new choices become possible.

## **7. Returning to Yourself Is Gradual**

Healing from self-abandonment is subtle. It happens through small moments of reconnection.

- Recognising a feeling.
- Expressing a boundary.
- Admitting a need.
- Allowing yourself to take up space.

Over time, these small moments rebuild self-trust. We learn we can remain present in relationships without disappearing from our own life.

## **12 Personalities That Grow Out of Self-Abandonment**

If you identify with any of the following personalities try not to feel shamed or guilty. It's a positive sign that you know yourself well enough to recognise elements of your character in these descriptions:

### **1. The People-Pleaser**

This pattern develops when a person learns early that keeping others happy prevents conflict or withdrawal. Instead of asking what *they* want, they constantly scan for what *others* might need. They anticipate reactions, soften disagreements, and manage emotional tension before it escalates. Eventually the person becomes exhausted from carrying emotional responsibility that was never really theirs.

### **2. The Overthinker**

The brain learned early on to analyse interactions carefully to prevent rejection or conflict. Overthinking is often labelled as anxiety, but overthinking is provoked by situations that require us to be hyper-vigilant for threats to our emotional safety.

### **3. The Emotional Shutdown**

Some people respond to stress by becoming highly emotional. Others respond by feeling almost nothing at all.

Emotional shutdown is a nervous system strategy that protects against overwhelm.

#### **4. The Conflict Avoider**

For some people, conflict is simply uncomfortable. For others, it feels deeply threatening. The nervous system learns that keeping the peace is essential for safety.

#### **5. The Over-Responsible One**

The over-responsible person learns at an early age to carry more emotional weight than should be required of them. They may feel compelled to solve everyone's problems or hold relationships together even when it drains them.

#### **6. The Invisible One**

Some people survive difficult environments by becoming as unobtrusive as possible. They stay quiet, observe more than they participate, and avoid drawing attention to themselves.

#### **7. The Hyper-Independent One**

When relying on others has led to disappointment or instability, a person may decide that depending on anyone is too risky, so they become fiercely self-reliant.

## **8. The Approval Seeker**

Some people develop a deep sensitivity to other people's reactions. Praise feels crucially important. Criticism feels devastating. Their sense of worth becomes tied to external feedback rather than internal stability.

## **9. The Emotional Absorber - the 'empath'**

These individuals are highly attuned to the emotional states of others. They notice tension quickly and sense when someone is upset. While empathy can be a strength, emotional absorbers often struggle to separate their own feelings from those around them.

## **10. The Self-Doubter**

When someone's experiences or feelings were repeatedly questioned or dismissed, they may grow up unsure if their own perceptions are valid. They second-guess decisions and seek reassurance before trusting their own judgement.

## **11. The Perfectionist**

Perfectionism often emerges in environments where mistakes brought criticism, shame, or disappointment. The mind learns a protective rule: if everything is done perfectly, nothing bad will happen.

## **12. The Self-Abandoner**

At the centre of these patterns is the same underlying adaptation: **we learned that maintaining connection required disconnecting from emotional parts of ourselves.**

Recovery begins when that pattern becomes visible.

When we recognise the moments where we left ourselves behind, we can begin the work of returning.

## **The Self-Abandonment Series**

If you'd like to dive deeper and understand more about why these patterns develop and how we begin returning to ourselves then this 10-part series is a good place to begin. The subjects in this series are:

1. The Moment You Learned to Leave Yourself Behind.
2. Why Your Nervous System Still Thinks the Past Is Happening.
3. When Keeping the Peace Becomes Losing Yourself.
4. The Hidden Cost of Being the Strong One.
5. The Loneliness of Being the Reliable One.
6. The Quiet Exhaustion of People Who Feel Too Much.
7. When Your Needs Start to Feel Like Problems.
8. How Self-Abandonment Becomes a Life Pattern.
9. Why Emotional Safety Feels So Unfamiliar at First.
10. The Slow Process of Returning to Yourself.

## 1. The Moment You Learned to Leave Yourself Behind

Most of us can't point the exact moment it happened. There was no announcement. No clear turning point. But somewhere along the way, we learned something quiet and powerful: **that maintaining connection required leaving emotional parts of ourselves behind.**

Children arrive in the world with a simple expectation. When they feel something – joy, fear, frustration, confusion – they expect someone to help them understand it. If a child cries, someone comforts them. If they feel overwhelmed, someone helps calm them down. If they feel curious, someone responds. Through thousands of small interactions like these, children gradually build a map of their emotional world. That map answers important questions:

- Is it safe to express how I feel?
- Is it safe to need things?
- Is it safe to disagree?
- Is it safe to be fully myself?

In emotionally supportive environments, the answers are mostly 'yes'. Feelings are welcomed. Needs are acknowledged. Mistakes are tolerated. Conflict can exist without threatening connection.

But in some environments, emotions feel unpredictable. A parent may be loving one moment and withdrawn the next. Disagreement may lead to criticism or anger. Certain emotions may be dismissed or treated as inconvenient.

Children are extraordinarily perceptive. Long before they can explain what is happening, their nervous system begins studying patterns. They notice what creates tension, what brings approval, and what causes withdrawal. Without anyone consciously deciding it, a new emotional strategy begins to form. Instead of asking, what do I feel, the child begins asking, what will keep things calm? Instead of asking, what do I need right now, they begin asking, how can I avoid upsetting someone? How can I maintain harmony?

This shift is subtle but profound. The child begins adjusting themselves to fit the emotional environment around them. They soften reactions. They become agreeable. They anticipate other people's moods. They try to prevent problems before they appear.

From the outside, these children often seem unusually mature. Adults describe them as thoughtful, well behaved, or responsible. But beneath the maturity lies something different: the child is learning how to maintain connection by adapting their emotions.

At first, this adaptation feels protective. It reduces tension. It keeps relationships stable. It helps the child navigate environments that might otherwise feel overwhelming. But over time as the child becomes increasingly skilled at noticing other people's emotions, they become increasingly disconnected from their own. They learn to read the room, to predict reactions, to smooth over tension, but what they rarely learn is how to remain connected to themselves while doing so.

As these children grow into adults, the pattern continues. They become the people others rely on. The supportive friend. The understanding partner. The reliable colleague. They are thoughtful and empathetic but often carry a quiet form of emotional fatigue as they maintain relationships through constant emotional adjustment that requires continuous effort.

Many people who learned this pattern struggle to answer simple questions like:

- What do I *actually* want?
- What do I feel about this situation?
- What would make me happy?

Their attention has been trained for years to focus outward rather than inward.

Eventually something begins to shift. During moments of exhaustion or during a relationship where the imbalance becomes impossible to ignore, or simply through the slow accumulation of small realisations, the person begins noticing:

- how often they silence themselves
- how often they agree when they feel uncertain
- how often they prioritise harmony over honesty

This moment of recognition can feel uncomfortable, but once the pattern becomes visible, something new becomes possible: **experimenting with small changes**. We begin pausing before automatically agreeing, we express a preference and allow disagreement to exist without immediately trying to resolve it.

These moments may feel unfamiliar at first, but they are not acts of selfishness. They are acts of reconnection to ourselves. Through these small choices, we gradually learn something that may not have been obvious earlier in life: that connection does not require disappearance, that relationships can survive honesty, and that the parts of ourselves we once set

aside were never truly lost. They were simply waiting for the moment when it felt safe to return.

## **2. Why Your Nervous System Still Thinks the Past Is Happening**

One of the most confusing experiences people describe in adulthood is reacting strongly to situations that seem, on the surface, relatively small.

A delayed message suddenly creates anxiety. A mild disagreement feels overwhelming. A shift in someone's tone produces an immediate sense that something is wrong. Often the person understands logically that the situation does not justify such an intense reaction, yet their mind and body have a pattern-based response before logic has time to intervene. Heart rate increases. Muscles tense. Thoughts begin racing. But the nervous system is not reacting to the present moment; it's responding to patterns it learned much earlier on.

The human nervous system is designed to detect potential threats quickly. To do this efficiently, it relies on pattern recognition. If a particular emotional environment repeats often enough, the brain begins storing information about what usually happens next. What tone of voice precedes criticism? What situations lead to conflict? What signals indicate someone is about to withdraw emotionally? These

cues become part of the nervous system's predictive structure.

This is why certain situations later in life can trigger strong reactions - even when the present circumstances are relatively safe. The nervous system is not just reacting to what is happening now. It's responding to what happened in similar situations many years before.

For example, if someone grew up in an environment where disagreement often escalated quickly, the body may still respond to disagreement as though escalation is imminent. If emotional withdrawal once followed certain kinds of conversations, the body may react strongly to subtle signs of distance. The nervous system is not attempting to **create** distress; it's attempting to **prevent** it. Its task is to keep us safe by predicting potential threats before they fully appear.

When life circumstances change, the nervous system does not immediately update its conditioning; it takes *repeated experiences of safety* before the body begins to revise its expectations.

In the meantime, the nervous system's current and future expectations are *based on the fear and dangers that were*

*present in earlier environments.* Understanding this can be both illuminating and liberating.

Instead of asking, 'what's wrong with me', we can begin asking a more compassionate question: 'what did my nervous system learn to do to keep safe'? This shift replaces self-criticism with curiosity.

And curiosity is a huge leap towards change.

### **3. When Keeping the Peace Means Losing Yourself**

Many people learn early in life that emotional harmony is fragile. Arguments may escalate quickly. Disagreement may lead to criticism. Certain emotions may create tension in the household.

When this happens repeatedly, children often develop a strategy that helps reduce conflict. They become peacekeepers. They learn to read emotional signals quickly. They adjust their responses to maintain calm. They soften disagreements before they escalate.

As adults, these individuals are often seen as thoughtful and considerate. They understand different perspectives easily and dislike unnecessary conflict. They try to create stability in their relationships. These qualities are admirable, but the strategy that protects harmony can sometimes create unexpected problems. When maintaining peace becomes the primary goal, expressing personal truth can begin to feel risky. Instead of saying what they really think, the person may say what feels safest. Instead of expressing frustration, they may minimise it. Instead of asserting a boundary, they may abandon their needs.

Over time something subtle happens. They become increasingly skilled at maintaining harmony but increasingly uncertain about their own voice. They know how to keep situations calm and how to prevent disagreements, but they are *less sure* how to remain present in a conversation while expressing their own needs. This is where peacekeeping can quietly transform into self-abandonment because the habit of protecting peace and harmony gradually pushes their own perspective further into the background.

Learning to speak honestly while maintaining connection is a different skill. It requires discovering that disagreement does not automatically destroy relationships and that authenticity does not have to mean conflict.

#### **4. The Hidden Cost of Being the Strong One**

In many families, one person quietly becomes the strong one. They are the one who stays calm when things become chaotic. The one who listens when others are upset. The one who handles responsibilities early. This role often develops gradually. Perhaps a parent was overwhelmed. Perhaps there was conflict in the household. Perhaps emotional stability was inconsistent. Whatever the cause, the child learns that being capable and composed helps stabilise the environment around them. They become reliable. Adults often praise these children. They're described as mature for their age, responsible, independent.

Emotional roles formed in childhood follow people into adulthood. The strong one becomes the friend others confide in. The colleague who holds things together becomes inundated with responsibility. The partner who works hardest to keep connections functioning struggles with their own dysfunctional relationship.

Being capable is not the problem but when strength becomes an identity, vulnerability can be lost. Over time 'the strong one' learns to carry their difficulties privately. They listen to everyone else's problems. They offer advice. They provide support. But they rarely ask for the same in return.

This creates an internal conflict, a misalignment, when others depend on your strength without fully seeing the effort it requires.

Strength is valuable but everyone, including the strong one, needs spaces where they do not have to hold everything together.

## **5. The Loneliness of Being the Reliable One**

Reliability is one of the qualities most people admire. Reliable people follow through on commitments. They keep promises. They show up when others need help. In workplaces, families, and friendships, reliable individuals are often the people others trust most.

But reliability can carry an unexpected emotional cost. When someone consistently demonstrates they can competently cope with difficulties, others gradually begin to assume they always will. The reliable person becomes the one people turn to when something goes wrong. They organise solutions. They offer reassurance. They help keep situations stable. And the self-abandonment loop intensifies.

Because they manage things so well, their own struggles often become less visible. They've become so practiced at coping independently that others assume they don't need support. Support begins to flow mostly in one direction - the reliable person gives it, others receive it creating an emotional imbalance in the connection.

People may value them deeply yet fail to recognise the emotional weight they carry. Being needed more than you are understood feels isolating.

Reliable people often hesitate to ask for help. They may worry about burdening others or disrupting the role they've become known for. If everyone depends on you, admitting that you're struggling can feel strangely uncomfortable. But reliability should not mean carrying emotional weight alone.

The strongest connections are not built on one person holding everything together. They are built on shared responsibility, mutual care, and the understanding that even the most capable people sometimes need someone to lean on.

Healthy relationships allow support to move in both directions.

## **6. The Quiet Exhaustion of People Who Feel Too Much**

Some people move through the world with a heightened awareness of emotion. They notice subtle changes in tone. They detect tension quickly. They sense when something feels slightly off, even before anyone says a word. This kind of sensitivity often develops in environments where emotional awareness was necessary. If someone's mood could change suddenly, learning to recognise early signals helped prevent conflict and maintained stability.

Over time the nervous system becomes highly attuned to emotional cues. What begins as a survival skill gradually becomes part of how someone experiences the world. This sensitivity often creates deep empathy. Emotionally attuned people can understand others quickly. They recognise when someone is struggling. They notice discomfort that others overlook. They're often the people others feel safe talking to.

But constant emotional awareness is exhausting. When the nervous system is continually scanning the emotional atmosphere around it, it never fully relaxes. The person may absorb tension from environments that others barely notice. They may feel responsible for maintaining harmony. They may carry emotional weight that does not entirely belong to them.

Over time this can lead to burnout, and a persistent sense of emotional depletion. Being around people may feel draining, even when the person cares deeply about those relationships. Learning to maintain empathy without absorbing everything is an important part of emotional balance.

Sensitivity is not a weakness; it's a profound strength. It allows people to connect deeply, understand others, and offer meaningful support. But sensitivity is only sustainable when it's paired with unbreakable boundaries. That's when the ability to care empathically for others becomes a strength rather than a burden.

## 7. When Your Needs Start to Feel Like Problems

Everyone has needs.

- The need for understanding.
- The need for support.
- The need to feel respected, valued, and emotionally safe.

But when expressing those needs once created difficulty, we learned to minimise them.

Perhaps requests were dismissed, emotions criticised, or attention and support were inconsistent. In environments like this, expressing needs can begin to feel risky. Instead of receiving understanding, we may have experienced frustration, rejection, or emotional distance. The nervous system eventually learns an important lesson: *asking for things creates problems.*

So, we ask for less. We adapt by managing things alone. We become self-sufficient. We handle difficulties quietly. From the outside this can look like independence or strength but internally something different may be happening... expressing a need can start to feel uncomfortable, almost like making a mistake. Asking for reassurance might feel demanding. Setting a boundary might feel selfish. Even small

preferences may be softened or hidden to avoid creating tension.

But needs do not disappear simply because they're ignored. They often reappear in other ways such as exhaustion, resentment, or subtle emotional distances that grow over time. When we consistently suppress our needs, relationships begin to revolve entirely around the comfort of others.

Learning to recognise and express our needs is part of the process of returning to oneself.

At first it may feel unfamiliar, even slightly uncomfortable, but our needs are not problems - they are signals. They help guide our connections with others towards balance, honesty, and authenticity - but particularly, our connection with ourselves.

## 8. How Self-Abandonment Becomes a Life Pattern

Self-abandonment doesn't begin with a decision to abandon ourselves. It develops slowly through small choices repeated over time:

- Choosing silence instead of disagreement.
- Softening emotions instead of expressing them.
- Prioritising harmony instead of honesty.
- Agreeing quickly to avoid tension.
- Taking responsibility for how others feel.

Each choice may seem insignificant on its own, but *repetition* of these choices changes our behaviour in powerful ways. What begins as an occasional sacrifice eventually becomes a habit - and habits, repeated often enough, become our identity. We start describing ourselves in certain ways: accommodating, flexible, low maintenance. When these behaviours appear consistently at the expense of our own needs, they create imbalance, confusion, and resentment.

We become highly skilled at responding to others, anticipating expectations, adapting quickly, keeping situations comfortable and stable. But something important slowly fades from the centre of our decision-making: *our own internal voice*.

We become uncertain about what we truly want, prefer, or feel. Decisions are made based on what will work best for everyone else. Personal needs become secondary, sometimes barely noticed at all. Recognising these patterns acknowledges the past behaviours that once helped us survive in toxic environments, but what we must also urgently recognise is that these same behaviours do not support the life we want to build now in the present moment.

Noticing the patterns is the first step toward changing them, and learning to include our own voice in the choices and decisions that shape our life.

## **9. Why Emotional Safety Feels So Unfamiliar at First**

When people spend years adapting to emotional unpredictability, calm environments can feel surprisingly unfamiliar. Even when nothing is wrong, the nervous system may remain alert, scanning, listening, waiting for tension to appear...or create its own tension to provide a sense of familiarity.

This response is not a conscious choice, but the result of how the body learned to stay safe in the past. If conflict, criticism, or sudden emotional shifts were common experiences, the nervous system adapted by becoming hyper-vigilant. Anticipating problems became a form of protection.

But when we later find ourselves in calmer, more stable environments, that vigilance does not immediately disappear. Instead, the body continues expecting something to go wrong. Moments of peace can feel strangely uncomfortable. Silence may feel suspicious. We wonder whether calm is temporary, or whether tension is simply building somewhere out of sight.

We feel restless in safe environments. Without the familiar rhythm of tension and resolution, the nervous system may not know how to settle. We don't prefer conflict; we simply

haven't learned that safety can be consistent, predictable, and dependable.

Emotional safety is something the nervous system learns through experience. Not once, but repeatedly. Gradually the body begins to recognise that calm does not always signal danger.

With time, the nervous system adjusts its expectations. Moments of peace start to feel less unfamiliar and eventually, something important begins to happen. Instead of scanning constantly for what might go wrong, the mind and body begin to relax into what is happening in the present.

When you find yourself in calm waters, observe. Allow the gently energy to soothe you, for trust to build, and the potential for emotional and physical safety to arrive. Watch and wait as your nervous system adapts to a different kind of rhythm.

Above all else, avoid voluntarily steering yourself into stormy waters.

## 10. The Slow Process of Returning to Yourself

Recognising self-abandonment can feel unsettling at first because it raises a difficult question: **if I stop adapting, will my relationships change?** Sometimes they will. When someone has spent years prioritising the comfort of others, even small shifts can alter the dynamics around them. Expressing preferences, setting boundaries, or disagreeing gently may feel unfamiliar - not only for the person making the change, but also for those on the receiving end.

Some people will notice these shifts and respect them. Others - particularly those who are accustomed to controlling, manipulative, or narcissistic behaviour - may resist. They might react with anger, guilt-tripping, passive aggression, or even withdrawal. This is a signal that the balance in the relationship was previously dependent on your self-silencing. Your voice, your needs, your presence in the conversation may feel threatening to people used to having you adapt to them at all times.

Returning to yourself is not about becoming confrontational or selfish. It begins with noticing when you silence your feelings, when you agree too quickly, and when your needs disappear from the conversation. Each moment of awareness creates a pause, and in that pause, a different choice

becomes possible. Perhaps you express a small preference. Perhaps you take a little more time before agreeing. Perhaps you allow yourself to say, "I'm not sure that works for me."

These changes often feel small, sometimes almost insignificant, but over time they begin to rebuild something vital: self-trust, the ability to recognise your own feelings, and to allow them to guide you towards decisions that keep you emotionally and physically safe. When dealing with difficult or controlling people, self-trust becomes a shield as well as a compass. It reminds you that you're entitled to your needs, even when others attempt to invalidate or manipulate them.

Returning to yourself rarely happens through one dramatic transformation. It unfolds through a series of quiet adjustments that gradually reshape how you move through the world. A boundary here, an honest response there, a moment where your voice is included instead of hidden. Slowly, the centre of your life begins to shift, and you remember something that may have been forgotten for a long time: your needs are not negotiable - they are the foundation on which your life is built.

When resistance arises - from a partner, friend, colleague, or family member - it's often a mirror, showing you where you have given away too much of yourself. The process is

sometimes uncomfortable, but necessary. In the pauses, in the gentle but firm assertions of your own needs, you reclaim the space to exist fully, honestly, and safely in your own life.

### **Navigating Resistance from Difficult People**

When you begin to prioritize your needs, it is common for some people - especially controlling or narcissistic personalities - to push back. Their reactions can range from guilt-tripping to anger, withdrawal, or attempts to manipulate you into reverting to old patterns. This is not your failure; it is a reflection of how your presence has been used to serve *their* comfort, not yours.

#### **Some strategies to navigate this safely:**

**Name the shift internally first.** Before responding to pushback, check in with yourself: Is this about my safety, my needs, or someone else's discomfort? Awareness protects you from being pulled into drama.

**Set clear, consistent boundaries.** Boundaries are not negotiable; they are statements of self-respect. Simple, calm, and firm language works best: "I cannot take this on right now," or "I need to decide what works for me."

**Expect resistance, not guilt.** It's normal for someone who is used to your constant accommodation to be uncomfortable. Their discomfort is theirs; it does not invalidate your choices.

Prioritize your support network. Surround yourself with people who respect your growth and who model healthy boundaries. External validation helps when internal trust feels fragile.

**Detach from manipulation.** Recognize attempts to coerce, shame, or gaslight. Your response can be as simple as repeating your boundary without justification. You do not owe explanations for taking care of yourself.

**Start small.** Gradual steps - tiny preferences, slight delays in agreement, gentle "no"s - all build your self-trust while reducing the intensity of conflict.

Resistance may feel discouraging at times, but each small act of self-prioritization strengthens your foundation. Over time, these quiet but firm adjustments teach you something radical: **your life does not revolve around the comfort of those who cannot hold space for your growth.**

Boom.

## **A Final Thought**

Many of the patterns explored in this guide are not chosen consciously. They're patterns that were learned to protect us in environments where maintaining connection required emotional compromise. Learning to recognise those patterns is the beginning of emotional freedom.

When you recognise and acknowledge the moments where you're leaving yourself behind, something new becomes possible: you start prioritising your own needs.

Returning to yourself happens through small moments of honesty, of courage, and never forgetting yourself again.

I hope you found this guide to the self-abandonment pattern helpful. If you'd like more guidance on how to build resilient mental health and robust emotional wellbeing please visit me at:

[howtomendyourmentalhealth.com/thelibrary](https://howtomendyourmentalhealth.com/thelibrary)

*See you there! x*