

Chapter 3

Adaptation Is Not Dysfunction

When people begin recognising patterns of self-abandonment in their lives, a difficult thought often appears: **something must be wrong with me."**

They may wonder why they struggle to say no, why they worry so much about upsetting people, why conflict feels so uncomfortable, and why they often put other people's needs before their own.

It can be tempting to interpret these tendencies as personal weaknesses but most of the behaviours associated with self-abandonment did not develop randomly. They were adaptations.

Adaptation is one of the most powerful abilities human beings possess. It allows us to adjust to environments, relationships, and circumstances in ways that help us survive and maintain connection. If an environment is calm and supportive, a child learns that emotions can be expressed freely and that disagreement does not threaten connection. But if an environment contains tension, unpredictability, criticism, or emotional withdrawal, the nervous system begins

developing strategies that help maintain stability. These strategies might include:

- reading other people's moods quickly
- anticipating reactions before they occur
- keeping the peace
- minimising emotional expression
- becoming helpful or responsible
- avoiding behaviours that might trigger conflict

None of these responses are signs of dysfunction. They are intelligent adjustments to emotional environments that required awareness and flexibility.

A child who becomes skilled at reading the emotional atmosphere around them is not weak, they're perceptive, a child who learns to calm difficult situations is not flawed, they are resourceful, and a child who becomes agreeable to avoid conflict is not defective but adapting to the emotional rules of their environment.

At the time, these strategies serve an important purpose:

- they reduce tension
- they maintain connection
- they help the child feel safer

Because these strategies work in the short term, the nervous system begins using them repeatedly. Over time, they become familiar ways of communicating in emotional connections with other people. Eventually, they become part of a person's identity - along with masking the effort it takes to maintain them.

What once helped preserve connection can gradually begin to create imbalance. Instead of adjusting occasionally, the person begins adjusting constantly. Instead of expressing their own reactions, they begin monitoring everyone else's. Instead of responding to their own needs, they focus primarily on maintaining harmony.

Understanding that these behaviours are not signs there's something wrong with you, but signs that your nervous system learned how to maintain connection in chaotic environments does something powerful: **it replaces self-criticism with curiosity**. Instead of asking: **what's wrong with me?** we ask: **what did my nervous system learn to do?**

This shift in perspective removes shame and creates space for recognition, understanding, and change.

The patterns that were learned can also be unlearned. The goal is not to erase the qualities that once helped you

navigate relationships - your empathy, attentiveness, and ability to care about others are valuable strengths. The goal is simply to expand your range. To learn how to remain connected to others **without losing connection to yourself.** When adaptation becomes balanced with self-awareness, you no longer need to disappear in order to maintain connection. You can remain present in relationships while also remaining present in your own life.

Reflection Exercise

Recognising Your Adaptation Strategy

Take a few moments to reflect on the ways you adapted to maintain stability in your early environment.

Growing up, I often tried to keep things calm by...

I learned to pay attention to...

For example:

- other people's moods
- signs of tension
- what might upset someone
- what might bring approval

One way I adapted to maintain connection was by becoming...

Examples might include:

- helpful
- agreeable
- responsible
- independent
- quiet
- supportive

Write whatever feels true for you.

What did this strategy help you avoid?

For example:

- conflict
- criticism
- disappointment
- emotional withdrawal



Final Reflection

Looking at your answers, can you see how these behaviours may have helped you navigate your environment at the time?

Recognising these adaptations is not about judging the past but about understanding how your nervous system learned to maintain connection. Once these patterns are understood, you can begin deciding which ones still serve you and which ones you no longer need.