




When Love Hurts

Attachment, addiction, abuse,
and relational recovery

Kayla Tandarich, CMW, BS
TSE Program Manager
Wesley Family Services

1



Humans Are Wired for Connection

Attachment is essential
Bowlby's attachment theory shows relationships support safety, emotional regulation, and survival.

When connection is disrupted
Inconsistent, neglectful, or harmful bonds can lead to strategies for managing fear, loneliness, or dysregulation.

Implications for recovery
Disrupted attachment increases vulnerability to substance use; healing focuses on safe bonds, belonging, and repair—not moral failure.

2

Disconnection Often Drives Behavior

- Substance use as a way to soothe, escape, or feel
- Strategies developed to survive—not fail

Common Internal Experiences

- Chronic stress or hypervigilance
- Emotional numbness or overwhelm
- Shame, isolation, or fear of rejection

Relational Patterns

- Difficulty trusting others
- Pushing people away or over-relying
- Expecting inconsistency or harm

Key Reframe

- These are not character flaws
- These are adaptive responses to disrupted connection



3

Understanding Attachment Patterns

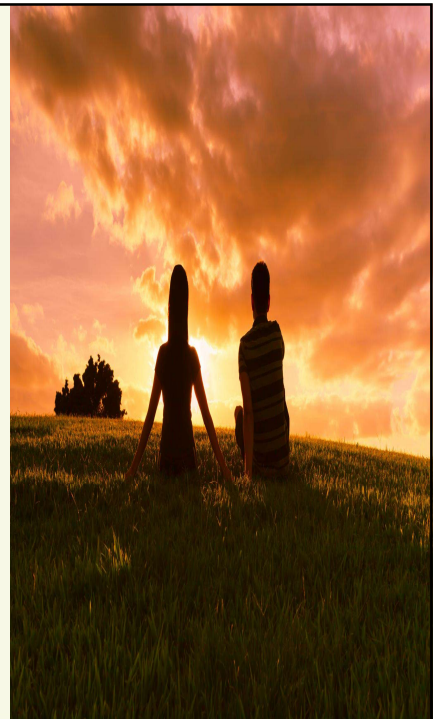
Attachment styles are survival strategies—not fixed traits.

Secure : safety, trust, and the ability to seek and receive support.

Insecure styles often form when caregivers are inconsistent, unavailable, frightening, or abusive:

- **Anxious:** fear of abandonment; heightened vigilance.
- **Avoidant:** self-reliance and emotional distance for protection.
- **Disorganized:** push-pull; connection is desired and feared (often trauma-linked).

Not diagnoses—and not permanent. Patterns can shift through healing relationships, therapy, and recovery-supportive communities, reducing shame and building hope.



4

How Attachment Patterns Show Up in Recovery

Secure (When Present or Developing)

- Able to seek support and stay connected
- Increasing trust in self and others
- Openness to feedback, growth, and repair

Anxious Patterns

- Fear of abandonment or being “too much”
- Strong need for reassurance or closeness
- Emotional highs and lows in relationships
- Substances may be used to manage intensity or fear



5



Avoidant Patterns

- Discomfort with dependence or vulnerability
- Tendency to withdraw, minimize, or shut down
- Strong self-reliance as protection
- Substances may be used to numb or disconnect

Disorganized Patterns

- Push-pull between needing connection and fearing it
- Difficulty trusting even safe relationships
- Intense internal conflict or unpredictability
- Often linked with trauma; higher vulnerability to addiction

Key Takeaway

- These patterns made sense at one point
- In recovery, awareness creates the opportunity for change

6

Substances as Emotional Regulators

Addiction as a relationship

When people feel unsafe with others, substances can become a predictable companion—offering comfort, numbing, or control.

Self-medication for attachment distress

Research supports substance use as an attempt to soothe trauma-related anxiety and regulate overwhelming emotion.

The long-term cost

Relief becomes costly—reinforcing isolation and weakening the capacity to form secure bonds; recovery needs relational healing.



7

The Regulation Cycle

Trigger

- Stress, trauma reminders, relational conflict, or isolation
- Internal discomfort feels overwhelming or unsafe

Short-Term Relief

- Substances provide quick regulation
- Numbing, calming, escape, or sense of control

Temporary Stability

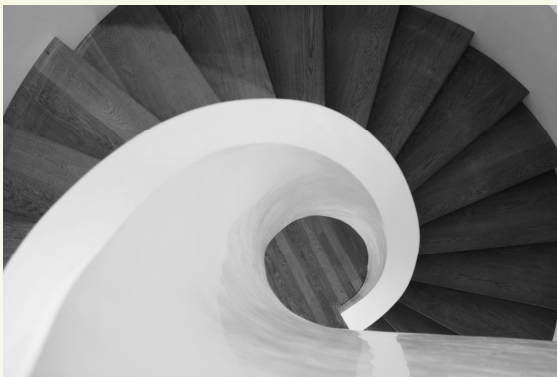
- Nervous system settles—for a moment
- Feels predictable and reliable compared to relationships

Long-Term Impact

- Increased isolation and disconnection
- Reduced tolerance for distress
- Reinforces need for substances

Cycle Continues

- Less access to natural regulation
- Greater reliance on external coping



8

What Substances Are Replacing

Substances often take the place of needs that were unmet or unsafe:

Regulation

- Soothing overwhelming emotion
- Creating calm when none is available

Connection

- Filling the gap of loneliness or disconnection
- Simulating comfort or belonging

Control

- Managing unpredictability
- Creating a sense of stability

Relief from Pain

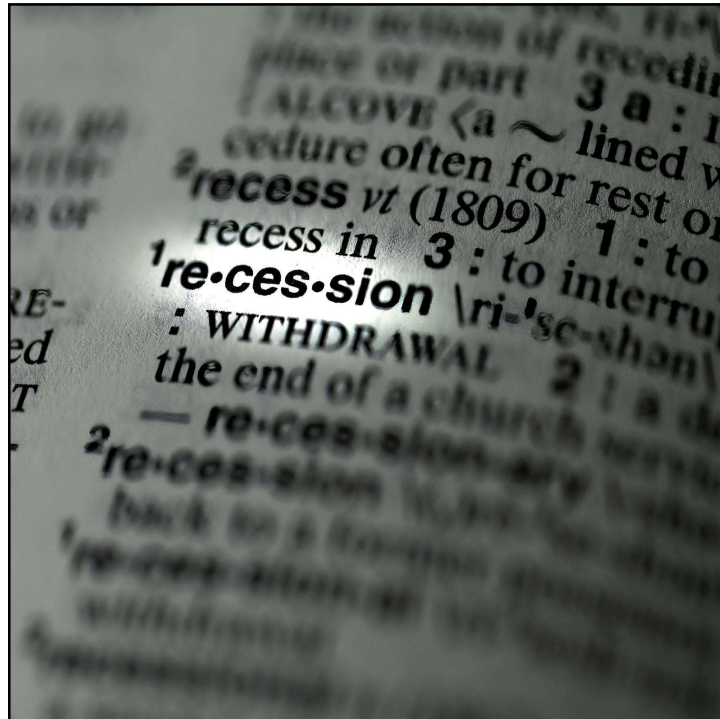
- Numbing trauma, fear, or shame
- Avoiding internal distress

Key Reframe

- The goal is not just removing substances
- The goal is replacing what they provided—with safer supports



9



How Trauma Bonds Form

Cycle of Harm and Relief

Fear, criticism, or violence is followed by apologies, affection, or promises—creating intense emotional whiplash.

Intermittent Reinforcement

Unpredictable “good moments” condition the nervous system, strengthening attachment instead of weakening it.

Why It's Hard to Leave

Stress and reward systems can activate like addiction, making the bond feel like love or loyalty and reducing victim-blaming.

10

Why Trauma Bonds Are So Powerful

The Nervous System Gets Confused

- Safety and danger become intertwined
- The body learns: harm can be followed by relief
- Calm becomes associated with the same source as stress

Intensity Can Feel Like Connection

- High emotional highs and lows feel meaningful or real
- Stability may feel unfamiliar or even uncomfortable
- Chaos can be mistaken for closeness

Hope Keeps the Bond Alive

- Belief that things will change or return to “good moments”
- Focus on potential vs. reality
- Reinforces staying, even when harm continues

Shame and Self-Blame Reinforce the Cycle

- “Why can’t I just leave?”
- Internalizing responsibility for the harm
- Isolation makes the bond stronger

Key Reframe

- This is not weakness—it is conditioning and survival
- Understanding the pattern is the first step toward breaking it



11

What Helps Break Trauma Bonds

Consistency Over Intensity

- Healing relationships are predictable and stable
- Safety is built over time—not through extremes

Relearning What Safe Connection Feels Like

- Slower, calmer, less reactive interactions
- Building tolerance for steadiness

Naming the Pattern

- Awareness reduces confusion and self-blame
- Putting language to the experience creates distance

Supportive Relationships & Community

- Connection outside of the harmful bond
- Witnessing and validation from others

Repairing the Relationship with Self

- Rebuilding trust in instincts and boundaries
- Developing self-compassion



12

Shared Cycles of Craving and Withdrawal

Parallel cycle pattern

Trauma bonding and addiction often move through craving, brief relief, growing tolerance, and withdrawal—driving repeated returns despite harm.

Distress and erosion over time

Separation can trigger intense longing and dysregulation; identity and boundaries may weaken, increasing dependence, isolation, and narrowed coping options.

Implications for recovery

Research suggests frequent co-occurrence—especially with unresolved trauma—supporting integrated, trauma-informed care that addresses relational and substance patterns together.



13

Inside the Cycle

Craving Isn't Just About Substances

- Intense pull toward relief, connection, or familiarity
- The body remembers what brought temporary safety
- Longing can feel urgent and overwhelming

Withdrawal Is More Than Physical

- Emotional distress, anxiety, loneliness, or despair
- A sense of emptiness or disconnection
- Difficulty tolerating stillness or absence

Relief Reinforces the Pattern

- Temporary calm feels like proof: "this works"
- The brain and body learn to return to what soothes
- Even harmful dynamics feel predictable

The Window for Choice Narrows

- Stress reduces access to reasoning and reflection
- Reactions become automatic
- Patterns repeat, even when insight is present

Key Reframe

- This is not a lack of willpower
- This is a conditioned cycle involving the body, brain, and relationships



14

Interrupting the Cycle

Awareness Creates Space

- Noticing the pattern without judgment
- Naming what is happening in real time

Expanding Tolerance for Discomfort

- Learning to sit with cravings and urges
- Building capacity for emotional regulation

Replacing, Not Just Removing

- Safe relationships
- Healthy soothing strategies
- Meaningful connection

Support Breaks Isolation

- Recovery does not happen alone
- Co-regulation and community matter



15

Healing Beyond Abstinence

Recovery is relational

Healing involves rebuilding safety, trust, and self-worth—not only ending use or leaving harm.

Grief and nervous system repair

Space to grieve the relationship (or hoped-for version) supports regulation and steadier connection.

Boundaries + support heal wounds

Self-compassion and consistent, empowering relationships create corrective experiences where attachment wounds can heal.



16

What Healing Looks Like in Practice



Learning to Stay

- Staying present instead of escaping or shutting down
- Tolerating discomfort without immediately numbing
- Building capacity, little by little

Trying Connection Again

- Reaching out—even when it feels risky
- Letting others show up consistently
- Practicing trust in small, manageable ways

Experiencing Safety Over Time

- Not intensity, not highs and lows
- Repeated moments of reliability and steadiness
- The nervous system learning: “this is different”

Repair Instead of Perfection

- Conflict doesn’t mean the end
- Relationships can break and be repaired
- Trust grows through repair, not avoidance

Redefining Self-Worth

- Moving away from shame-based identity
- Beginning to believe: “I am worthy of care”
- Developing self-compassion alongside external support

17

Why Healing Can Feel So Hard



Old Patterns Feel Safer

- Familiar does not mean healthy
- The brain prefers what it knows

Calm Can Feel Uncomfortable

- Stillness may feel unfamiliar or even threatening
- The absence of chaos can feel “empty” at first

Progress Isn’t Linear

- Slips, setbacks, and returns are part of the process
- Healing includes revisiting old patterns with new awareness

Grief Is Part of Healing

- Grieving relationships, lost time, or unmet needs
- Letting go of what was hoped for

Key Reframe

- Healing is not about getting it “right”
- It’s about continuing to return, reconnect, and rebuild

18

Protective Relational Factors

Secure, consistent relationships

Reliable connection supports regulation and offers corrective emotional experiences that rebuild trust over time.

Peer support and belonging

Shared community reduces isolation and shame, strengthening motivation and sustaining long-term change.

Trauma-informed care environments

Choice, collaboration, and safety shift support from control to connection—promoting healthier attachment patterns.



19



Protective Factors in Practice

Consistency Builds Safety

- Showing up predictably—again and again
- Following through on words and commitments
- Responding in steady, non-reactive ways

Small Moments of Connection Matter

- Brief check-ins, eye contact, presence
- Being listened to without judgment or fixing
- Feeling seen in ordinary, everyday interactions

Belonging Reduces Isolation

- Being part of something without needing to perform
- Shared experiences that normalize struggle
- Spaces where people are accepted as they are

Choice and Voice Restore Control

- Being included in decisions about care and support
- Having preferences respected
- Moving away from control → toward collaboration

Repair Strengthens Trust

- Acknowledging missteps or harm
- Returning to the relationship after conflict
- Demonstrating that relationships can be safe even when imperfect

20

"Difficulty leaving harmful relationships or substances is not a sign of weakness, but a reflection of deep attachment needs and survival instincts."

This is about dignity, resilience, & the possibility of change.

21

Thank You 😊

*Contact: Kayla Tandarich
Wesley Family Services
(412) 867-6529
Kayla.Tandarich@wfspa.org*

22