



When Intensity Feels Like Love: Trauma Bonding Romantic Chemistry and the Nervous System

Brian Kennedy MA LMFT

Marriage and Family Therapy Associates

Olympia Washington

The beginning of a relationship can be exhilarating. We feel more alive, more hopeful, and unusually drawn toward another person. At times, however, what appears to be extraordinary chemistry is not only attraction. It is also activation: an old attachment pattern has been awakened, and the nervous system is responding to familiarity with urgency.

That does not mean intense attraction is inherently unhealthy. Nor does every anxious or unstable relationship constitute a trauma bond. The term *trauma bond* is most useful when it describes a powerful attachment strengthened through a repeated cycle of harm, fear, intermittent affection, and relief, especially in relationships involving coercion or abuse. A person may also experience attachment-driven chemistry without being in a trauma bond: the relationship evokes old wounds and defenses, but it has not developed the coercive cycle the term traditionally describes.

The distinction matters. If we call every compelling but difficult attraction a trauma bond, we flatten important differences and risk turning ordinary relational struggle into pathology. Yet if we dismiss the role of trauma altogether, we may mistake dysregulation for passion, intermittent relief for intimacy, and familiarity for safety.

The central question is not simply, *How strongly do I feel?* It is, *What is this relationship awakening in me, and what happens to each of us over time?*

Familiarity Can Feel Like Recognition

Attachment theory begins with the idea that our earliest relationships become internal working models: implicit expectations about who we are, what other people are like, and what must happen for connection to endure. These models are not merely conscious beliefs. They are carried in posture, sensation, emotion, attention, and automatic patterns of response.

A child whose caregiver is reliably available gradually learns that distress can be shared and survived. A child whose caregiver is inconsistent, intrusive, emotionally absent, or frightening may develop a different set of expectations: closeness is precarious; love must be earned; need will be punished; abandonment is always near; dependence is dangerous.

These expectations can persist long after childhood. They shape what we notice, whom we find compelling, and how we interpret another person's behavior. Someone who learned that love must be pursued may feel unusually alive around a distant partner. Someone who experienced intimacy as engulfing may be drawn to connection but retreat as soon as it becomes real. In each case, the nervous system may experience the old pattern as strangely convincing.

This is one reason people sometimes say, "I felt as though I had known this person forever." The feeling may reflect genuine compatibility. It may also reflect implicit recognition: something about the person's availability, emotional distance, intensity, or unpredictability fits an old relational template.

Familiarity and safety are not the same. What is familiar can feel right before we have enough information to know whether it is good for us.

The Body Remembers Before the Mind Understands

The work of Allan Schore and Daniel Siegel helps explain why these experiences can be so powerful. Early attachment is organized largely before language. Its traces are therefore often implicit rather than autobiographical. We may not remember a specific scene, yet our bodies remember how closeness felt: the tightening in the chest, the vigilance, the waiting, the collapse, or the surge of relief when connection returned.

Later, a delayed text, a subtle shift in tone, or an emotionally unavailable partner can activate those states. The present event may be relatively small, but the response carries the emotional weight of an earlier world. A person can know intellectually that a relationship is harmful while feeling, at another level, that losing it would be unbearable.

This is not simply a contest between a rational left brain and an emotional right brain. Human experience is more integrated and complex than that shorthand suggests. Still, the clinical point remains: attachment activation is often rapid, embodied, and outside conscious awareness. Insight alone may not quiet it. The nervous system needs new experiences of safety, regulation, agency, and repair before its expectations can change.

In intimate relationships, we are continually reading one another beneath words: facial expression, rhythm, gaze, distance, tone, and responsiveness. These signals can evoke either settled connection or threat. When old trauma is activated, the body may interpret uncertainty as danger and relief as love. The intensity is real, but its meaning is not always what it first appears to be.

Longing Reward and Intermittent Reinforcement

Jaak Panksepp's affective neuroscience offers another useful lens. He described SEEKING as a primary emotional system involved in curiosity, anticipation, exploration, and pursuit. SEEKING contributes to the vitality of new love: we want to move toward the other person, learn who they are, and imagine what might become possible.

But pursuit becomes more consuming when affection is unpredictable. Behavioral psychology has long shown the power of intermittent reinforcement: rewards delivered inconsistently can produce especially persistent behavior. In a destabilizing relationship, warmth may follow coldness, tenderness may follow cruelty, or reunion may follow threatened abandonment. The return of connection produces not only pleasure but relief. That relief can be mistaken for evidence of the relationship's depth.

Panksepp also described a system associated with separation distress, often called PANIC or GRIEF. In an unstable bond, separation distress and SEEKING can become mutually amplifying. Disconnection feels intolerable, pursuit intensifies, and reunion briefly quiets the alarm. The person is not merely moving toward pleasure; they are trying to end pain.

This helps explain why willpower and advice are often insufficient. From outside the relationship, the pattern may appear obviously destructive. From inside it, the next moment of tenderness can feel essential to survival. The partner becomes both the source of dysregulation and the anticipated source of relief.

Oxytocin, dopamine, cortisol, and other biological systems participate in attachment, stress, motivation, and reward, but no single chemical explains a trauma bond. It is more accurate to think of a whole learning system: the brain and body begin organizing around threat, pursuit, reunion, and temporary relief. Over time, the cycle itself can become compelling.

When Two Attachment Strategies Lock Together

Many painful relationships develop a pursuer-withdrawer pattern. One partner moves toward the relationship when afraid, seeking contact, reassurance, or resolution. The other experiences the intensity as criticism, intrusion, or danger and moves away. Each person's protection activates the other's deepest fear.

The pursuing partner experiences withdrawal as confirmation: *I am alone; I do not matter; I am about to be left*. The withdrawing partner experiences pursuit as confirmation: *Closeness costs me my freedom; I will be controlled, overwhelmed, or found inadequate*. The more one pursues, the more the other withdraws. The more one withdraws, the more urgently the other pursues.

This loop can create tremendous intensity without the relationship necessarily being abusive or trauma-bonded. Both people may care deeply and still be caught in mutually reinforcing defenses. What distinguishes a difficult but workable attachment cycle from a coercive trauma bond is not the presence of conflict alone. We must also ask whether there is fear, domination, degradation, exploitation, chronic boundary violation, or a repeated pattern in which harm is followed by affection without meaningful accountability or change.

Healthy relationships can contain attachment activation. They differ in what happens next. Can the partners become curious about the cycle? Can each take responsibility without collapsing into shame or blame? Can either person say no without punishment? Does repair lead to changed behavior, or merely reset the cycle?

Parts of Us That Confuse Self Abandonment With Love

Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model offers a compassionate way to understand the inner conflict that often accompanies destabilizing attraction. A younger, wounded part may carry profound loneliness or the conviction that it was never fully chosen. When an inconsistent partner offers moments of closeness, that part may experience them as the answer to an ancient longing: *Perhaps this time I will finally be enough for someone to stay*.

Protective parts then organize around preserving the attachment. One may become vigilant and accommodating, trying to anticipate every need. Another may rationalize mistreatment or insist that greater patience will finally secure love. A different protector may detach, become contemptuous, seek sexual intensity, or abruptly end the relationship before abandonment can occur.

These strategies are not evidence of weakness. They are attempts to prevent an older pain from returning. Yet they can cause a person to confuse loyalty with self-erasure, urgency with devotion, or emotional intensity with intimacy.

Healing begins when we can notice these states without allowing any one of them to define reality. We can say, "A young part of me is terrified of losing this person," rather than, "This terror proves that this is the love of my life." That small shift restores reflection and choice. It also allows the underlying wound to receive care without requiring the relationship to reenact it.

Authentic Connection Is More Than Calm

It would be too simple to say that healthy love is calm and unhealthy love is intense. Real intimacy can be passionate, disruptive, erotic, frightening, and deeply challenging. A secure relationship is not one in which no one becomes activated. It is one in which activation can be metabolized through truth, responsiveness, boundaries, and repair.

Diana Fosha's work in Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy offers a useful language for this distinction. In relationships that support healing, difficult emotions can move. Hurt can become grief; grief can open into tenderness; anger can clarify a boundary; fear can be met with protection and care. The person does not merely return to baseline. Something new becomes possible.

In a destructive cycle, emotion repeats without being transformed. There may be dramatic reconciliation, but little integration. The apology ends the immediate crisis while the behavior remains unchanged. The reunion is intense, yet the person's sense of self gradually contracts. More energy is devoted to monitoring, appeasing, pursuing, escaping, or recovering.

Authentic connection tends to make room for more of each person. Over time, both partners can become more truthful, more differentiated, and more able to remain present without abandoning themselves. Safety does not mean the absence of conflict. It means that conflict does not routinely threaten dignity, reality, bodily autonomy, or the right to exist as a separate person.

Chemistry or Activation

No single feeling can answer the question. Butterflies may accompany attraction, anxiety, or both. Calm may signal security, but it can also reflect emotional disengagement. The more reliable evidence is found in the pattern that unfolds over time.

Consider asking:

- Do I feel increasingly free to be honest, or increasingly careful about what I say?
- Can I maintain friendships, values, interests, and boundaries outside the relationship?
- When I express hurt, does my partner show curiosity and care, even if they initially become defensive?
- Do apologies lead to observable change?
- Can either of us tolerate the other's separateness without retaliation, withdrawal, or panic?
- Is the relationship reciprocal, or am I continually earning moments of closeness?
- After contact, do I generally feel more grounded and more myself, or relieved but depleted?
- Is fear an occasional state we can address together, or the organizing principle of the relationship?

The decisive issue is not whether the relationship produces intensity. It is whether the intensity develops into intimacy.

Healing the Pattern

Leaving a coercive or abusive relationship may require practical safety planning, specialized support, and careful attention to the risks of separation. The emotional bond should never be treated as evidence that the abuse is mutual or that the harmed person is responsible for changing the person causing harm.

In less dangerous but attachment-driven relationships, healing may involve both internal and relational work. Individually, a person can learn to recognize activation, tolerate longing without immediate action, restore neglected sources of connection, and grieve what the relationship cannot provide. Therapy can offer a different kind of attachment experience: one in which emotion is welcomed, boundaries are reliable, and the person does not have to surrender reality in order to remain connected.

Relationally, the essential work is not simply calming down. It is developing the capacity to tell the truth, hear impact, regulate without disappearing, and repair without demanding that either person abandon themselves. Some couples can do this together. Others discover that the relationship depends on the very pattern they are trying to outgrow.

We do not heal by becoming suspicious of desire or choosing relationships that feel emotionally dead. We heal by becoming more discerning about what our desire contains. Attraction may include pleasure, admiration, erotic energy, hope, attachment hunger, fear, recognition, and projection all at once. Maturity does not eliminate this complexity. It gives us enough inner room to remain curious about it.

Love That Enlarges the Self

Trauma can teach the nervous system that love is something we must chase, earn, endure, or rescue. When a new relationship awakens that learning, urgency may be interpreted as destiny. The task is not to distrust every powerful feeling. It is to distinguish the presence of love from the activation of everything we have feared and longed for in love.

A trauma bond narrows life around a cycle of harm and relief. Attachment reenactment draws us toward familiar roles and expectations. Authentic connection, while never perfect, gradually increases truth, agency, mutuality, and the capacity for repair.

Healthy love can be passionate. It can unsettle old defenses and ask more of us than comfort alone would ask. But over time it allows us to become more fully ourselves. It does not require terror to make tenderness meaningful, or self-abandonment to make belonging possible.

That may be the clearest distinction: trauma-driven intensity makes the relationship feel indispensable while the self becomes smaller. Love worthy of the name makes room for the relationship and the self to become more alive.

Conceptual Influences

This essay draws on John Bowlby's attachment theory; Allan Schore's work on affect regulation, attachment, and the implicit self; Daniel Siegel's writing on implicit memory and interpersonal

neurobiology; Jaak Panksepp's affective neuroscience; Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model; and Diana Fosha's work on attachment, transference, and experiential healing.

I occasionally use AI tools to assist with organizing, synthesizing, and refining my writing. The clinical perspective, judgments, and responsibility for the final work are my own and arise from more than thirty years of therapeutic practice and personal reflection.