

Trauma and People Pleasing

There's a strong connection between trauma—especially relational or childhood trauma—and people-pleasing patterns. People-pleasing can develop as a survival strategy, rooted in the nervous system's way of protecting itself from further harm. Here are some key links:

1. Early Experiences of Trauma

- Children who grow up in environments with neglect, criticism, abuse, or inconsistent caregiving often learn to “earn” safety, love, or approval by being helpful, agreeable, or invisible.
- Pleasing others becomes a way to avoid conflict, punishment, or abandonment.

2. Fight, Flight, Freeze ... and Fawn

- Beyond the well-known trauma responses (fight, flight, freeze), researcher Pete Walker added **fawn**: appeasing others to reduce danger.
- Fawning looks like putting others' needs first, suppressing one's own emotions, or over-apologizing.

3. Hyper-vigilance and Safety Seeking

- Trauma can wire the brain to constantly scan for threat.
- People-pleasing becomes a way to manage others' moods, prevent rejection, and create a sense of control in unpredictable situations.

4. Identity and Self-Worth

- When love or acceptance was conditional, individuals may internalize the belief: *“I'm only worthy if I'm useful, agreeable, or perfect.”*
- This leads to difficulty saying “no,” setting boundaries, or expressing true feelings.

5. Short-Term Safety, Long-Term Cost

- While people-pleasing once kept someone safe, as an adult it often creates exhaustion, resentment, loss of self, and unhealthy relationships.

Healing and Change

Interventions & Techniques

- **Nervous System Regulation**
 - Practice grounding techniques: deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, or the “5-4-3-2-1” sensory exercise.
 - Movement (yoga, walking, dancing) helps release stored stress.
- **Boundary Work**
 - Start small with low-stakes boundaries (e.g., saying no to something minor).
 - Practice scripts: “I can’t take that on right now, but thank you for asking.”
- **Rebuilding Identity**
 - Explore personal values and needs outside of others’ expectations.
 - Reframe self-worth: “I am worthy because I exist, not because of what I do for others.”
- **Self-Compassion**
 - Notice self-critical thoughts and replace them with supportive affirmations.
 - Treat yourself as kindly as you would a loved one.

Journal Prompts

- When I think about saying “no,” what emotions or fears come up for me?
- How did people-pleasing serve me in the past? How is it limiting me now?
- What does safety mean to me today, and how can I create it without sacrificing myself?
- What are 3 values that matter to me, separate from anyone else’s approval?
- Write about a time you honored your needs and what that felt like.