

People-pleasing can be a result of trauma. It's called 'fawning' — here's how to recognize it.

June 1, 2019. By Sam Dylan Finch, off the website- <https://letsqueerthingsup.com/>

When I recently wrote [a Twitter thread](#) about my people-pleasing tendencies, I didn't at all expect for it to go viral. Yet that's exactly what happened.

As I shared my experiences with trauma and people-pleasing, I was hit with an avalanche of emotion. So many of you could relate to this phenomenon known as "fawning," and it became immediately clear that we needed this resource to exist outside of Twitter.

So let's keep the conversation going. I'm going to share both the original thread, as well as building on it. Let's talk about the link between people-pleasers and emotional abuse.

Confession: I am a people-pleaser.

It took me a long time to realize this, though. Because I'm opinionated! And I speak my mind! I'm an "open book" about a lot of what I've been through. Clearly, I don't care what people think... right?

But in the last year, I've come to understand that people-pleasing is a lot more complex than that. We all curate our lives to some extent. And for people-pleasers, the ways in which we do that "curating" piece often stems from a place of fear.

Most people know about fight, flight, and freeze — but another trauma response, "fawn," is at the core of what people-pleasing is actually about.

To avoid conflict, negative emotions, and re-traumatization, people who "fawn" when triggered will go out of their way to mirror someone's opinions and appease them in order to deescalate situations or potential issues.

For me, this meant that the more invested I was in an emotional connection, the less likely I was to criticize that person, vocalize when my boundaries were crossed, express unhappiness with their behavior, or share anything that I felt might damage that relationship.

This could come across as being excessively nice and complimentary, overly-concerned with another person's happiness, and waiting for cues in conversation to determine if something was "safe" to share or disclose.

You could say that people-pleasers are sort of 'emotional chameleons,' trying to blend in in order to feel safe.

We try to embody whatever articulation of ourselves feels the least threatening to the person that we're trying to be close to.

This can show up in a number of ways. People-pleasers are often really warm, encouraging, and generous people. They tend to overextend themselves and say "yes" to everything and everyone, eager to make those they care about happy and comfortable.

This tendency usually stems from childhood. They often grow up in very controlling and chaotic environments, and internalized the idea that if they were perfectly good or well-behaved, they could minimize conflict and secure love and attachment.

When you have this tendency to defer, make yourself subordinate, try to become smaller, ignore your boundaries and intuition, and minimize your own needs... you are profoundly vulnerable to emotional abuse.

This vulnerability to abuse is often a continuation of the familiar, chaotic dynamic from earlier in life.

When you are excessively concerned with pleasing others, you learn that in order to be effective at this, you have to shut down your gut instincts, your values, your emotions — because being an individual, rather than a mirror, doesn't serve you in securing the love that you want.

That's why people-pleasers can become drawn to abusive relationships, and repelled from relationships that are abundantly loving. We've internalized the idea that love has to feel "earned" in order to feel secure.

In other words? If love is given too freely or easily, it doesn't feel safe.

This means people-pleasers can be drawn to relationships that are controlling (they feel safest when they defer to others), emotionally-withholding (they are driven by the need to "secure" affection, and feel elated when they do), and even abusive (their lack of boundaries is exploited).

Another part of being vulnerable to abuse is that people-pleasers are so easily gaslit, because when they are inclined to suppress their own instincts, values, and beliefs, they're infinitely more likely to defer to an abuser's version of events or narrative.

This also means that "fawn" types often go through cycles of restricting emotionally (I can't be "too much" for others) and then purging emotionally ("unloading" onto a trusted person) because the expectation to be perfect and to repress gets to be too much.

I think this is why so many of us have eating disorders, too. The ways in which we restrict and purge emotionally can be reflected in the relationships we have to food. It's driven by this internal battle of being "too much" and "not enough." It's fundamentally the same fear of simply being.

It's important to understand that fawning isn't intended to manipulate others.

It's not exactly dishonest, either. Every single person presents a version of themselves to others. This merely describes how trauma informs that presentation on an often unconscious level.

The "fawn" response is driven by fear, not a hidden agenda. The "fawn" type is less about manipulation, because it's not being used to overpower someone. Instead, it's *an excessive relinquishing of personal power*, driven by fear and a desire for validation.

For example, someone who runs personal errands for their boss — despite it not being part of their job description — is not manipulating their boss into liking them. (It won't work anyway.) Their boss, testing those thin boundaries, is exploiting their need for approval.

In more intimate relationships, this can show up as "fawn" types gravitating towards hot/cold dynamics, where affection and love are offered unpredictably.

This is where the emotional abuse piece comes into play. I wrote about this dynamic previously [in my controller/pleaser article](#).

You have someone who is controlling, who feels safest in relationships where they call the shots, and feels loved when someone is actively seeking out their approval.

Enter: The "fawn" type.

An abuser will offer validation and love to keep the fawn type tethered. They're usually the sort of person that feels distant, so the affection they offer to the fawn type comes across as special or unique.

But they'll withdraw that affection before things feel stable, to ensure that the pleaser will continue going out of their way to "fawn" and secure that affection again. An abuser in this scenario feels safest when someone is actively pursuing them, so they get to replicate this sense of control and security over and over again... each time they withdraw their affection.

In the process, the fawn type is repeatedly giving over their power and autonomy so the abuse can continue. All the controller needs to do is rotate between withdrawing affection and, at the right moment, offer it abundantly.

I know this dynamic better than anyone, really, because it's come up in my life repeatedly.

I'm sharing this because, holy shit, my friends, the number of traumatic relationships I've thrown myself into — professionally, personally, romantically — to get stuck in this cycle, with my self-esteem pulverized, has made my heart so heavy.

It took stepping away from a friendship that had so thoroughly gaslit and demolished me — while plummeting into the deep depths of anorexia — before I realized that chasing controlling, emotionally unavailable, even abusive people was crushing my spirit.

I sought out the most emotionally inaccessible people, and I threw myself into the pursuit, somehow believing that if I could secure the love and affection of the most unattainable person, it would indisputably prove my worthiness.

It's a painful cycle. But for me, simply being aware of it was the first step towards healing.

If you're reading this and saying, "Holy shit... it me. Oh god. What do I do?" Don't panic. I've got you.

For starters, I'm going to ask you something: Which of your friends do you cancel on?

Personal experience: I had this tendency to bail on friends, partners, acquaintances, whoever, that were the most generous, warm, and emotionally-available.

I avoided those relationships where love was free and easy. Because it didn't feel "earned," so I didn't feel "worthy."

Which isn't to say that everyone with this trauma response does this, but humans often seek out the familiar. Which means many of us tend to avoid what feels unsafe. For people-pleasers, we're so used to working endlessly hard in relationships — it's disorienting when we aren't asked to.

I made a google doc (no, I seriously did) where I listed out people who were "way too nice to me." And then I asked myself, *do I like this person? Do I enjoy their company?* If I did, I sent them a text message and told them I wanted to commit to spending more time with them.

I was completely honest about my process with those folks, too. I said, "Listen, I get really scared when people are nice to me. You've always been SO nice to me, and I get afraid of disappointing you. But I want to change that, because I just enjoy your company so very much."

In my phone contacts, I put emojis by their names. I put strawberries next to people who were super loving. I put seedling emojis by folks who taught me things that made me think/grow. So when I

saw a text from them, it reminded me that I should prioritize that message.

And?

My life completely changed... in every imaginable way.

My ‘strawberry people’ went from being sort of friendly to becoming chosen family that I can’t imagine my life without.

With the help of some amazing therapy (trauma-informed therapy, if you can access it, is a game-changer), I grew to love myself so much — because that love was being modeled for me in a healthy way.

I’ve struggled [with addiction](#) and [eating disorders](#), because I’ve taken this out on my body as much as I have my mind. When you have an overwhelming sense of being “too much” and “not enough” all at once, it’s not surprising when you try to numb every emotion and shrink yourself down.

And my strawberry people (who are now all in a group text together!) have been there every step of my recovery. I reached a year in my sobriety this last month. And I’m finally medically stable after being severely malnourished from anorexia nervosa.

Choosing love — unconditional love of self, and being loved unconditionally by others — literally saved my life.

It all began just by affirming, “I am enough, here and now, and I deserve love that doesn’t hurt.”

It’s not an easy process by any means, but I can’t begin to tell you how much happier I am as a result.

If this all sounds familiar, I do have some recommendations on next steps — because this blog post is really just the tip of the iceberg.

I genuinely believe that every single person should be reading Pete Walker’s book about complex trauma. It’s called “[Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving: A Guide and Map for Recovering from Childhood Trauma](#),” and it’s absolutely incredible.

So much of what I know about complex trauma and fawning is from the groundwork that Pete laid out in that book. I have a few of his other books as well, and he’s uniquely positioned as both a trauma-informed clinician and as a survivor of complex trauma.

I also have a few blog posts around complex trauma that I think are really useful in this conversation...

[People-pleasers can be drawn to toxic relationships. It’s important to know why.](#) This one breaks down the pleaser/controller abuse dynamic, in case that cycle sounds familiar.

[Am I traumatized enough for a Complex PTSD diagnosis?](#) A lot of people who are new to complex trauma wonder if they’ve “suffered enough” to describe their experiences as trauma. I get it! And I’m here to unpack that question for you.

[10 ways to reach out when you’re struggling with your mental health.](#) If you’re struggling and not sure how to connect with your “strawberry people,” I have an entire resource about it.

[If your goal in therapy is to ‘be happy,’ here’s why you might want to rethink that.](#) People-pleasers also tend to be perfectionists in the ways they approach recovery. This article I wrote can help with goal-setting as you start to untangle trauma stuff!

I also do a bit of blogging about recovery, especially as it relates to disordered eating, over on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

Most of all though, I just want to validate the hell out of you.

I understand the very difficult cycle that we find ourselves in when we're consumed by this idea that we need to be "exactly enough," and that, if we measure it out correctly, we'll never hurt or be hurt again.

But relationships involve putting ourselves in harm's way sometimes. What they shouldn't involve, though, is self-harm — and ultimately, that's what "fawning" does. We're harming ourselves. We're making ourselves smaller, we're self-silencing, and we're punishing ourselves.

You are allowed to have *all* the feelings. You are allowed to take up *all* the space. You're allowed to be everything that you are and then some.

The right people — your people — will love you even more when they see how expansive your life becomes when you give yourself that space.

It doesn't happen overnight. It's a process! But I want you to know that it's a process you can begin at any time.

It's never too late to give yourself permission to be, to show up more authentically, and to find those who will celebrate you for it. I promise you that.

Sam Dylan Fitch