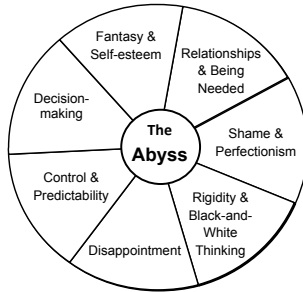


Fear of the Abyss:

Healing the Wounds of Shame and Perfectionism

Aleta Edwards, Psy.D.



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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this book to my husband, Rand, without whose support and sacrifice I could not have written this book. His support, his editorial comments, his multiple readings of the manuscript, and his handling of all the technical work were indispensable, but his emotional help and his belief in me and in the book were the greatest contributions of all.

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Preface to the Paperback Edition

Since publishing the ebook version of *Fear of the Abyss* I have received hundreds of comments from readers, sharing their life stories and telling me how my book has helped them. I am very touched and gratified by their remarks and appreciate every one of them. Many have also encouraged me to publish a physical version of my book, and the book you are reading now is a response to these requests.

*Dr. Aleta Edwards
Tampa, Florida
October 31, 2013*

Preface

Why This Book?

In my years of practice as a psychologist, I have come to know that people can actually *heal*, not just cope better. While coping is important and helps get us through hard times, it is not the same as healing. Depending on the difficulty of their problems and the degree of self-examination they are willing to do, people can truly heal - leaving behind old patterns of behavior, as well as their attendant thoughts and feelings.

My orientation is psychodynamic, meaning that I believe in helping people get to the root of the issues that trouble them. A person's history or narrative, and the unconscious (thoughts and feelings not in awareness) are keys to this process. My goal in this kind of therapy is integration - to view the many different components of one's personality with love, compassion, and honor, and to understand that we all have some tendencies we don't like that can be tempered by the positive ones. It is unnecessary to deny these tendencies, which can leave people feeling inauthentic. What some call the shadow side must be acknowledged and embraced, not

split off almost like a separate person. This book will not tell you how to cope with these feelings, but will encourage you to see yourself as a whole person - though maybe one with some feelings you have been running from - and set you on the path to healing.

Many people have come to realize the importance of awareness, of being in the present, of knowing who they really are. The way to do this is to see who you are *not*, to go through issues and defenses that obscure your real feelings. The rewards are great: healing from emotional wounds and much greater awareness. Unfortunately, many people who think of themselves as spiritual believe that they shouldn't have "negative" feelings. This is not true; the human being goes through many dark and difficult thoughts to arrive at true compassion or forgiveness, and this is definitely the case with self-awareness. To really know who you are, your core self, you need to know who you are pretending to be and who you are not, and the way to heal is the same way to grow in awareness.

I wrote this book to help those with a certain set of traits that I frequently see in my clients. Specifically, I have written this book for people who have problems with perfectionism, control issues, shame, problems making decisions, black-and-white thinking, a dread of criticism, poor self-esteem, a fear of being disappointed or disappointing others, an inhibited fantasy life, and problems with relationships that relate to these traits. I call this set of traits the *PCS constellation*, for Perfectionism, Control, and Shame. These issues are all interrelated and describe a certain *type* of person; they also cut across diagnostic lines. Although they may or may not have led to a formal diagnosis, they nonetheless present problems in living and feelings of unease.

Perfectionism is often the most obvious of the traits in this constellation or personality type. I believe that

people with perfectionistic personalities actually feel anything *but* perfect. Maybe this describes *you*. Perhaps you, too, feel there is a horrible person hiding inside that you must always defend against. As one extremely bright and insightful young client put it, "Do you think I *like* being so rigid, strict, and judgmental? I *hate* it, but I'm afraid if I ever take one drink or go to one bar, I will be just like my parents....If I tell one lie or condone one little lie in someone else, I will become this horrible liar like they are, making excuses for things and never doing anything."

Those who feel this way do not yet know the tremendous healing power of processing their feelings and experiences. This processing does not happen quickly, and takes much hard work and at times painfully honest self-examination, but it is the only way to heal the emotional wounds that cause the troubling symptoms in the first place. While arduous, this path leads to tremendous rewards. It results in a more contented and calm person, one possessing more insight and depth and better able to develop authentic goals and carry them to completion. It leads to the realization that you have far more choices than you ever imagined, because you have decided to live with awareness. People are surprised and comforted to discover that telling their stories and exploring their feelings, while someone listens intelligently and compassionately, constitute a powerful healing tool.

While this book is not psychotherapy and cannot take its place, it does invite you to move toward self-awareness - to see yourself not as a label or problem, but as a rich and unique person with many productive, unproductive,

and neutral traits. You can use this book alone, share it with a therapist, or use it in conjunction with a meditative practice.

My Hope

I hope you also *enjoy* this book. As you read parts of it that call on your honesty, strength, and courage, remember that people with these symptoms are usually very kind, moral, and ethical people. These are not traits you would or should ever want to change. Many people facing their own unique challenges in life struggle just to develop *some* of the fine qualities that come naturally to the PCS personality.

Remember that we are all "package deals." Our positive and negative traits come from the same place, and the life challenge is to bring more balance and awareness to our personalities. One client, a kind and loyal friend to those she knew, said that she wished she could be "witty and bubbly" like a friend of hers. This friend was good-hearted and nice, but not very stable or dependable. I told my client that, though she didn't "do witty and bubbly," she was an outstanding friend and person, and that the more spontaneous friend had to struggle against the flip side of her spontaneity, impulsivity.

The PCS person often judges herself in this way: she compares herself to those with qualities more valued in our culture, which too often underrates the more mature traits of dependability and compassion found in the PCS personality. Their sense of morality and

concern about the way they affect others is often what brings them to therapy in the first place. So remember as you face your challenges that you are a good person trying to grow. As you expand your mind and realize how much strength and courage you are using, those too will become a genuine part of your self-image.

Introduction

I have written this book for a specific *type* of person, one that I frequently see in my private practice. These people - whom I refer to as "PCS personalities" - suffer from problems with perfectionism, control, and shame, but they also have trouble with making decisions, think in rigid black-and-white terms, live in dread of criticism (especially self-criticism), and experience poor self-esteem, among other characteristics. I like to picture the individual issues of this PCS constellation as the spokes of a wheel. The hub of this wheel is what PCS personalities really feel inside that drives them to have these problems. It is the center of this wheel that needs to heal; then the whole constellation of issues or symptoms can disappear.

Although the name "PCS personality" comes from just three of the traits often found in this personality - perfectionism, control, and shame - I could just as easily have chosen any of the others. PCS is simply a shorthand way to refer to all the traits which are all found to a degree in anyone with this personality. You might recognize some of these traits as those of

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), but the clients I see with this personality type do not have the essential features of this disorder. People with true OCD, with their repetitive, often elaborate rituals, are in such pain that it often prevents them from participating in insight-oriented psychotherapy or even the type of self-reflection that is required by this book. Thus, though the PCS personality may share some traits with the obsessive-compulsive, most come to me suffering from depression, anxiety, or panic disorders. Sometimes they have already been to another therapist who has told them that their anxiety or other symptoms are best treated with cognitive-behavioral therapy, which teaches coping devices to alleviate and control the symptoms. They learn these techniques but then are dissatisfied with the results, because they *know* on some level that something is causing them to have the symptoms that they continue to cope with. The symptoms that are being treated are merely the manifestation of their underlying feelings, which remain in place even after being taught new ways of "coping." No one has ever told them that there is hope that they can actually heal, by addressing the "hub" of their personality, the underlying dynamics that cause them to suffer. They have never been asked to tell their "story," the narrative of their lives that led to the symptoms. One very insightful young client told me in the first session that he felt like he had lost a part of himself and wanted to get it back. He was exactly right.

Although this book discusses some of the issues that trouble the PCS person in its individual chapters, it is not written for a specific problem - the "spokes" of the PCS wheel - but for a certain *type* of person who has

these problems. There are numerous books available on anxiety, panic, or depression, but this book is for a certain *type* of person who may suffer from these. It is also not about coping, but rather about engaging in a truly healing process, a process that leads to greater awareness. This process is not an easy one. Those who enter therapy of any kind expecting a miracle that will transform their personalities overnight are hoping for the impossible. And, after all, who would really want our personalities to be so malleable that we might wake up one morning and not recognize ourselves? No, true change and healing take real work, the work of sometimes rigorous self-reflection and honesty, whether with the guidance of a professional psychotherapist or on your own.

Organization of the Book

Because the traits in the PCS constellation are so closely related, it is difficult to disentangle them and discuss them as individual issues. The linear structure of a book requires that I do this; however, the relatedness of the issues also requires that the reader always keep in mind how each trait is interconnected in the overall pattern of this personality. Within the book you will see that many chapters deal with individual "spokes" in the PCS Constellation, but that there is quite a bit of overlap among them because the issues have the same hub or root. Despite the repetition, the reader must still frequently return to chapters already read to gradually build up the big picture.

Given the need for a linear organization, here's how the book is laid out: Chapter One gives an overview of the constellation of PCS issues and discusses my objections

to diagnostic labels. Chapters Two through Four discuss individual issues, or individual spokes - specifically, shame, rigidity, and disappointment. Chapter Five takes a break from individual issues to talk about two theories that explain how we develop these issues, because to increase your understanding of the constellation you need to know how development occurs. Chapters Six through Nine discuss the rest of the issues I have chosen to focus on in this book - control, decisions, fantasy, and relationship difficulties.

Chapter Ten focuses on the Abyss. While you can get tremendous relief from going beneath the surface issues to the part of the unconscious that is closer to your awareness, facing the Abyss is the hardest part of all, because it is usually furthest from our conscious awareness. In this chapter you'll find more advanced work that invites you to really look at what you are afraid of - the kind of person you fear you are under these specific traits. Chapter Eleven discusses Your Authentic Self, and the freedom and peace that come from having an integrated Self. When you can truly face the Abyss, the defenses against knowing your Authentic Self drop away, and you will never be the same.

The chapters on individual spokes contain exercises designed to help you gradually go deeper and deeper in knowing yourself. The beginning exercises help you to get comfortable with just having issues - as we all do - and to observe yourself without judgment. While many exercises focus on looking behind or beneath the issues, they also gradually invite you to get closer and closer to your real, Authentic Self. Change is difficult, and you'll need to muster up all your courage to do this work.

While these exercises may at times reduce you to tears, I invite you also to laugh! It can be tremendously liberating to laugh at ourselves, and it is a very natural reaction to discovering that the hidden "monster" inside of you is perhaps no more frightening than a small, cornered animal. In being "caught," the worst is over, as the fear is brought into the light.

You cannot expect to do an exercise once and reap the benefits of deep change. Therefore, I suggest that you keep a journal, and make the exercises part of your life until they become a part of you. As you go through this process you will get closer and closer to your unconscious, which means that you will know yourself better, and won't feel at the mercy of a mind you sometimes feel doesn't even belong to you. Greater self-awareness leads to greater control over yourself and your life. Keep repeating the exercises from each chapter until you do not need them. Each chapter has new ones, but the older ones need to become a part of you and your life as well.

My Clients

In my years as a clinician, I have enjoyed an extremely diverse practice. I have worked with men and women, gay and straight people, and people of different races, ages, and cultural-ethnic groups. I have done psychological evaluations with children, have done therapy with seniors in nursing homes, treated active-duty military, and have worked with private clients from many different groups. The PCS issues are not limited to

any specific group, which makes them universal and very important to address.

Please note that while the people whose material inspired my vignettes all gave me permission to use their stories, the people you will meet in this book are composites. I changed gender, age, and circumstances, but the issues remain true to the ideas. Therefore, if you ever met anyone who inspired a vignette, you would not know it. At the same time, you may "see" yourself and many you know, because these issues are so prevalent, but any resemblance to actual people is simply a coincidence.

I do not know you personally, but would like to help you in your healing process. In my eighteen years of private practice, I have walked this path with many clients, and I have seen a great many people with these dynamics heal. There is no greater pleasure than when a client says to me, "Remember when I used to beat myself up over every little thing?" and then to savor how free she feels now. It has been my honor and privilege to help them on the path they walked with courage, honesty, and true desire for greater self-awareness.

The desire to not be afraid of hidden, cut-off parts of our minds, but to confront, own and, yes, make room for the so-called negativity is something we must all struggle with and, in my view, are meant to. Healing does not mean never being sad. It means not being blinded by anxiety that seems to come from nowhere, always feeling you must tread water simply to avoid life's blows. Since you are reading this book, I know you

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want to begin the healing process, and I wish you the best in your journey.

