

Emotional LABILITY

*Recognizing It, Understanding It,
and Avoiding Its Trap*

Humors and Rantettes

Irishess Johnson

Tone and Other Trifles

Mama's Boys and Daddy's Girls

Hells

Emotional English

The Gaze in the Mirror

Fish and Other Slippery Creatures

James Bonds

BY *STYX C. COLLINS, M.A., I.P.*

Emotional Unavailability
Recognizing It, Understanding It, and Avoiding Its Trap

Bryn C. Collins, M.A., L.P.



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To Rod

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Introduction

Imagine this: You've been invited to a party, but you realize on the day you're pretty sure the party is happening that you're not sure what kind of party it is or what time you should arrive. Well, you figure, you're smart and you'll just give it your best shot. So you dress in a kind of neutral casual-dressy style and show up at seven.

As you come up the walk, you can hear the sounds of a party: music, conversation, laughter, glasses clinking, and champagne corks popping, and you think, "This is going to be a great party." When you come up the stairs to the porch, you can smell delicious aromas coming from the house and again you say to yourself, "This is going to be a great party."

You ring the bell and your host emerges wearing a bemused, enigmatic smile . . . and a tuxedo.

"You're late," he says.

"I'm sorry. You didn't tell me what time the party was."

"I thought you'd figure it out."

"Well, I'm sorry. And I'm here now." You try a confident smile, which doesn't quite work.

Your host looks you up and down. "That may be true, but you're not dressed properly."

You look down at your elegant, if casual, clothing and then at his black-tie formal wear. "Yes, that's true. But I'm not that far from home. I can just go and change quickly and be right back before you even notice. I won't even be gone an hour."

You desperately think about what's in your closet that would fit with formal wear and how long it will take you to press it. You add up the travel time, wonder what you'll have to do to your hair to look right with whatever outfit you're going to put together, and try to think of how you can change your makeup without redoing it. After all, this still seems like it'll be a great party.

Your host shakes his head. "But then you'll be *really* late. Dinner will be over and I was *counting* on you to sit right beside me at the head table."

Your heart sinks. Your one chance and you blew it! Inside your head, you say several unflattering things about yourself, your abilities, your intelligence, and your potential, but out loud you declare, "Honest, I'll be back in forty-five minutes. I'll be perfect. Can't you wait? It's just forty-five minutes." You cannot imagine how you'll be back, but you want so badly to be the guest of honor.

Your host shakes his head. "Well, I don't know. But what are you planning to bring to contribute to the dinner? I've told you how much I like those special, individual nineteen-layer cakes you bake. I thought you'd know to bring one for every guest."

Behind him you can still hear the laughter and the music; you can still smell the exotic foods, and you can still see the champagne in his glass. And you still think it's the greatest party ever and you still want to be the guest of honor.

"Maybe I could be back in time for dessert. . . . How many guests are there?"

That's what an emotionally unavailable relationship *feels* like. You're just never quite good enough to get admitted to the party. You get seduced by the clear, often indirect and unspoken, message that something is just a little wrong. If you can fix that, the implied promise goes, you'll be the guest of honor and win the door prize: love.

But when you "fix" what was "wrong" the first time, something else is a little "wrong." And when you fix that, something else will appear.

Your host has no intention of making you—or anyone—the guest of honor. Your host also has no *ability* to make you the guest of honor—or even to open the door to let you in. Your host is suffering from **emotional unavailability**. This is the inability of a person to reach out and make a heart connection with another person.

What's so unsettling and painful is that you end up with

the clear belief that this is somehow your fault and that it's your responsibility to fix it by being perfect. If it isn't fixed, you're not perfect enough.

For the first of many times, let me say clearly to you:

YOU DIDN'T BREAK IT . . .
YOU DON'T HAVE TO FIX IT!

What was I Thinking?

You've just read the affirmation above (affirmation—a true and positive statement of the way things ideally are) and the metaphor about the party and said to yourself, "That's so obvious. I'd *never* get caught in any situation like that."

It seems obvious—until you're in the middle of it. It doesn't start out with unreasonable demands of perfection. If it did, you'd walk away after the first five minutes. We all get sucked into emotionally unavailable situations (I don't like to abuse the word *relationship* when describing something so one-sided) because the process is subtle and progressive. The demands move a little at a time, inching you away from your power base, shifting control of the situation to the emotionally unavailable person.

That's one of the keys to understanding emotional unavailability. The person who is not available doesn't want love as much as he or she wants control. Emotions are unsafe; control gives the illusion of safety.

It's perfectly reasonable to expect an emotional connection with someone with whom you have a relationship. We base a lot in life on expectations of certain behavior by others in given situations. That's part of the reason life's details don't overwhelm us. We use expectations as a guide to predicting the behavior of people around us. Otherwise we'd have to figure out every situation we encountered every minute of every day. Just imagine rush-hour traffic!

We expect police officers to enforce the laws and keep us

safe. We expect teachers to teach. We expect doctors to help us heal. We expect our partners in relationships to connect with us emotionally. These expectations put us into a particular mind-set when we're around those people.

Suppose that you are in a bank and a uniformed police officer is standing behind you in line. Someone comes in to rob the bank. You make decisions about what to do based on your reasonable expectation that the police officer will attempt to protect you and the others in the bank. People who have been in this situation where the "police officer" turned out to be a costumed accomplice of the robber have been more traumatized by the betrayal of the "police officer" than by the experience of being in a robbery.

If you are in a relationship with someone, you expect the relationship to grow and deepen over time; you expect a heart connection to be made and maintained. You operate your life from the basis of this expectation. When your partner in the relationship turns out not to be making an emotional connection, it causes trauma; that's why these relationships are so painful. The trauma then does further damage as it undermines your expectations about yourself and your abilities to make connections. As illogical as that may seem, it's human nature to look for flaws in ourselves when things don't go as we expect. We end up being traumatized twice by these relationships: once by the loss and abandonment and again by the loss of our own confidence in ourselves. That's why the end of these relationships can be so much more painful than the end of a fully realized relationship. We ruminate about what we could have done differently to make it work.

A Road Map

One of the objectives of this book is to introduce you to emotionally unavailable types so you'll recognize them when they appear in your life. We'll do this in Chapter 1.

In Chapter 2, we'll take a look at some of the ways in which people become emotionally unavailable. We'll also explore emotions and mind-sets and some different ways to look at communication, which will help you spot emotionally unavailable people *before* you are hooked.

Chapters 3 through 16 focus on how the folks we met in Chapter 1 behave when they get into relationships. There are checklists and quizzes to help you identify these people, and some tools to understand how you get hooked in.

Chapters 17 and 18 give you tools to change the way you approach people and relationships. As you use these tools in daily life, you will attract other emotionally available people into relationships because you will be clearly emotionally available.

Chapter 19 helps you identify those people and relationships that go beyond emotionally unavailable into toxic. You'll learn how to recognize toxic people and how to get away and stay away.

My hope is that through reading and using this book, you'll learn to let go of emotionally unavailable people and relationships and find other emotionally available people with whom to connect.

Chapter One

Mr. Wonderful, Ms. Perfect, and Friends

I don't think I know anyone who has escaped having a relationship with someone emotionally unavailable at some point in their life. There's no particular time in life when the unhealthy relationship happens—some people have one in their teens, others in their senior years.

Some unlucky people I know have never had a relationship that *wasn't* emotionally unavailable! These sad folks can't seem to figure out how they keep getting into bad relationships. They don't realize it's a process of choice—and of education.

There's an old rule of thumb that people choose to be with partners who remind them of the parent with whom they had the most unresolved issues. As it turns out, that's usually true. It also leads a person to choose essentially the same type of relationship again and again. The partner might come in different packages, but the contents are emotionally similar. Part of the education process is to be able to recognize the type of emotionally unavailable person you've chosen in the past. That gives you a guidepost to figuring out what it is about that type that feels so familiar and entices you again and again.

Let's take a look at some of the personality types who

are emotionally unavailable. This is not an all-inclusive list, but it includes the major representatives. Recognize that all behavior falls along a range from pretty OK to extreme. These personality types fall along the same range: mild to unacceptable. Acceptable of course varies from person to person.

It's also worth noting that people can change. They do it all the time. Almost nothing is cast in stone. In each of these personality types save two there is potential to grow and change. It takes work and sometimes therapy, and it depends on where within the range the person is as to how much change he or she can make, but it can happen if the person believes it's important enough.

And the two who can't? Read on.

Romeo/Romiette: Great Balcony, No Stamina

Ah, romance: Barry White is playing in the background, lights are low, the scent of roses fills the air.

Week One: "Baby, you are without a doubt the most gorgeous and wonderful woman I've ever met. I can't even look at you without wanting to sweep you into my arms."

You meet Romeo/Romiette and find yourself swept away. Sweet phone calls, endearing cards, flowers, special and thoughtful treats. When you're together, you are the center of attention.

Week Two: "I can't imagine how I survived without you."

You can't help it—suddenly you know you are *it*. Every love song was written for the two of you. Every romantic movie is about you. Romance novelists must have been hiding in your kitchen drawers, writing everything the two of you say and do into their books.

Week Three: "I can't stop thinking about you. You're making me get in trouble at work because I don't concentrate. I just want to spend time with you."

You begin to make plans. Words like *our* and *we* pepper your conversation. The distant echo of wedding bells rings in your ears. Your friends are sick of hearing about your perfect relationship.

Week Four: "Sorry I'm not here to take your call right now. Leave a number and I'll get back to you."

Week Five: "Sorry I'm not here to take your call right now. Leave a number and I'll get back to you."

Week Six: "Sorry I'm not here to take your call right now. Leave a number and I'll get back to you."

Suddenly, it's gone. Without so much as a by-your-leave or a go-to-hell, everything stops. There's no fight. There's no discussion. There's been no accident (you know because you've checked with every hospital emergency room in the state) and no funeral. Romeo/Romiette simply disappears.

You ruminate. You make up wild scenarios involving global amnesia or a terrorist kidnapping. You find yourself gracelessly leaping for the phone whenever it rings. You agonize about what it is *you* did to make this happen, and you leave desperate, unattractive, and unanswered messages at the phone numbers where you had reached Romeo/Romiette instantly only days before. Then you get sad. Eventually you might even get mad.

What you probably don't get is answers, even if you happen to run into Romeo/Romiette. What you will get then is a warm, superficial greeting and evasive answers to the questions you ask.

Before you completely trash-talk yourself, let's dissect this alleged relationship for a minute. When it first begins, the intensity of the connection is what hooks you. It feels deep and sincere, but that's in part because Romeo/Romiette is focused on you, and for most of us that's an unusual experience and the effect is heady.

Because the focus is on you, you don't find out much about Romeo/Romiette. Any questions of a personal or feelings nature get turned aside or converted into questions about you. This evasion serves Romeo/Romiette well because he or she has a wealth of information about what you want and what you like and what you believe; Romeo/

Romiette uses that to further engage you in the relationship. In return, Romeo/Romiette gets adoration, romance, and fulfillment—not to mention the thrill of the chase and the rush of the conquest—very sparkly stuff!

What doesn't interest this type of person is the dull patina of reality. As soon as any hint of repetition or familiarity appears—as soon as you push to know something about how Romeo/Romiette *feels* about something—alarms begin to peal and Romeo/Romiette begins to look for a new conquest. Remember those wedding bells you heard? That was the alarm going off.

Romeo/Romiette has made no emotional investment in the relationship. The connection you felt is with yourself because Romeo/Romiette focused his or her attention—and your own—on you.

It's one-sided but doesn't feel that way because most of us are so grateful and flattered to be the center of someone's total attention that we don't see it—sometimes not until years afterward!

Gratitude and flattery are not acceptable substitutes for love and real emotional connection. That's what causes the pain of this kind of abandonment. Essentially, it's as if you're being abandoned by yourself. Meanwhile, Romeo/Romiette remains emotionally distant, emotionally unavailable, throughout the course of this relationship, so when it ends, he or she has no pain and no sense of abandonment. Instead, Romeo/Romiette's drawn to the thrill of the chase with someone new.

Why would someone do this? Although it seems really mean and manipulative, it comes from a place that's sad and empty. People like Romeo/Romiette are so numbed and at arm's length from themselves that it's impossible for them to connect on any real level with another human.

While you're emptying that box of Kleenex and downing that quart of triple fudge cookie dough ice cream, it's important to remind yourself that this isn't about you. You have been treated like a precious object that, once acquired, is no longer desirable.

Being *objectified*, treated like an object, is one of the hallmarks of abusive relationships. It's not OK and it's not nice and you didn't deserve it. Healing comes from being able to let yourself off the hook and from identifying the lesson you learned or the unfinished business you might have finished from the encounter. Before you jump off that balcony that Romeo/Romiette left you on, finish this book, finish the ice cream, and try to remember how good it feels to feel good about yourself! That's the biggest gift Romeo/Romiette has to offer.

Indiana Jones: The Dangerous Man

The sound of the howling Alpine winds almost drowns out his words, but you can make out, "... gorgeous in this ... feel so good to be ... adrenaline feels just like love."

You most often meet Indy in high-intensity situations: he's the ski instructor; the cliff diver; the race-car driver. His conversation is filled with references to exotic places and exciting events. There's nothing he won't try "just for the fun of it." He might come in a uniform: cop, firefighter, jet pilot. The unflappable, cool rescuer who can take on anything and still keep his head. He also keeps his heart—and his emotions!

What he gives is a steady stream of adrenaline-by-association as he tells you the tales of his exploits. Sometimes you even find yourself following him out the door of a perfectly safe airplane, down a dangerous ski run, or to the bottom of a shark-patrolled reef without really knowing how you got there. Indy is all adrenaline. Even when it's just the two of you sitting cozy in front of the fire, the room is filled with his sky-diving, bad-guy arresting, firefighting electricity. Where Romeo is completely focused on you, Indy is completely focused on events and excitement. He casts himself in the central role, but it's all action—and no interaction.

As long as you continue to be the awed spectator/supporter, the relationship continues. But should you look for any emotional content or try to share any emotion beyond, "Wow! You're amazing!" you will find yourself abandoned on a dead-end road while he's off to the remote wherzis to whatzis with whozis. When the adrenaline dissipates, Indy disappears.

So why are women attracted to Indy? Adrenaline and excitement are a turn-on. What happens is that the event and the person doing the event get jumbled together so the person becomes the excitement of the event or the action. Indy probably got tuned to that style early in life when he was praised for things he did but not for who he was, or when he got a strong reaction from peers and parents (probably about 180 degrees apart!) for pulling off some crazy stunt. Suddenly he was in the action spotlight. He didn't have to make any emotional connections or commitments, take any emotional risks, or make himself vulnerable to get attention.

Think of a high school sports hero who gets lots of positive attention for his athletic achievement without having to put any of his self or his soul into it. I'm not saying all athletes are Indys, but a lot of Indys were star athletes whose careers ended with graduation. When that spotlight went out, they went looking for another way to plug it back in. Sometimes the military provides the spotlight; sometimes being a punk or gang member; in other cases it might be a hobby or interest that's fraught with risks—rock climbing, scuba diving, white-water rafting. In all these situations, the message is the same: Indy's value comes from what he does, not who he is. You'll notice that in his chosen fields of activity there's no incentive to explore emotions and there might even be a disincentive because then Indy would have to be vulnerable, and tough guys don't do vulnerable in their view.

When you finally tire of the war stories and want something more in the way of an emotional connection, Indy will grab the next plane to Timbuktu—or the local equivalent—and go on to the next adventure appreciator.

Just as all athletes are not Indys, neither are all scuba divers, bungee jumpers, cops, firefighters, and so on. The love of a particular sport or sports or an exciting hobby doesn't preclude a person's making emotional connections. Where Indy makes his appearance is when the sport or activity takes the place of real emotional connections—where the activity is the connection.

Where Romeo slips away silently, Indy disappears in a cloud of activity. He just gets busy and you're not on the schedule. He might go off on an adventure or take up a new activity you're not interested in or he might find a new group of adventure buddies. Just ask for a commitment and watch the activity burst forth!

This breakup involves not so much ice cream as a garage sale as you get rid of the scuba gear or ski boots. Because the relationship was not with the person but with his action and behavior, the end is not so much pain as it is adrenaline withdrawal. The residual these people leave in our lives, however, is a taste for the jazz of excitement. This fallout is dangerous because it can lead you right to another Indy. Another ride on the great roller coaster of dangerous men (or women).

Take heart. You *can* learn to be comfortable with a person whose idea of excitement is a movie and McDonald's. All it takes is a real emotional connection.

Tens and Other Trophies

JFK Jr.'s double, Claudia Schiffer's doppelganger, Cindy Crawford's twin, Brad Pitt's look-alike. Where Indys rely on their excitement quotient, Tens rely on the power of their physical beauty to enchant without connection. The underlying dynamic is much the same. The Tens got the message early in life that looks were a better asset than anything else they had to offer—a *terrible* message—and reacted by developing that asset. What they learned is that it's a low emo-

tional risk to have an adoring person captured by their looks. They have the illusion of connection without having to give anything back.

"What do you think about this shirt on me?"

"Looks great. It's really you."

"Does my hair look all right?"

"Looks great. I think this cut is the best ever."

"I only drink Evian water because I want to keep my skin perfect."

"Let me just get some of that for you."

"I think I'll take up horseback riding because I think I'd look good on a horse."

Your role in the relationship is clearly defined from the first contact. You are in charge of admiration and adoration. It's your job to complement and compliment, to display and step out of the way while your Ten basks in the glow of the spotlight.

In a sense it's another form of objectification but this time the object is the Ten and it's a role he or she takes voluntarily! This is key to understanding how low the Ten's self-esteem is. If you believe your only value is as a trophy or an object for others to admire, that's self-victimization. So, you're asking yourself, if I have a relationship with a Ten who chooses to objectify himself or herself, does that make me an objectifier?

Good question. It looks right at the heart of objectification because this voluntary offering of a person as an object also objectifies the person to whom the object is offered. In other words, as the Ten is self-victimizing, he or she is also victimizing you. What a no-win situation that is.

It takes a while for the admiration to wear off, but eventually the reflected glow of the spotlight isn't enough and you ask for something from the heart. What you're offered instead is more beauty. There's nothing wrong with beauty, but it's not enough when your heart needs attention. Beauty is not emotion.

Sometimes Tens will attract trophy hunters. These relationships are mutually parasitic and unfulfilled emotionally

but each person's agenda gets met so we're not going to focus on those combinations. Think of them as emotional unavailability squared.

The person who is attracted by the beauty of the Ten gets a different kind of rush than the adrenaline-by-association of the person who chooses the Indy. It accesses feelings of pride and accomplishment by association; they can't miss the glances of appreciation and jealousy coming their way. Don't misunderstand, however. Just as all action-oriented guys aren't Indys, all beautiful people aren't Tens. What distinguishes the Tens is the emotional distance they keep from anyone who tries to connect and be a part of their lives. Sounds pretty lonely to hold the world at arm's length, doesn't it?

The breakup with a Ten is painful because it attacks *your* self-esteem. If you've been getting a glow-by-association from being the partner of a Ten and suddenly you're replaced, you have to be a very grounded, centered person not to wonder if it might have happened because you're not attractive enough. That speculation leads down a very rocky and negative trail, a trip you should avoid at all costs. It's hard to remember that love and beauty are not the same thing, but that will help you avoid getting stuck in negative rumination. A little positive self-talk, some reality checks, and the use of emotional dark glasses to block out the glare of the reflected spotlight and you'll be ready to find a genuine heart link with someone else!

Mama's Boys and Daddy's Girls

"Well, my mom always knew what I wanted without my having to tell her. Why can't you figure it out? Why do I always have to tell you what I need?"

"If my daddy thought I was unhappy, he would buy me something to make me feel better. What are you going to do for me?"

They grew up secure in the belief that they hung the moon. Mom and Dad gave them everything—except emotional connections. When you enter a relationship with a Mama's Boy or a Daddy's Girl, you are expected to take over where Mama and Daddy left off. The problems with this expectation are legion.

First, it's unlikely that Mama and Daddy are going to be willing to relinquish any presence in the life of the Boy or Girl. Instead, their expectation is for you to join the admiring audience, but not as a full member. Instead you are to remain in a subordinate role to them and to the Boy or Girl—a satellite.

The second problem will arise as your love is compared, generally unfavorably, to the love Mama and Daddy offered. Often this will be measured in material goods or money ("Daddy would have gotten me the . . .") or in terms of boundary-free acceptance ("I don't know why you're upset. Mama never got upset when . . .").

Which leads me on a small side trip. We seem to have gotten confused about the difference between unconditional love/acceptance (desirable) and boundary-free acceptance (dysfunctional). Unconditional love/acceptance says, "I love you because you exist. I accept you for who you are. However, you must act right and be a good citizen of the world or you will have consequences."

Boundary-free acceptance says, "I know Junior shouldn't be doing drugs, sleeping with everything that moves, and stealing from us and his employer. But I don't want him to suffer consequences. He needs treatment. It's society's fault. It's his teacher's fault. It's his therapist's fault. You don't understand him. He's special."

Junior may be a lot of things, but he's no fool. It takes very little time for him to catch on to this scam. "I'm special. Rules don't apply to me. If I get consequences, Mama will fix it." Most elementary schoolteachers can tell you the effects of this parenting style as they struggle with classrooms full of kids who believe they can do anything they please whenever they want.

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