



Challenging the Fantasy Bond

with Dr. Lisa Firestone



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Four Parts to This Webinar:

Part 1:

What is a
fantasy
bond?

Part 2:

Why fantasy
bonds form

Part 3:

How fantasy
bonds affect
us and our
relationships

Part 4:

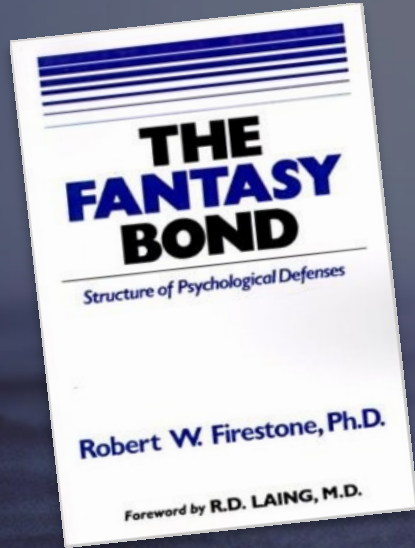
Breaking
free from a
fantasy
bond

A photograph of a couple lying in bed. In the foreground, a pair of feet is prominently displayed, pointing towards the camera. In the background, a woman is lying down, looking at a smartphone, and a man is lying down, looking at a laptop screen. The bed has a patterned blanket and white pillows. The overall atmosphere is relaxed and intimate.

Part 1:

What is a Fantasy Bond?

Definition of Fantasy Bond



A Fantasy Bond is an illusion of connection, originally an imaginary fusion or joining with the parent. We use the term Fantasy Bond to describe both the original imaginary connection formed during childhood and the repetitive efforts of the adult to continue to make these types of connections in intimate relationships.



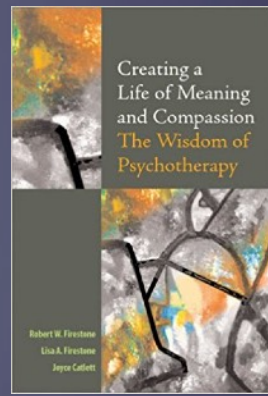
- The fantasy bond describes an illusion of connection that is substituted for feelings of real love and connection.
- Forming a fantasy bond is an often unconscious act of self-parenting and self-protection, in which a person becomes pseudo-independent, the helpless child and the all-powerful parent at once.

Origins of a Fantasy Bond

- Illusion of connection we originally form with our parent to help relieve early anxiety and emotional pain
- Process of self-parenting - see and treat ourselves the way we were seen and treated by our primary caretakers, both punishing and soothing ourselves
- Fantasy bond extends to our adult relationships
- Defenses we form limit our capacity for real love and closeness



Three States of Fantasy Involvement



- The individual with extreme propensities for fantasy and imagined fusion who moves toward increased isolation and withdrawal from other people
- The individual who, to varying degrees, uses elements reality to reinforce and support an ongoing fantasy process rather than really investing in relationships and career
- The individual who lives a realistic committed life, whose actions correspond to his or her aspirations and abilities

Extensions of the Fantasy Bond

The Fantasy Bond is often extended beyond our parents, romantic partners, and children. We can develop a fantasy connection with:

- Siblings or other relatives
- Country
- Religion
- Work
- Sports team
- Social issue, cause, or political party
- Groups





Part 2:

Why Fantasy Bonds Form

Separation Theory

Robert W. Firestone, Ph.D.



Integrates psychoanalytic and existential systems of thought

Two kinds of emotional pain:

UNDEFENDED



DEFENDED



INTERPERSONAL

EXISTENTIAL

FANTASY BOND

CRITICAL INNER VOICE

The Fantasy Bond

Primitive defense mechanism that we developed in early childhood as a way of maintaining an illusion of safety and security at those times that were frustrating, hurtful, or frightening.





Memory of being at one with the parent.



Infants have a natural ability to comfort themselves by using images and memories of past feeding experiences to ward off the anxiety of being temporarily separated from their mothers. Fantasy helps reduce feelings of hunger and frustration.

- The bond compensates for (or substitutes) inadequacies in the early environment.
- In an attempt to cope with the emotional pain and restore a feeling of comfort, the infant merges with its mother in its imagination, magically believing itself to be one with her.



Existential Issues

"The fantasy of being connected to another person gives us a sense of immortality, a feeling of living forever, but robs us of day-to-day life. The addictive and compelling nature of the bond lies in the fact that it denies death and relives our anxiety about the future. The drawback is that it creates a powerful resistance to living a free, independent existence in harmony and genuine closeness with our loved ones."

- Robert Firestone, *The Fantasy Bond*



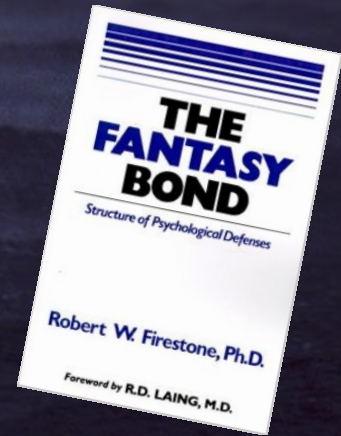
A photograph of an elderly couple sitting on a bed in a minimalist room. The man, on the left, is wearing a plaid shirt and striped pants, sitting with his head buried in his hand in a gesture of distress. The woman, on the right, is wearing a white t-shirt and white pants, sitting with her arms crossed and looking away. A dark grey rectangular box is superimposed over the center of the image, containing white text. The background shows a white wall, a bedside table with a book, and a lamp.

Part 3:

How Fantasy Bonds Affect Us and Our Relationships

“As humans, we are torn between pursuing an assertive goal-oriented life, and depending on passive-dependent machinations that assure us of a fantasy bond. How we resolve this basic conflict determines whether we have a free-flowing, changing existence or a static, rigid, defensive posture. The primary fantasy bond is the core defense underlying our resistance to change. It is the major barrier to a full, rich existence.”

~ Dr. Robert Firestone, The Fantasy Bond



Ways We Maintain Fantasy Connections to Our Family

- Idealization of parents and family
- Maintenance of a negative self-image
- Projection of negative parental qualities and behaviors onto others
- Recreation of negative family dynamics in adult relationships
- Reliving your parents' life rather than living your own
- Maintaining psychological defenses that were adaptive as children but that limit us as adults

Language of the Defense System



The critical inner voice refers to a well-integrated pattern of destructive thoughts toward our selves and others. The “voices” that make up this internalized dialogue are at the root of much of our maladaptive behavior. It affects every aspect of our lives: our self-esteem and confidence, and most importantly, our personal and intimate relationships.

*Your parents were great.
There's just something wrong
with you. Don't trust him. She's
gonna leave you. No one will
ever love you. Make sure you
look right.*

The critical inner voice supports our fantasy bonds:

- Coaches you about yourself and others
- Warns you to not get too close or to cling
- Keeps you from real relating
- Fosters attitudes and behaviors that support the fantasy bond
- Maintains idealization of parents, as you continue to find fault with yourself and those close to you



Examples of “Voices”

*He's your
better half.*

*You'll always be
alone.*

*No one else
would like
you.*

*You can't
live without
her.*

*You deserve a
drink. You've
been working
hard.*

*Your kids are
making you
look bad.*



Do You Have a Fantasy Bond?

- Withholding from your partner
- Acting like a parent or child
- Putting partner up on a pedestal
- Becoming hypercritical toward your partner
- Focusing on form over substance
- Feeling like you can't do things on your own
- Less eye contact and physical affection
- Loss of independence

Fantasy Bond on a Continuum



Couple Interactions Chart

Interactions in an Ideal Relationship	Interactions in a Relationship Characterized by a Fantasy Bond
Nondefensiveness and openness	Angry reactions to feedback
Open to trying anything within reason	Closed to new experiences
Honesty and integrity	Deception and duplicity
Respect for the other's boundaries, priorities and goals, separate from self	Overstepping boundaries. Other seen only in relation to self
Physical affection and personal sexuality	Lack of affection; inadequate or impersonal, routine sexuality
Understanding--lack of distortion of the other	Misunderstanding-distortion of the other
Noncontrolling, nonmanipulative, and nonthreatening	Manipulations of dominance and submission

Factors That Contribute to Relationship Distress

- Selection
- Distortion
- Provocation



A man and a woman are jogging on a paved path that curves along a hillside. The woman, on the left, is wearing a colorful floral-patterned zip-up jacket over a white shirt and black leggings. She has white earbuds in and is smiling. The man, on the right, is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and black shorts. They are both looking towards the right. In the background, there is a panoramic view of a city with buildings and a body of water under a clear sky. A semi-transparent yellow rectangle is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title text.

Part 4: Breaking Free From a Fantasy Bond

To break free from a fantasy bond we must:

- Leave our own inward world and challenge our self-nourishing and punishing habits
- Redirect our energy toward taking chances on finding satisfaction in the external world through goal-oriented behavior



Identifying Your Defenses

What are the ways you adapted to your early environment and to your parents' treatment that helped you as a child, but that now limit you in your adult life?



Identifying Negative Traits

What negative behaviors or undesirable traits of your parent(s) do you recognize in yourself? Are there negative behaviors or traits that you are re-enacting in your current relationship, for instance?



Admit the Existence of Fantasy Bonds

Do you have a fantasy bond with a parent?

Idealize your parent?

Don't see how a parent hurt you?

React in child mode?

Limited based on parent's limitations?

Fear surpassing or being different from parent?

Hear parent's voice in your head?

Admit the Existence of Fantasy Bonds

Do you have a fantasy bond with your partner?

*No longer
engage in
loving actions?*

*Withhold, punish
or criticize your
partner?*

*Have rigid
behavior
patterns?*

*Relate as a
unit?*

*Take your
partner for
granted?*

*Feel like you
can't live
without
partner?*

Admit the Existence of Fantasy Bonds

Do you have a fantasy bond with your child?

*Feel
embarrassed by
your child?*

*Feel the child
reflects on you?*

*Make up for
things you
didn't get as
a child?*

*Feel sorry for
your child?*

*Need
reassurance
from your
child?*

*Feel your child
is the only one
who loves
you?*

Steps of Voice Therapy

1. Identifying What Your Critical Inner Voice is Telling You
2. Recognizing Where Your Voices Come From
3. Responding to Your Critical Inner Voice
4. Understanding How Your Voices Influence Your Behavior
5. Changing Your Self-Limiting Behaviors



Corrective Suggestions

It is helpful to think of corrective suggestions for yourself to challenge:

- Self-nurturing habits
- Dependency behavior
- Inwardness
- Destructive bonds
- Provoking behaviors
- Withholding patterns




It is also important to think of suggestions for how you can:

- Explore your new, independent identity
- Overcome fears

Corrective Suggestions for Breaking a Fantasy Bond

- Move toward independence and respect for those close to you and establish true equality. Disrupt reciprocal patterns of dominance, submission, and defiance
- Develop a non-defensive posture toward feedback and an open and honest style of communication
- Move toward increased interaction with others—extend circle of family and friends to provide better reality testing



A photograph of a man and a woman sitting on a green park bench, viewed from behind. The man is wearing a grey sweater and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a black leather jacket and black boots. She has long blonde hair and is leaning her head against his shoulder. The background shows trees and a path, with a warm, golden light suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

Breaking a Fantasy Bond in Your Relationship

The Firestone Voice Scale for Couples

Circle the frequency with which you experience the following critical inner voices:

0 = Never 1 = Rarely 2 = Once in a While
3 = Frequently 4 = Most of the Time

0 1 2 3 4 It's a man's job to take care of a woman.


0 1 2 3 4 You're never going to find another person who understands you.

0 1 2 3 4 Men are so insensitive. They're so opinionated. They don't want you to have your own views about anything .

0 1 2 3 4 Don't get too hooked on him (her).

Don't Play the Victim

Be An Active Participant in Your Relationship

- 
- Assume responsibility for your relationship
 - Give up victimized language and thinking
 - Avoid the use of passive aggression to get what you want

Withholding

The background of the slide features a silhouette of a man and a woman sitting back-to-back. Both individuals have their arms crossed and are looking away from each other, which visually represents the concept of 'withholding' or emotional distance. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. The image is set against a light green background with a dark purple horizontal band at the top.

What does it look like?

- Holding back positive qualities
- Feeling victimized or consumed by others

A photograph of an elderly couple outdoors. The woman, on the left, has short grey hair and is wearing a white t-shirt. The man, on the right, has short grey hair and is wearing a pink polo shirt. He is sitting on a bicycle, and they are both smiling broadly. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting a park or garden. A semi-transparent dark grey banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the title and a list.

Generosity

- 1. Giving something that is sensitive to the person. It's not about material things. It's about being giving of yourself.**
- 2. Be open to the person expressing appreciation.**
- 3. Be open to receiving the generosity of others. It's important to let others do things for you.**
- 4. Showing appreciation for the generosity directed toward you.**

Unilateral Disarmament



- Defuse escalating arguments by dropping your stake in winning
- Say something warm and understanding
- Stress that it doesn't really matter who's right
- Express physical affection

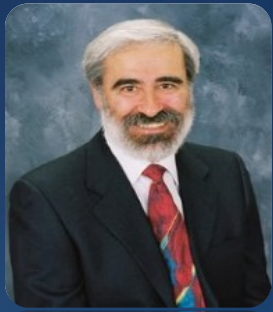
The technique of Unilateral Disarmament does not imply that you're surrendering your point of view or deferring to your partner's opinion. It simply indicates that you value being close to your partner more than winning your point.



Integration

Daniel Siegel, M.D.

- Two differentiated people coming together and linking, not merging.
- Becoming a “we” while staying a separate self.



Merge or Coevolve?

David Schnarch, Ph.D.



Are you living with a fused identity?

OR

Are you helping each other to evolve to be a better person? Coevolution.



Emotionally Focused Therapy

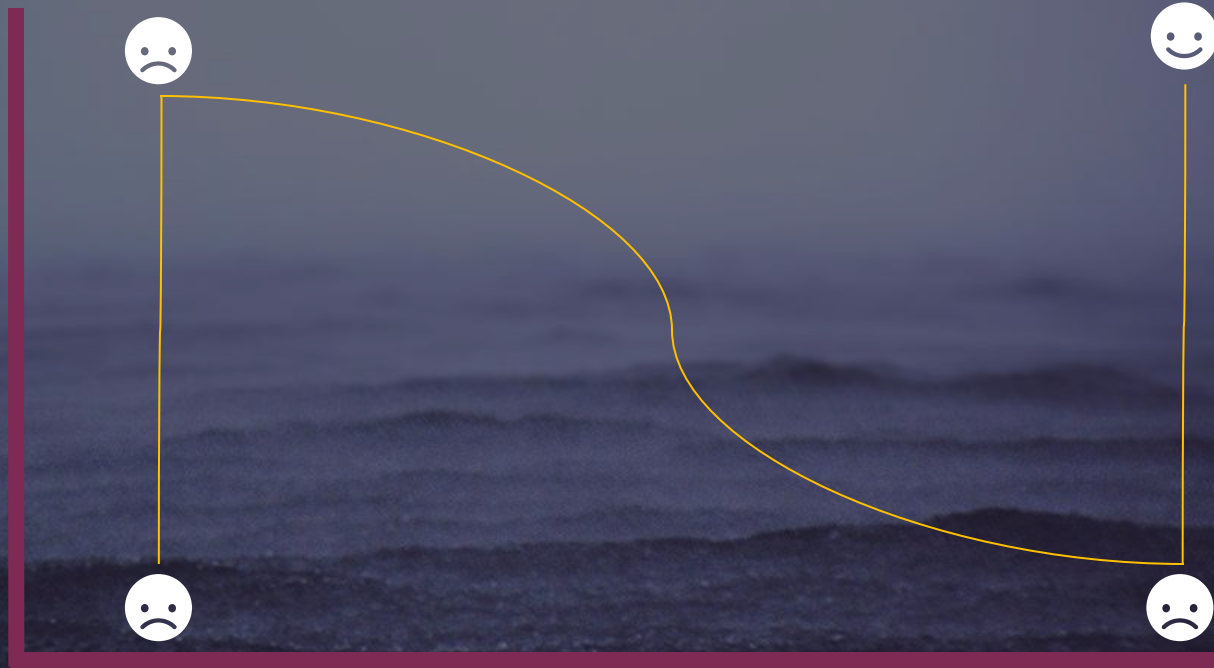
Susan Johnson, Ph.D.

A man and a woman are sitting on a grey couch, facing each other and smiling. The man is on the left, wearing a white sweater, and the woman is on the right, also wearing a white sweater. In the background, there is a fireplace with a warm fire burning. To the right of the fireplace, there is a small white table with a bust on it. The overall atmosphere is cozy and intimate.

The importance of being
emotionally close, attuned, resonate
with your partner

Differentiation and Linkage

Linkage
(emotional
closeness)



Differentiation
(individuation as an individual)

Actions that counter a fantasy bond:

1. Express love in a way your partner would experience as loving.
2. Be affectionate.
3. Slow down. Be kind and present.
4. See partner for who they are.
5. Make eye contact.
6. Try something old.
7. Try something new.
8. Break routine.
9. Avoid passivity and control.
10. Talk as an "I" instead of a "we."
11. Be aware of your critical inner voice.





Behavioral Checklist for Partners

Describe yourself and your partner along these dimensions on a scale of 1 to 5:

1. Does not describe me/does not describe partner at this time.
2. Describes me on infrequent occasions/describes partner on infrequent occasions.
3. Describes how I am some of the time/describes how my partner is some of the time.
4. Describes how I frequently am/describes how my partner frequently is.
5. Describes me most or all of the time/describes my partner most or all of the time.

non-defensive and open (able to listen to feedback without overreacting/open to new experiences):

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

respect for other's boundaries:

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

vulnerable (willing to feel sad, acknowledge hurt feelings, etc.):

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

honest (straightforward, non-deceptive):

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

physically affectionate:

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

sexuality (satisfied with sexual relationship):

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

empathic and understanding (lack of distortion of the other):

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

communication (sense of shared meaning, feel understood):

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

non-controlling, non-manipulative, and non-threatening:

Self: 1 2 3 4 5 / Partner: 1 2 3 4 5

How would you rate yourself along these dimensions?

sense of well-being:

1 2 3 4 5

self-confidence:

1 2 3 4 5

optimism:

1 2 3 4 5

A young man and woman are shown from the chest up, looking upwards and to the right with hopeful expressions. They are holding hands. Above them is a large, light blue thought bubble with a torn-paper edge. Inside the bubble are various hand-drawn sketches: a house, a car, a dollar sign, a laptop, a city skyline, a sun, a family with children, a baby in a stroller, a flower, and a heart. The background is a solid light blue.

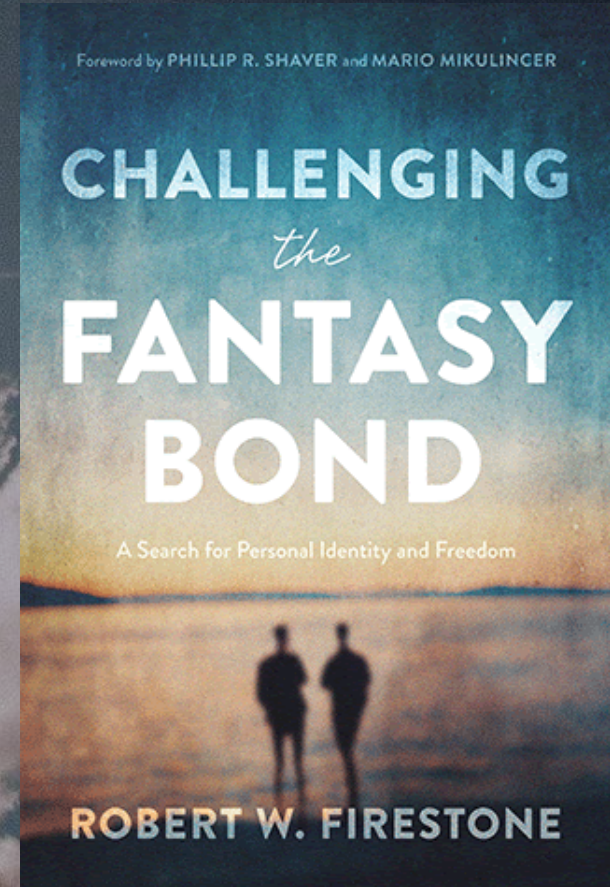
Goals for Your Relationship

- Goals I have for my relationship
- Actions to take to achieve my goals

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The Fantasy Bond



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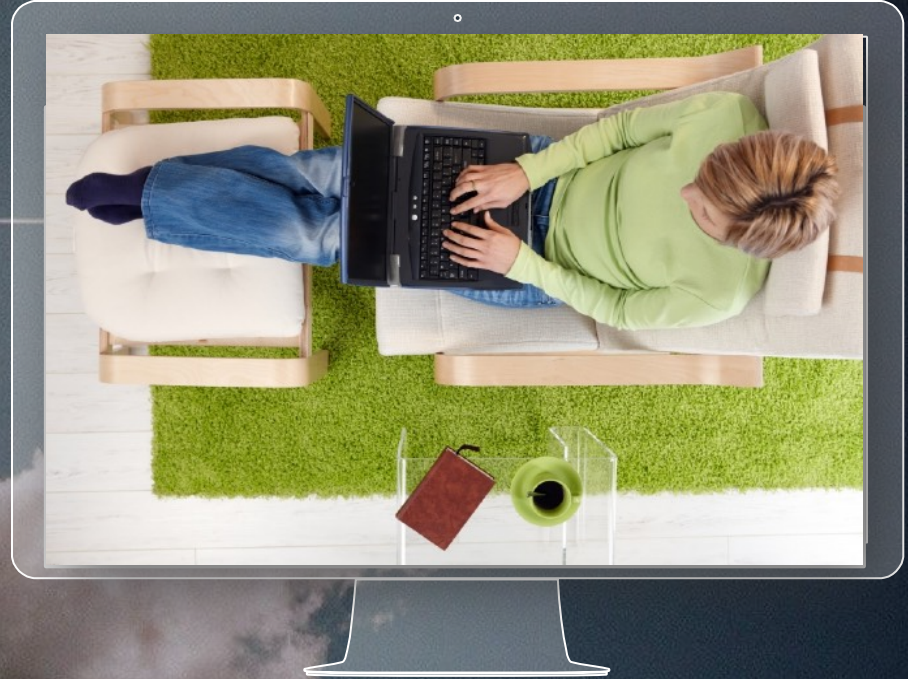
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Thank you!

Any questions?

You can find me at glendon@glendon.org