

TOXIC PARENTS

OVERCOMING
THEIR HURTFUL
LEGACY AND
RECLAIMING
YOUR LIFE

BY THE AUTHOR OF *MEN WHO HATE WOMEN & THE WOMEN WHO LOVE THEM*

DR. SUSAN FORWARD

WITH CRAIG BUCK

TOXIC PARENTS

*Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy
and Reclaiming Your Life*

DR. SUSAN FORWARD
with Craig Buck



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For my children

TOXIC PARENTS

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Introduction

Sure, my father used to hit me, but he only did it to keep me in line. I don't see what that has to do with my marriage falling apart.

—Gordon

Gordon, 38, a successful orthopedic surgeon, came to see me when his wife of six years left him. He was desperate to get her back, but she told him she wouldn't even consider coming home until he sought help for his uncontrollable temper. She was frightened by his sudden outbursts and worn down by his relentless criticism. Gordon knew he had a hot temper and that he could be a nag, but still he was shocked when his wife walked out.

I asked Gordon to tell me about himself and guided him with a few questions as he talked. When I asked him about his parents, he smiled and painted a glowing picture, especially of his father, a distinguished midwestern cardiologist:

If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have become a doctor. He's the best. His patients all think he's a saint.

I asked him what his relationship with his father was like now. He laughed nervously and said:

It was great . . . until I told him I was thinking about going into holistic medicine. You'd think I wanted to be a mass murderer. I told him about three months ago, and now every time we talk he starts ranting about how he didn't send me to medical school to become a faith healer. It really got bad yesterday. He got upset and told me I should forget I was ever a part of his family. That really hurt. I don't know. Maybe holistic medicine isn't such a good idea.

While Gordon was describing his father, who was obviously not as wonderful as Gordon would have liked me to believe, I noticed that he began to clasp and unclasp his hands in a very agitated way. When he caught himself doing this, he restrained himself by placing his fingertips together in the way that professors often do at their desks. It seemed a gesture he might have picked up from his father.

I asked Gordon whether his father had always been so tyrannical.

No, not really. I mean, he yelled and screamed a lot, and I got spanked once in a while, like any other kid. But I wouldn't call him a tyrant.

Something about the way he said the word *spanked*, some subtle emotional change in his voice, struck me. I asked him about it. It turned out that his father had "spanked" him two or three times a week with a belt! It hadn't taken much for Gordon to incur a beating: a defiant word, a below-par report card, or a forgotten chore were all sufficiently venal "crimes."

Nor was Gordon's father particular about where he beat his child; Gordon recalled being beaten on his back, his legs, his arms, his hands, and his buttocks. I asked Gordon how badly his father had physically hurt him.

GORDON: I didn't bleed or anything. I mean, I turned out okay. He just needed to keep me in line.

SUSAN: But you were scared of him, weren't you?

GORDON: I was scared to death, but isn't that the way it's supposed to be with parents?

SUSAN: Gordon, is that how you'd want your children to feel about you?

Gordon avoided my eyes. This was making him extremely uncomfortable. I pulled my chair closer and continued gently:

Your wife is a pediatrician. If she saw a child in her office with the same marks on his body that you had on yours from one of your father's "spankings," would she be required by law to report it to the authorities?

Gordon didn't have to answer. His eyes filled with tears at the realization. He whispered:

I'm getting a terrible knot in my stomach.

Gordon's defenses were down. Though he was in terrible emotional pain, he had uncovered, for the first time, the primary, long-hidden source of his temper. He had been containing a volcano of anger against his father since childhood, and whenever the pressure got too great, he would erupt at whoever was handy, usually his wife. I knew what we had to do: acknowledge and heal the battered little boy inside of him.

When I got home that evening, I found myself still thinking

about Gordon. I kept seeing his eyes fill with tears as he realized how he had been mistreated. I thought about the thousands of adult men and women with whom I had worked whose daily lives were being influenced—even controlled—by patterns set during childhood by emotionally destructive parents. I realized there must be millions more who had no idea why their lives weren't working, yet who could be helped. That's when I decided to write this book.

Why Look Back?

Gordon's story is not unusual. I've seen thousands of patients in my eighteen years as a therapist, both in private practice and in hospital groups, and a solid majority have suffered a damaged sense of self-worth because a parent had regularly hit them, or criticized them, or "joked" about how stupid or ugly or unwanted they were, or overwhelmed them with guilt, or sexually abused them, or forced too much responsibility on them, or desperately overprotected them. Like Gordon, few of these people made the connection between their parents and their problems. This is a common emotional blind spot. People simply have trouble seeing that their relationship with their parents has a major impact on their lives.

Therapeutic trends, which used to rely heavily on the analysis of early life experiences, have moved away from the "then" and into the "here and now." The emphasis has shifted to examining and changing current behavior, relationships, and functioning. I believe this shift is due to clients' rejection of the enormous amounts of time and money required for many traditional therapies, often for minimal results.

I am a great believer in short-term therapy that focuses on changing destructive behavior patterns. But my experience has taught me that it is not enough to treat the symptoms; you must also deal with the sources of those symptoms. Therapy is most effective when it proceeds down a double track: both

changing current self-defeating behavior and disconnecting from the traumas of the past.

Gordon had to learn techniques to control his anger, but in order to make permanent changes, ones that would stand up under stress, he also had to go back and deal with the pain of his childhood.

Our parents plant mental and emotional seeds in us—seeds that grow as we do. In some families, these are seeds of love, respect, and independence. But in many others, they are seeds of fear, obligation, or guilt.

If you belong to this second group, this book is for you. As you grew into adulthood, these seeds grew into invisible weeds that invaded your life in ways you never dreamed of. Their tendrils may have harmed your relationships, your career, or your family; they have certainly undermined your self-confidence and self-esteem.

I'm going to help you find those weeds and root them out.

What Is a Toxic Parent?

All parents are deficient from time to time. I made some terrible mistakes with my children, which caused them (and me) considerable pain. No parent can be emotionally available all the time. It's perfectly normal for parents to yell at their children once in a while. All parents occasionally become too controlling. And most parents spank their children, even if rarely. Do these lapses make them cruel or unsuitable parents?

Of course not. Parents are only human, and have plenty of problems of their own. And most children can deal with an occasional outburst of anger as long as they have plenty of love and understanding to counter it.

But there are many parents whose negative patterns of behavior are consistent and dominant in a child's life. These are the parents who do the harm.

As I searched for a phrase to describe the common ground

that these harmful parents share, the word that kept running through my mind was *toxic*. Like a chemical toxin, the emotional damage inflicted by these parents spreads throughout a child's being, and as the child grows, so does the pain. What better word than *toxic* to describe parents who inflict ongoing trauma, abuse, and denigration on their children, and in most cases continue to do so even after their children are grown?

There are exceptions to the "ongoing" or "repetitive" aspects of this definition. Sexual or physical abuse can be so traumatic that often a single occurrence is enough to cause tremendous emotional damage.

Unfortunately, parenting, one of our most crucial skills, is still very much a seat-of-the-pants endeavor. Our parents learned it primarily from people who may not have done such a good job: their parents. Many of the time-honored techniques that have been passed down from generation to generation are, quite simply, bad advice masquerading as wisdom (remember "spare the rod and spoil the child"?).

What Do Toxic Parents Do to You?

Whether adult children of toxic parents were beaten when little or left alone too much, sexually abused or treated like fools, overprotected or overburdened by guilt, they almost all suffer surprisingly similar symptoms: damaged self-esteem, leading to self-destructive behavior. In one way or another, they almost all feel worthless, unlovable, and inadequate.

These feelings stem, to a great degree, from the fact that children of toxic parents blame themselves for their parents' abuse, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. It is easier for a defenseless, dependent child to feel guilty for having done something "bad" to deserve Daddy's rage than it is for that child to accept the frightening fact that Daddy, the protector, can't be trusted.

When these children become adults, they continue to bear these burdens of guilt and inadequacy, making it extremely difficult for them to develop a positive self-image. The resulting lack of confidence and self-worth can in turn color every aspect of their lives.

Taking Your Psychological Pulse

It's not always easy to figure out whether your parents are, or were, toxic. A lot of people have difficult relationships with their parents. That alone doesn't mean your parents are emotionally destructive. Many people find themselves struggling on the cusp, questioning whether they were mistreated or whether they're being "oversensitive."

I've designed the following questionnaire to help you take the first steps toward resolving that struggle. Some of these questions may make you feel anxious or uncomfortable. That's okay. It is always difficult to tell ourselves the truth about how much our parents may have hurt us. Although it might be painful, an emotional reaction is perfectly healthy.

For the sake of simplicity, these questions refer to parents in the plural, even though your answer may apply to only one parent.

I. Your Relationship with Your Parents When You Were a Child:

1. Did your parents tell you you were bad or worthless? Did they call you insulting names? Did they constantly criticize you?
2. Did your parents use physical pain to discipline you? Did they beat you with belts, brushes, or other objects?

3. Did your parents get drunk or use drugs? Did you feel confused, uncomfortable, frightened, hurt, or ashamed by this?
4. Were your parents severely depressed or unavailable because of emotional difficulties or mental or physical illness?
5. Did you have to take care of your parents because of their problems?
6. Did your parents do anything to you that had to be kept secret? Were you sexually molested in any way?
7. Were you frightened of your parents a great deal of the time?
8. Were you afraid to express anger at your parents?

II. Your Adult Life:

1. Do you find yourself in destructive or abusive relationships?
2. Do you believe that if you get too close to someone, they will hurt and/or abandon you?
3. Do you expect the worst from people? From life in general?
4. Do you have a hard time knowing who you are, what you feel, and what you want?
5. Are you afraid that if people knew the real you, they wouldn't like you?
6. Do you feel anxious when you're successful and frightened that someone will find out you're a fraud?
7. Do you get angry or sad for no apparent reason?
8. Are you a perfectionist?
9. Is it difficult for you to relax or have a good time?
10. Despite your best intentions, do you find yourself behaving "just like your parents"?

III. Your Relationship with Your Parents as an Adult:

1. Do your parents still treat you as if you were a child?
2. Are many of your major life decisions based upon whether your parents would approve?
3. Do you have intense emotional or physical reactions after you spend or anticipate spending time with your parents?
4. Are you afraid to disagree with your parents?
5. Do your parents manipulate you with threats or guilt?
6. Do your parents manipulate you with money?
7. Do you feel responsible for how your parents feel? If they're unhappy, do you feel it's your fault? Is it your job to make it better for them?
8. Do you believe that no matter what you do, it's never good enough for your parents?
9. Do you believe that someday, somehow, your parents are going to change for the better?

If you answered yes to even one-third of these questions, there is a great deal in this book that can help you. Even though some of the chapters may not seem relevant to your situation, it's important to remember that all toxic parents, regardless of the nature of their abuse, basically leave the same scars. For example, your parents may not have been alcoholic, but the chaos, instability, and loss of childhood that typify alcoholic homes are just as real for children of other types of toxic parents. The principles and techniques of recovery are similar for all adult children, as well, so I urge you not to miss any of the chapters.

Freeing Yourself from the Legacy of Toxic Parents

If you are an adult child of toxic parents, there are many things you can do to free yourself from their distorted legacy of guilt and self-doubt. I'll be discussing these various strategies throughout this book. And I want you to proceed with a great deal of hope. Not the deluded hope that your parents will magically change, but the realistic hope that you *can* psychologically unhook from the powerful and destructive influence of your parents. You just have to find the courage. It is within you.

I'll be guiding you through a series of steps that will help you see this influence clearly and then deal with it, regardless of whether you are currently in conflict with your parents, whether you have a civil but surface relationship, whether you haven't seen them for years, or even if one or both are dead!

Strange as it may seem, many people are still controlled by their parents after their deaths. The ghosts that haunt them may not be real in a supernatural sense, but they're very real in a psychological one. A parent's demands, expectations, and guilt trips can linger long after that parent has died.

You may already have recognized your need to free yourself from your parents' influence. Maybe you've even confronted them about it. One of my clients was fond of saying, "My parents don't have any control over my life. . . . I hate them and they know it." But she came to realize that by fanning the flames of her anger, her parents were still manipulating her, and the energy she put into her anger was a drain on other parts of her life. Confrontation is an important step in exorcising the ghosts of the past and the demons of the present, but it must never be done in the heat of anger.