

It's Never Too Late to Have an Okay Childhood

Your mother was absent, your father angry (or was it the other way around?). You think that's all behind you...but until you mourn the disappointments and losses of your childhood, chances are you'll continue to be controlled by those same family patterns. Therapist **ROBERT KAREN** on why the remembrance of painful things past can set you joyously free.

SOON AFTER I BECAME A FATHER, I WAS haunted by the fear that I would lose my son. The fear was not that one of us would contract a terminal disease or that we would be separated by earthquake or war, but rather that we would stop loving each other. Power struggles, bitterness, and hatred would tear us apart and we would become enemies.

Why was I so certain of this? You could say it was written into my psychology, a remnant of the heartache etched in me as a result of my boyhood relationship with my father.

My father used to say that he liked children till they reached the end of the age of innocence. I knew what he meant. Until age 3 or so, they adore you and hang on your words. Then they start having ideas of their own, and it's the beginning of the end. My father never got over his own childhood ▶

injuries (including having lived with a father who never spoke to him), injuries that often left him feeling powerless and uncared about. No one ever doted on him when he was growing up, and he still longed for it. He couldn't enjoy my challenges or independence; he couldn't tolerate my anger. He didn't have the kind of resilience and security that come from having been well loved. When he got angry, he went to a dark place and stayed there.

My father loved me, and in later years the love between us was affirmed. But growing up, much of the time, I couldn't feel it. Power struggles had turned us into antagonists who could flare up at each other over nothing. If I had not been able to face and deal with the legacy of that relationship, I would surely have repeated much of it with my son.

The childhood we never had—that is to say, all the love and understanding and help we needed but didn't get—is haunting. It haunts our relationships with those we love the most, and it undermines our capacity to deal with emotional hardships. Not solely because we were wounded as children—all children get wounded—but because as children we rarely get to mourn the most difficult hurts and losses.

Let's take a closer look at this idea of mourning, which is so widely misunderstood. Ideally, mourning is not just suffering. It is productive suffering. Mourning is about processing the hurt, about expanding the self, about growing and moving on—without having been crippled or diminished by the loss. Mourning is complicated. It takes time. It takes creativity. Anger and depression may be part of the mix, but ultimately, mourning is completed under the auspices of love. Especially in childhood, it requires the loving assistance of others, which is gradually converted into a loving concern for the self. If we learn to mourn as children, it serves us for the rest of our lives. If we don't, all losses come to feel unmanageable, self-love is elusive, and every sorrow becomes a cause for depression.

People can learn to mourn as adults. That is one of the fundamentals of successful psychotherapy. In therapy, mourning begins when we open forbidden internal territory to the therapist's caring.

But it's not easy to give up the defenses that have shielded us from pain. Or to drop patterns of relating that pay secret homage to the past. These are part of what Wilhelm Reich called character armor. Caring threatens to pierce that armor, to interfere with our comfortable misery. Long ago Freud referred to psychoanalysis as a cure through love. But he knew that, even when offered with the greatest sensitivity and tact, love could be stubbornly resisted.

ALICIA, THE MOTHER OF A newborn boy, is in a lousy, postpartum funk that takes her into a dark part of her psychology. She finds herself without feeling for her baby. When I question her about what she expects her relationship with him to be like, she imagines him growing up to align himself with her husband, her brother, and her brother-in-law,

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creating a male cabal that cuts her out. Although she suspects there's something irrational about it, she already sees the baby as ungrateful, as preferring others, like her younger sister, and crying whenever she herself approaches.

Interestingly, Alicia's perceptions of her newborn are similar in certain respects to the way her mother perceived her, while in other respects they represent the way her mother *was* with her. Her mother was an envious person who felt oppressed, burdened, and bitter about having to give of herself, and who was very critical of her little girl, whom she constantly accused of being overly demand-

ing, impossible to please, and ungrateful. The mother not only saw Alicia as the agent of a persecuting, depriving world but she projected onto her daughter many of the bad feelings she had about herself.

Not surprisingly, Alicia came to believe these accusations. As an adult, she complains angrily about her mother, but psychologically speaking, she still clings to her, longs for her, and does imaginary battle with her almost every day of her life. Indeed, it often seems that no one else quite matters. Being stuck on a parent in this way is a common symptom of unmourned trauma. It usually includes some emulation of the disliked parental qualities and a refusal to let love in from others. Like her mother, Alicia, too, is prone to envy and bitterness. She resents those she perceives as having more, and does not want to bless anyone with her gratitude.

This issue of gratitude, so central to feelings of loving and giving, arose in one of our recent sessions. She was complaining about feeling unappreciated and unloved by the baby and others, when we had the following exchange:

- RK:** *Do you feel I've been giving to you?*
A: Yes, Bob, you've given me a lot of insights over the years.
RK: *How about I've also fought like hell for you?*
A: Yes, yes, that's true.
RK: *And yet I get no acknowledgment.*
A: Hmm.
RK: *Sometimes I feel as if you suck me dry and then walk away as if you've gotten nothing.*

This statement may seem odd coming from a therapist, but it represents an important part of the therapist's job: to mirror for the patient the kinds of feelings she induces in others, in this case that one must give, give, give, and yet all one gives is useless. My observation hits its mark, and Alicia starts grumbling—first, that she doesn't see what I'm getting at; then that she doesn't know what to do about it; and, finally, that she feels guilty and bad. But it's not the kind of guilty or bad that does me any good; indeed, it's meant to make *me* feel guilty and bad. Her complaint is really a temper tantrum disguised as confusion.

In the end, Alicia argues that she doesn't see us as having a real relationship anyway—so what difference does all this make? When I remind her that we've known each CONTINUED ON PAGE 210

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 208 other for a long time, that of course we have a relationship, and that it's natural for us to be affected by each other, she protests:

A: I always thought of you as a therapist and not needing anything back from me.

RK: *But that's how you treat everyone—like a functionary. You feel horribly deprived and everyone is measured by how much he can give you. But you don't give back.*

A: Yeah, my husband says that about me, too.

RK: *But even now you don't seem particularly concerned about it. It's just a curiosity that he and I say the same thing.*

She remembers now that her husband had given her a card that morning and a little present to try to lift her spirits. But she'd thought, *Damn it, after everything I've been through lately, why couldn't he get me a nice piece of jewelry!* It was a good insight, and she wasn't fighting me off anymore, but neither was she at the point of feeling regret.

RK: *How do you think he feels when you thank him with a fake smile and never say another word?*

She becomes reflective and her tone changes:

A: It's got to be hard for him. He's been really putting out, and I know he wants so much for me to appreciate him.

For the first time today, she speaks with genuine sorrow about how she has behaved. She has momentarily left the blighted realm of Alicia and Mother and entered a more soulful, more loving place, where her deepest feelings matter and where what she does with others has consequence. It's at moments like these where she is most emotionally available that she becomes a person you'd really want to be close to.

Alicia's moment of sorrow fades quickly. The world for her remains in many respects her mother's world, one in which she has to ward off assaults and grab whatever she can from people who don't really care and don't want to give; it's not a place where mutual warmth and concern pay off. But such feelings, of regret and concern for others, if taken seriously and returned to repeatedly—and if coupled with a recognition that others care about her as well—can eventually tap into the hidden reservoir of tears within her. This would make possible a better life for her

with her son, her husband, her sister, and me, not only because she would be more empathic toward us but because she would allow us to feel more for her.

But perhaps most crucial, permitting herself feelings of regret and concern might be the beginning of a more caring relationship with herself. Instead of holding on to her mother's view that she was an impossible child, Alicia might find that she wants to cry for that child. Eventually, she might find herself able to both take in and give herself the understanding and love that were too scarce when she was growing up.

CHILDHOOD IS FULL OF LOSSES. The worst is the loss of a parent because of death, abandonment, or some other cause. But there are smaller losses as well. We lose the paradise of our mother's breast, the status of fussed-over baby, the privileged position of only child, the fantasy that we will marry Mom or Dad when we grow up, the security of our intact family if our parents separate. If

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we're lucky, we get lots of help with such losses so that they don't leave us scarred. We're reassured that we're loved, we learn that life is good even if it isn't perfect, and this enables us to be more realistic about life, more tolerant, and more forgiving of ourselves and others.

But when a child has problems with a difficult parent—involving feelings of neglect, rejection, or betrayal—the need for help is especially great. When a girl's mother has a terrible temper and is prone to fits of blaming and threats, a sensitive father (or grandmother or older sibling)

can be a huge ally. He can not only try to straighten the mother out but can help the wretched girl sort out what's going on. Through him she can understand that it's not her fault (as children are prone to believe), that Mom has a problem, that Mom still loves her, and, despite the girl's own hurt and fury, she still loves her mom. Her father can hold her and reassure her and go through the tempest of her emotions with her. With that kind of loving ally, she can be introduced to a more satisfying mode of relating. There are other critically important lessons as well: that love can withstand fury, hatred, even brutality. That forgiveness is possible. And that she can care for herself—and get caring for herself—when in pain.

But most children suffering the stresses of parental failure don't have anyone to play that supportive role. The second parent is usually not much help, either blaming the child or offering platitudes or denying that there is a problem at all. The relatives are out of reach. And a therapist is not consulted. So the child has no choice but to feel bad and unlovable, and also terribly guilty. She's so full of anger that she mistakenly believes she has committed the gravest crime in the universe: She no longer loves her mother. She either acts out and becomes a behavior problem, hating herself and the world, or she puts the whole thing out of her mind even as it gets hardened into her psyche.

In other words, as children, instead of mourning our losses, we may get all tangled up in them. They remain inside us in raw, unprocessed form and haunt us with depression or obsessive efforts to avoid depression. Meanwhile the parents who hurt us become the most prominent beings in our psyches, even if we've ruled them out of our lives and moved to the other side of the planet to avoid them. The natural process of separation, which is a part of a healthy growing up—and which enables a child to feel secure in a parent's love while moving on to other realms and relationships—gets derailed. Sometimes in our longing to have the love and support we missed as kids, we stubbornly refuse to grow up. Unconsciously, we imagine that our immaturity will be rewarded with the magical appearance of the perfect parent in the form of a lover or a boss, a CONTINUED ON PAGE 212

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 210 friend or a child. But, inevitably, in an unreturned call or a tone of voice, we find our hurtful parent instead. We elicit or imagine the slighting responses we expect, and we replay our past with all the important figures in our lives.

Alan, an extraordinarily accomplished man, with one foot in industry and another in the arts, recently broke up with an abusive girlfriend, the latest in a series. Even now, months after they've separated, she showers him with invective. He comes to me, beaten down by her complaints, his head hanging, feeling guilty as charged, wanting to make amends, give her money, and so forth. I encourage him to recognize why he lets himself live in this forlorn place. Why does he seek punishment from women? What does he gain from martyring himself to them? Why is making a female sourpuss smile the greatest pleasure he knows? These questions bring us back to the causative pain, the pain he suffered with parents who barely noticed him—except, in his mother's case, to yell and find fault.

To win his parents' admiration, Alan

became a superachiever, and to cope with his mother's anger, he became supercompliant. He felt a powerful need to make things right for a mother whom he believed he'd somehow wronged. Why else would she be so hostile and tormented all

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the time? If he could fix her life, she'd forgive him, love him, exalt him. In his adult romances, he accepts all blame, pays all bills, accedes to irrational demands, tamps down his anger, and becomes self-hating and depressed when his earnest

find a way to absorb them creatively into a broadened identity. In Alan's case, anger is one such emotion. Because his mother never allowed him his anger as a child and he has not allowed it to himself as an adult, it's foreign, it's volcanic, it's untamed by the wisdom of good models and thought-through experience. Just to let himself know that he is an angry man, to feel entitled to his anger, would be an important step in the rehabilitation of the cut-off parts of himself. Indeed, at this point in Alan's development, walking around in an angry state would not only be a whole lot better than masochistic submission but also an indication that mourning has begun to take hold.

Any move toward mourning on Alan's part—remembering, resuffering, letting in caring and feeling it for himself—would inevitably include a pause in his obsessive quest to achieve, to be admired, to gallantly win the love of a rejecting woman. Which means that mourning would play another crucial role in his life—as an antidote to his workaholic and romantic obsession, qualities that might otherwise end up making him a remote parent much like his dad.

WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH that children can be securely or insecurely attached to a parent. The securely attached child is confident of the parent's love, feels freer, as a result, to explore the world, and is better able to make intimate connections with others. The insecurely attached child is either clingy or avoidant, is more likely to be a bully or a victim with peers, carries within her bad feelings about herself, and is frequently either desperate or cynical about love.

Mary Main, a psychologist at the University of California at Berkeley who studies the quality of parent-child attachment, showed that one of the aspects that distinguishes parents of children who are securely attached to them is their ability to talk coherently about their emotional lives, including the sorrows and losses they've suffered. They convey a sense that they can acknowledge a tragedy and move on—without having repressed or forgotten the experience. In fact, their memories were the most rich and detailed of all the parents.

Most parents of insecure children lack

efforts only garner more abuse.

Looking in the rearview mirror of failed relationships, Alan sees his ex-girlfriends the way he saw his mother, as "wonderful and perfect," while he's the "miserable guy who ruined their lives."

Alan, who sometimes would prefer that I simply give him advice, has asked me several times, "Why do I have to remember the past?" And my response has generally been to up the ante: You have to do more than remember—you have to re-feel; you have to suffer the pain again. Emotionally speaking, there's something of the orphan in Alan. That orphan boy has been locked out and disowned—like a wounded, raging enfant terrible that Alan has kept in the woodshed because he's ashamed of him, hates him, doesn't want to see him. But that boy needs to be acknowledged. For Alan to let his heart break for that forgotten part of himself—guilty, confused, indicted, swollen with unrequited love, wanting to hurt back—would bring about a revolution in self-love.

Re-owning unwanted parts of ourselves brings us face-to-face with emotions we fear and dislike and forces us to

this capacity. They either are still preoccupied and emotionally enmeshed with the parents who disappointed them or they flatly deny any problems. Both types are alike in their lack of mourning—displaying either an inability to deal with hurts that were remembered and relived on a daily basis or an unwillingness to think about them at all.

Much of modern life is built around avoiding pain, and we have more things to divert us from our unwanted feelings than mankind ever imagined. But as Main's research shows, attending to the very feelings we so much want to escape holds the promise of a better emotional life.

Mourning should not be confused with an obsessive holding on to a pain that never heals. In healthy mourning, we do heal, if not always completely. We are able to recover—even from the deaths of people we love—without losing the sense that the world is a good place, that the lost person is still within us in a good way, and that new love can come into our lives. In the end, it's through mourning, which deepens our relationship with ourselves, that we are able to deepen our connections to others. ●