Recovering from Emotionally Immature Parents

Practical Tools to Establish Boundaries & Reclaim Your Emotional Autonomy

LINDSAY C. GIBSON, PsyD
Publisher’s Note

All the case examples in this book come from people who gave their permission to include their stories and quotes in this work. The identifying data of psychotherapy clients has been thoroughly disguised, and in some cases combined to preserve maximum confidentiality. Examples used were representative of many other client experiences as well, and were chosen for their universality.

While books such as this can be tremendously helpful, there is no substitute for psychotherapy, support groups, or other forms of face-to-face help. This book is not intended to be a substitute for psychotherapy, but an adjunct to it. Readers who feel the need are encouraged to seek out a psychotherapist who can help them work through the issues that may come up in reading this book.

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Introduction

One day listening to a client talk about her dad, I realized that her father wasn’t just inappropriate and abusive; he was pathologically immature. Her father had the impetuosity and egocentrism of a very young child, with no thought for his impact on her. At an emotional level, he was like a giant toddler—at best, a fourteen-year-old. I thought of how many psychotherapy clients I’d had whose childhoods were overshadowed by this kind of parental unpredictability and emotional overreactivity. They grew up as captives of emotionally immature parents—psychological infants armed with rigid authority and a powerful adult body. That day I saw these parents differently, stripped of all their false authority and revealed for the bullies they were.

Other clients had emotionally immature (EI) parents who were better behaved but were so aloof—even outright rejecting—that their children grew up feeling emotionally lonely and connection-deprived. Although these parents often looked competent and dependable on the outside, they were so self-preoccupied and limited in empathy that they couldn’t engage with their children. Still other clients’ parents were pleasant enough but betrayed the child by absenting themselves whenever the child had a real problem or needed protection.

Whatever their differences in individual behaviors, my clients’ emotionally immature parents were the same under the skin: all lacked in empathy, all were self-involved, and all could not sustain a satisfying emotional connection with their children. Overall, many of my clients grew up in a family atmosphere characterized by conflict, mockery, and a lack of emotional intimacy.

Paradoxically, many EI parents can behave like real adults in other ways, functioning well at work or in their social group. From the outside, it was hard to believe they could cause such misery at home for their children.
As children, my clients were deeply confused by their parents’ contradictory personalities. The only thing that made sense was to blame themselves. Those who felt mistreated or overlooked as children figured it was their fault for not being lovable or interesting enough. These clients saw their emotional needs as illegitimate, felt guilty for being angry at their parents, and minimized or made excuses for their parents’ behavior. (“Sure, they hit me, but so did a lot of parents in those days.”)

**The Problem with Emotionally Immature Parents**

A childhood spent with EI parents can lead to long-lasting feelings of emotional loneliness, as well as ambivalence about relationships in general. Emotional loneliness is the result of feeling unseen and unresponded to, no matter how hard you try to communicate and connect. In adulthood, these children were often attracted to unsatisfying, disappointing partners and friends who seemed very familiar in their self-involvement and refusal to connect at a deeper emotional level.

When I teach clients about EI parents, many recognize their own histories. It’s like a light bulb going on. It explains a parent whose love felt self-centered and who rejected their child’s attempts at deeper emotional connection. Once they understand their parents’ emotional immaturity, pivotal moments in childhood make sense to them at last. Seeing their parents’ limitations more objectively, they no longer have to be prisoners of their parents’ immaturity.

It’s not just actual abuse that’s harmful. The whole parenting approach of these parents is emotionally unhealthy, creating a climate of anxiety and untrustworthiness between parent and child. They treat children in such superficial, coercive, and judgmental ways that they undermine their children’s ability to trust their own thoughts and feelings, thereby restricting the development of their children’s intuition, self-guidance, efficacy, and autonomy.

As a child of an EI parent, you may have learned to shut yourself down in order not to upset your parent’s emotional applecart. This is because your spontaneity might easily offend a thin-skinned EI parent. The intense
reactivity of EI parents trains their children to be inhibited, passive, and acquiescent instead of nurturing their individuality and trust in others. In order to get along with these parents, it’s easier in the short run to tune out who you really are and what you really want. But in the long run, you end up burdened by obligation, guilt, shame, and feeling trapped in your family role. The good news is that once you understand these parents and their effects, your life will be your own again.

The Purpose of This Book
Understanding how parental emotional immaturity has affected you is what this book is all about. Until you grasp your parent’s psychological limitations, you may blame yourself wrongly or keep hoping for changes they won’t make. This book will help you see what you’ve been up against while understanding your parent in the deepest possible way.

You are going to learn to name and explain EI characteristics and behaviors that have never been popularly defined. My aim in writing this book is to give you a language for everything that goes on in EI relationships, both what happens between you and them, and what happens inside yourself as you try to cope with them. Once you can name it, you can deal with it. The impact of emotionally immature persons (EIPs) doesn’t have to rule your life. You can figure out their effect on you and neutralize it.

Throughout the book, you’ll also find writing exercises to strengthen your self-awareness and gain insight into your experiences with EI parents and other EIPs. I hope you find these interactive exercises both enlightening and fun.

The Timeliness of Understanding Emotional Immaturity
This topic of emotional immaturity has never been more important. EI behavior is widespread these days, and EIPs cause enormous suffering in all walks of life. Because EIPs insist on dominating and being the center of importance, they don’t leave room or resources for others to be fully themselves. Their me-first entitlement and self-justifications negate the rights of
other people, giving them free rein for abuse, harassment, prejudice, exploitation, and corruption of all types.

Unfortunately, the lack of self-questioning in EI leaders can make them seem strong and confident, enticing followers to support agendas not in their best interests and almost solely for the benefit of the leader. Our vulnerability to self-centered authority starts in childhood when EI parents teach us that our thoughts are not as worthwhile as their thoughts and that we should accept whatever our parent tells us. It’s easy to see how EI parenting could turn out children who later fall prey to extremism, exploitation, or even cults.

Learning about emotional immaturity will help you understand and deal with all manner of EI behavior, regardless of its source. The EIP in your life might be a parent, significant other, child, sibling, employer, customer, or anyone else. The interpersonal dynamics will be the same, whether inside the family or outside. All the methods that work with EI parents will work with other EIPs as well.

Overview of Topics

The first half of this book, part I, will focus on what you’ve been up against, describing what it’s like to grow up with EI parents—or to be in a relationship with any EIP—and what you can do about it.

In chapter 1, we’ll explore what it’s like having a relationship with your EI parent. You’ll learn about their hallmark emotionally immature relationship system (EIRS) and how they seek to make you responsible for their self-esteem and emotional stability. You’ll also find out possible reasons why they turned out as they did.

Chapter 2 describes EI personality characteristics in detail. You’ll also learn to spot EI emotional coercions and emotional takeovers, and how EIPs use self-doubt, fear, shame, and guilt in you in order to maintain their central role in the relationship.

In chapter 3, we’ll explore what it’s been like for you to try to have an emotionally satisfying relationship with your EI parent. We’ll look at different types of EI parents and why they pull back from closeness. You’ll learn how to see your EI parents more objectively, mourn what you didn’t
get, and move toward a more compassionate and loyal relationship with yourself, as well as others.

Chapter 4 shows you how to avoid emotional takeovers by EIPs by questioning their reality distortions and emotional emergencies. You’ll learn how to set appropriate boundaries, as well as when and how to respond to their demands for help. You’ll see how their interpersonal pressure can disconnect you from yourself, making you take responsibility for their happiness in spite of knowing better.

In chapter 5, you’ll learn exactly what to say and do as the most effective responses to classic EI behaviors. You’ll learn how to sidestep their pressure, lead the interaction, and stop them from taking over.

Chapter 6 shows the countless little ways that EI parents and other EIPs undermine your self-confidence and trust in your intuitions. EI parents and EIPs are hostile toward your inner life by mocking and invalidating your perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. In this chapter, you will learn how to be immune to this shaming by staying loyal to your inner experience.

In the second half, part II, of the book, we will shift from understanding and dealing with EIPs to strengthening your individuality in spite of them. As you focus more on your own growth, you’ll be reversing the effects of growing up with EI parents.

In chapter 7, you’ll see why valuing your inner world is crucial to reestablishing a solid relationship with yourself. With new loyalty to your inner self, you’ll trust yourself and welcome your feelings as invaluable information about what needs your attention.

Chapter 8 shows you how to renounce EI-induced thinking to make room for your own mind. You’ll learn to undo the self-doubt caused by critical EI parents who dismissed any viewpoints different from theirs. As you clear your mind of mental clutter from old EI influences, you’ll have fewer obsessive worries and less self-criticism.

In chapter 9, you’ll update and broaden your self-concept. It’s unlikely that EI parents would’ve helped you develop an accurate, confident self-image. Instead, they’re more likely to have taught you to be submissive, leading you to see other people’s needs and feelings as more important than your own. As you update your self-concept, you’ll start appreciating
the full spectrum of what you bring to the world. You’ll also learn how to dismantle any distorted or outdated self-concepts you may hold.

In the last chapter, you’ll put together all you’ve learned. You’ll review the secret terms of your implicit EIP relationship contract and see if you’re ready to put your relationship on a more equal footing. Your ultimate recovery goal is to build a loyal, committed relationship to your own inner self and well-being. You’ll also learn how to transform your EI relationship into the best it can be, without sacrificing your integrity or blaming them.

Finally, in the epilogue, you’ll be given a new bill of rights for all adult children of emotionally immature parents. These rights express the book’s main ideas and can be used as quick reminders of what you’ve learned.

**My Wish for You**

I hope you come away from reading this book feeling understood and empowered to live your life from a new place of self-connection and self-understanding. Your parents gave you life and love, but only of the sort they knew. You can honor them for that but cease to give them unwarranted power over your emotional well-being. Your mission now is for your own growth: to become an individual who is fully engaged with both yourself and other people. It would be my dream come true if you find this book useful in that quest.
Part I

What You’ve Been Up Against
Dealing with Emotional Immaturity

In the first part of this book, you’ll learn how it feels to be involved with emotionally immature (EI) parents, how they got to be that way, their personality characteristics, and why it’s hard to have a satisfying, close relationship with them. You’ll learn tools and interactional strategies to protect your healthy limits in spite of their emotional distortions and attempts to dominate. You’ll understand why it’s so important to be loyal to yourself around them and how to resist their urgent demands and emotional coercions.
Emotionally immature (EI) parents are both frustrating and demoralizing. It’s hard to love an emotionally blocked parent who expects honor and special treatment but tries to control and dismiss you at the same time.

A relationship with an EI parent is characterized by not getting your emotional needs met. They have little interest in experiencing emotional intimacy in which two people come to know and understand each other at a deep level. This mutual sharing of deepest feelings creates a satisfying, deep bond that makes the participants precious to each other, but this is not something EI parents feel comfortable doing.

Sometimes you glimpse a fleeting desire in them for real connection, and this keeps you reaching out to them. Unfortunately, the more you reach out, the further they recede, wary of real intimacy. It’s like being in a dance with someone who is moving away from you in perfect synchrony to your efforts to get close. Their demands for attention, coupled with wariness about intimacy, create a push-me, pull-me relationship that leaves you unsatisfied and emotionally lonely. You care about your parent, but you can’t get close enough to have a real relationship.

Once you understand them, however, your experiences will make perfect sense to you—and so will your emotional loneliness. By comprehending the EI psyche, you will be able to deal with your EI parents—or
any emotionally immature person (EIP)—in ways that free you from their *emotional coercions* and create a more genuine relationship based on knowing what you can and can’t expect from them.

In this chapter, we’ll explore what it’s like to be intimately involved with such emotionally un Giving parents. You’ll learn about the *emotionally immature relationship system* (EIRS) they use as a substitute for love, and you’ll get to see how EI parents probably got to be the way they are.

As part of your discovery process, it’s a good idea to keep a journal about what you learn as you go along. Throughout this book, you’ll find exercises to help you process what you read about. As you record your self-discoveries—hopefully in a new journal especially for this purpose—you’ll be giving yourself vital emotional support and validation, two things that EI parents have in short supply.

The writing process will help you finally put words on previously elusive and undefined experiences. Be sure to take notes on the feelings, memories, and insights that arise as you read. These entries can be about your parents or any EIP you have known. As you record your experiences and realizations, leave a couple of blank lines after each entry for later insights. It will be invaluable to look back later and see where you began. In that spirit, let’s look at how you came to be reading this book.

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**Exercise: Why You Picked Up This Book**

Take a moment to think about what attracted you to this book. In your journal—or just on some paper for now—write down what intrigued you when you saw the title. What did you hope you would find out and about whom? How has this person made you feel? How do you wish your relationship with this person were different? If this person is no longer living, how do you wish your relationship could’ve been?

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Now let’s examine what it is like to be in a relationship with an EI parent or other EIP and how they make you feel. This can stir up old issues, so—as in any self-discovery process—please be sure to seek out a psychotherapist for extra help and support as needed.
What It’s Like Being Involved with Them

EI parents and other EIPs have a recognizable interpersonal style. The following ten experiences describe what to expect in a relationship with them.

1. You Feel Emotionally Lonely Around Them

Growing up with EI parents fosters emotional loneliness. Although your parent may have been physically present, emotionally you may have felt left on your own. Although you may feel a family bond to your EI parent, that’s very different from an emotionally secure parent-child relationship.

EI parents like to tell their children what to do, but they are uncomfortable with emotional nurturing. EI parents may take good care of you when you’re sick, but they don’t know what to do with hurt feelings or broken hearts. As a result, they may seem artificial and awkward when trying to soothe a distressed child.

2. Interactions Feel One-Sided and Frustrating

EI parents’ self-absorption and limited empathy make interactions with them feel one-sided. It’s as if they’re imprisoned in their own self-involvement. When you try to share something important to you, they’re likely to talk over you, change the subject, start talking about themselves, or dismiss what you’re saying. Children of EI parents often know a great deal more about their parents’ issues than the parents know about theirs.

Although EI parents require your attention when they’re upset, they rarely offer listening or empathy when you’re distressed. Instead of sitting with you and letting you get it all out, EI parents typically offer superficial solutions, tell you not to worry, or even get irritated with you for being upset. Their heart feels closed, like there’s no place you can go inside them for compassion or comfort.
3. You Feel Coerced and Trapped

EI parents insist you put them first and let them run the show. To this end, they coerce you with shame, guilt, or fear until you do what they want. They can flare into blame and anger if you don’t toe the line.

Many people use the word *manipulation* for these kinds of emotional coercions, but I think that word is misleading. These behaviors are more like survival instincts. They do whatever’s necessary to feel more in control and protected in the moment, oblivious to what it might cost you.

You can also feel trapped by their superficial style of relating. Because EI parents relate in a superficial, egocentric way, talking with them is often boring. They stick to conversation topics they feel safe with, which quickly become stagnant and repetitious.

4. They Come First, and You Are Secondary

EI parents are extremely self-referential, meaning that everything is always about them. They expect you to accept second place when it comes to their needs. They elevate their own interests to the point that yours feel downgraded. They’re not looking for an equal relationship. They want blind allegiance to their need to be considered first.

Without a parent willing to give your emotional needs a high priority, it can leave you feeling insecure. Wondering if a parent will think of you or have your back can make you vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and depression. These are reasonable reactions to a childhood environment in which you couldn’t trust a parent to notice your needs or protect you from things that overwhelmed you.

5. They Won’t Be Emotionally Intimate or Vulnerable with You

Although they’re highly reactive emotionally, EI parents actually avoid their deeper feelings (McCullough et al. 2003). They fear being emotionally exposed and often hide behind a defensive exterior. They even avoid tenderness toward their children because this might make them too
vulnerable. They also worry that showing love might undermine their power as parents because power is all they think they’ve got.

Even though EI parents hide their vulnerable feelings, they can show plenty of intense emotion when they fight with their partner, complain about their problems, blow off steam, or fly into a fury with their kids. When upset, they don’t look like they are at all afraid of what they feel. However, these one-sided eruptions of emotion are merely releases of emotional pressures. That’s not the same thing as a willingness to be open to real emotional connection.

For this reason, comforting them is hard to do. They want you to feel how upset they are, but they resist the intimacy of real comforting. If you try to make them feel better, they may stiff-arm you away. This poor receptive capacity (McCullough 1997) prevents them from taking in any comfort and connection you try to offer.

6. They Communicate Through Emotional Contagion

Instead of talking about their feelings, EI people express themselves nonverbally through emotional contagion (Hatfield, Rapson, and Le 2009), coming across your boundaries and getting you as upset as they are. In family systems theory, this absence of healthy boundaries is called emotional fusion (Bowen 1985), while in structural family therapy it is called enmeshment (Minuchin 1974). This is the process by which EI family members get absorbed into each other’s emotions and psychological issues.

Like small children, EI parents want you to intuit what they feel without their saying anything. They feel hurt and angry when you don’t guess their needs, expecting you to know what they want. If you protest that they didn’t tell you what they wanted, their reaction is, “If you really loved me, you would’ve known.” They expect you to stay constantly attuned to them. It’s legitimate for a baby or small child to expect such attention from their parent, but not for a parent to expect that from their child.
7. They Don’t Respect Your Boundaries or Individuality

EI parents don’t really understand the point of boundaries. They think boundaries imply rejection, meaning you don’t care enough about them to give them free access to your life. This is why they act incredulous, offended, or hurt if you ask them to respect your privacy. They feel loved only when you let them interrupt you any time. EI parents seek dominant and privileged roles in which they don’t have to respect others’ boundaries.

EI parents also don’t respect your individuality because they don’t see the need for it. Family and roles are sacrosanct to them, and they don’t understand why you should want space or an individual identity apart from them. They don’t understand why you can’t just be like them, think like them, and have the same beliefs and values. You are their child and, therefore, belong to them. Even when you’re grown, they expect you to remain their compliant child or—if you insist on your own life—at least always follow their advice.

8. You Do the Emotional Work in the Relationship

*Emotional work* (Fraad 2008) is the effort you make to emotionally adapt to other people’s needs. Emotional work can be easy—such as being polite and pleasant—or deeply complicated, such as trying hard to say the right thing to your distraught teenager. Emotional work is comprised of empathy, common sense, awareness of motives, and anticipating how someone is likely to respond to your actions.

When things go wrong in a relationship, the need for emotional work skyrockets. Apologizing, seeking reconciliation, and making amends are among the strenuous emotional labors that sustain healthy long-term relationships. But because EI parents lack interest in relationship repairs, reconnection efforts may fall to you.

Instead of amends or apologies, EI parents often make things worse by projecting blame, accusing others, and disowning responsibility for their
behavior. In a situation where it would seem easier just to go ahead and apologize, EI parents can be adamant that it was something you did—or failed to do—that warranted their hurtful behavior. If only you had known better and done what they asked, this problem never would’ve occurred.

9. You Lose Your Emotional Autonomy and Mental Freedom

Because EI parents see you as an extension of themselves, they disregard your inner world of thoughts and feelings. Instead, they claim the sole right to judge your feelings as either sensible or unwarranted. They don’t respect your emotional autonomy, your freedom and right to have your own feelings.

Because your thoughts should reflect theirs, they react with shock and disapproval if you have ideas that offend them. You are not free to consider certain things even in the privacy of your own mind. (“Don’t even think about it!”) Your thoughts and feelings are filtered through their comfort level as either good or bad.

10. They Can Be Killjoys and Even Sadistic

EI parents can be awful killjoys, both to their children and to other people. They rarely resonate with others’ feelings, so they don’t take pleasure in other people’s happiness. Instead of enjoying their child’s accomplishments, EI parents can react in ways that take the shine off the child’s pride. They also are famous for deflating their children’s dreams by reminding them about depressing realities of adult life.

For instance, as a teenager, Martin proudly told his father that he had made fifty dollars on his first music gig. His father’s immediate reaction was to point out that nobody can support a family on that kind of wage. Lacking empathy, his father completely missed the emotional point.

Sadism goes beyond being a killjoy and takes actual pleasure in inflicting pain, humiliation, or forced restraint on a living being. Sadism is also a way of claiming the role as the most powerful and important person in the relationship. Sadistic EI parents enjoy making their child suffer,
whether by physical or psychological means. Physical abuse is obviously sadistic, but hidden sadism is often expressed in “teasing” and “joking around.”

For instance, when Emily introduced her fiancé to her family, her physically abusive father “joked” that the young man should throw her out if she ever got too mouthy. Her mother and sisters chimed in to “tease” Emily, and they laughed at Emily’s excruciating embarrassment.

Sadistic parents like it when their child feels powerless. They secretly enjoy making their children feel desperate by giving them extreme physical punishments, refusing to interact with them for long periods of time, handing down unfathomably long restrictions, or making them feel trapped. For instance, when Bruce was a little boy, his father would squeeze him tightly on his lap and refuse to let him down. If Bruce started to squirm or cry, his father would send him to his room and beat him with a belt. Later his father would apologize but explain that Bruce brought it on himself by being so “bad.”

In the next section, we’ll look at how EI parents affect other people’s emotions and self-worth. Their relational style has an immediate subconscious impact on your emotions and self-esteem. How they react to you can make you feel bad or good about yourself, depending on whether they want to control you or get you on their side.

The Emotionally Immature Relationship System (EIRS)

Emotionally immature people don’t regulate their self-esteem and emotional stability well on their own. They need others to keep them on an even keel by treating them just so. To accomplish this, they act in ways that make other people feel responsible for keeping them happy. They do this through complex, extremely subtle cues that influence others to feel certain ways. I call this the emotionally immature relationship system (EIRS).

This EIRS draws you into being more attentive to the EI parent’s emotional state than to your own self. Under the influence of this relationship system, you attune to the EI parent’s emotional needs instead of listening
Find the freedom to finally live your life your way

Learn more
It’s time to make you a priority!

If you grew up with an emotionally immature parent, you may still struggle with anger, sadness, self-doubt, or shame. As a child, it’s likely many of your emotional needs weren’t met, your feelings were dismissed, and you took on adult levels of self-restraint to deal with your parent’s behavior. Somewhere along the way, you lost your sense of self. And without this strong sense of self, you may now feel like your own well-being isn’t valuable.

In this compassionate guide, you’ll find powerful tips and tools to honor your emotions, set boundaries with others, and thrive in the face of life’s challenges. You’ll also learn how to protect yourself from unfair treatment, stop making excuses for hurtful people, forge healthier relationships, and manage daily stressors with competence and clarity. Self-care means respecting and valuing your authentic self and your right to emotional self-protection. If you’re ready to nurture a deeper sense of your own worth and live with confidence, this book will guide you toward a new way of being.

LINDSAY C. GIBSON, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist in private practice who specializes in individual psychotherapy with adult children of emotionally immature (EI) parents. She is author of Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents.
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Introduction: Life Skills You Were Never Taught

This is a book to keep you company on your journey to self-discovery. Pick it up as a reminder to self-engage whenever you feel pressured to ignore your own well-being. If you had emotionally immature (EI) parents, you were probably expected to put them first. Nurturing and being true to yourself are not things that EI parents usually teach their children. Your parents’ vulnerabilities and distortions, which I describe in my previous books, meant they couldn’t show you how to sense and feel your way to a solution that is just right for you and the circumstances. So I compiled these short pieces of insight to help you remember what you need to feel whole, confident, and to have your best possible life.

This collection is designed to put you on a quest for self-awareness and fulfillment, to encourage certain attitudes and practices to make life easier and more enjoyable. I wrote these pieces to give you encouragement whenever you need it. The insights will tap that deep vein of authenticity that courses through you so you can be more yourself than ever before. I want you to feel you are back in touch with yourself, honoring your emotions, as you recall truths about yourself that may have been misplaced. There’s no denying the thrill that comes when reading something that brings back a truth that had been lost from awareness. May you experience a spark of recognition as you read each piece, a click that says, “That’s me” or “Yes, I knew that” even though you’re reading it for the very first time.
These pieces on self-care, relationships, and how to approach problems will be the reminders you need to nurture your emerging self, to honor your inner world, and to protect yourself emotionally. In other words, they will encourage you to be true to yourself first.

In previous books, I have explained the phenomenon of emotional immaturity instructively, teaching and guiding in a linear fashion. But please read this collection of short pieces, meant to spark insight, with a looser approach. Read them as you are inspired to, for brief, hopefully enjoyable observations and reflections that aim to give you confidence in managing your greatest challenges. We’ll also try out new ideas and different approaches to help move you into harmony with your authentic self. This inner self is where you find peace, happiness, and deep self-confidence. It makes you feel good about yourself, and you’ll realize that life and its challenges have meaning and messages for your growth. These insight-pieces are grouped into sections on taking care of yourself, fostering relationship health, and confidently coping with life’s challenges. These three areas are the gateways to a happier, more fulfilling life.

In the first section, we’ll look at how self-care is built on self-awareness. As you become more skillfully self-aware and active on your own behalf, knowing what you really want, you will feel more competent and life will feel more manageable. You will be able to trust your inner world and protect yourself emotionally.

Next, we’ll tackle the world of relationships and its challenges. We’ll explore finding love and appreciating differences. We’ll look at how to deal with difficult people, too. Interactions always go better when you know yourself and respond to others in such a way that you don’t lose yourself. You don’t have to give free passes for hurtful behavior or make excuses for other people’s limitations. Instead, you can be realistic about them, admitting their effect on you, and stop making yourself responsible for their self-esteem and happiness. You alone get to decide how much time and attention you have to spare for difficult people.

Fortunately, there are also kind and helpful people in life as well who make you believe in yourself and feel emotionally safe. As you experience their
positivity and unconditional acceptance, it nourishes your inner strength. These delightful people show you that good relationships are supposed to be about mutual enjoyment and encouragement instead of one person’s enhancement at the cost of someone else’s sacrifice. These special beings will point you toward love, trust, and honoring your feelings.

In the section about parenting, we'll look at which attitudes and approaches work best with children. Many people with EI parents fear they might become EI parents themselves and don’t want to do to their children what was done to them. But if you are a self-reflective person who understands a handful of essential things about children and relating to people in general, you needn’t worry. Once you understand your own past and how you were treated, you won’t pass that on to anyone else, much less your own children. And once you grasp the bigger picture about what children are here to teach us, you will learn from them in ways that you never imagined.

When you grow up with EI parents, having a difference of opinion or setting a limit is labeled as selfish and uncaring. You are taught that nothing short of sacrificing yourself will ever prove loyalty and love, and that to think about yourself is the same thing as abandoning others. You may also be taught that ordinary life challenges are unjustified, unfair, and likely to overwhelm you. You are taught by example to be afraid of anything you cannot absolutely control. But there’s another approach to life that we will explore, one in which you can take care of yourself and handle situations with acceptance and skill instead of panic.

In the last section of this book, you’ll learn more productive approaches to life and how to cope with challenges. You’ll see how life is showing you all the time how to accept its terms and deal well with it, if only you are willing to listen. You’ll see how life keeps asking you to be active on your own behalf. With this approach to problems, you can see setbacks as calls to creativity and disappointments as prompts to consider anew what you truly want.

When you see life in such positive terms—not as senselessly inscrutable, but as meaningful and supportive to your growth—you begin to understand that stress can be treated as a warning signal that you are getting off track. You
can heed stress’s message by slowing down, tuning in, and trusting your ability to sense your way through a problem and work gently with your fears so you create effective solutions.

You are creating your life all the time. Will your life be a war against reality, a struggle against the facts like it is for many EI people? Or will you try to make things easier, to be more straightforward, to start from the ending you want, and work your way back to the beginning you’re about to create? Will you be friendly with your mistakes and forbearing in those times when you can’t see anything to be proud of in yourself? Those are the moments when life is asking you to be an artist, a really good one, who transcends mistakes and leaves spaces enough for creativity to breathe through the openings. You’ll live your life more confidently and skillfully as soon as you start seeing it as your creation instead of something that is being done to you.

This book will activate new insights and build skills to make your life fuller and you more friendly toward yourself. Its goal is to attune you with your own authenticity and the wisdom of life. These insights will activate a search in you at a deeper level for the real you, a self-reflective process that will make change easier than you imagined.

If you’ve gotten out of synch with yourself, don’t despair. If you’ve gotten tangled up in inherited issues from your parents, tiptoeing around their vulnerabilities by making yourself tentative and small, you can change that. If you’ve learned to judge yourself, you can quit it. None of these things has anything to do with the true nature of you. You were not made to be confused, guilty, or judged. The only sensible question in life is what you’re going to do with what you’ve got.

The true nature of all life (including yours) is that it wants to go in the direction of expansion, thriving, and more life. But you may have learned to hold yourself back out of love, loyalty, and fear related to your childhood attachments. Others may have set conditions on what is necessary for you to be worthy, when actually you were worthy all along. Once you are more self-aware and back in touch with yourself, guilt and distortions just won’t stick anymore. They will slide right off you because they no longer make sense once you are
aligned with yourself, your life, and the right kind of people. You’ll realize life is not out to hold you back and you are not selfish for being self-protective. You are not uncaring because you got tired, and nobody has the right to tell you what you should think and feel. These are mistaken beliefs that violate your basic rights and that you can drop as soon as you’re ready.

The insights in this book will prepare you for that day when pleasing others is just a nice thing to do, freely embarked upon, and not a begging for the goodness that was yours anyway from the beginning. Here’s to your new life, where you take good care of yourself like a proud, devoted, mature parent. Here’s to your confidence that it is safe to be who you are. May you find relationships with kindred souls and look upon life as a challenging game that yields to your right approach. If these pieces of insight turn out to be your worthy companions in this process, no one will be happier than me.
Be True to Yourself

If you grew up putting others first too much, you may end up living a life of reaction rather than one of fulfillment. Instead, you can learn to become your own champion and protector, valuing and supporting who you are on the inside. The self-awareness you gain will center and ground you in your true self. Finding your authentic self is an enlivening process that keeps on giving once you resolve never to misplace it again.
1 Build a Better Relationship with Yourself

Be as available to yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Your relationship with yourself is the most vital relationship you have, essential for real connection with other people. Knowing yourself and appreciating what you find there make you become a fuller human being better capable of understanding and loving others. Unfortunately, you may neglect this inner relationship if you grew up in a family that discounted your inner world.

In childhood, when people invalidate or dismiss your inner experiences, your inner world seems unworthy of being taken seriously. If others won’t listen to your deepest feelings, you start tuning out what goes on inside you. You learn to turn away from the rich inner world that could sustain you regardless of outer circumstances.

People who have disconnected from themselves discount their feelings by saying things like “I know this is stupid, but…” or “This is such a small thing; I’m embarrassed to admit it.” Their attitude toward their inner experience is full of shame. Not trusting their inner guidance, they are sheepish about their real feelings. But your inner experience is who you are. It’s your job to notice and understand what goes on inside you. To be emotionally healthy, you need to be as available to yourself as you would be with someone you love.

When you disregard your own feelings and thoughts, your inner world feels empty and you start obsessing over other people and external circumstances. You then try to get other people to fill the vacuum left behind by your own emotional self-neglect. This further disconnects you from your inner world, reinforcing the false belief that security and stimulation can only come from outside yourself. Relationships become frustrating under these conditions because you’re looking to other people for a validation that is already yours.
No amount of social activity will fill the emptiness where there should be a robust relationship with yourself. When you judgmentally reject your true thoughts and feelings, you create a life of anxious dependency in which no power is greater than someone’s opinion of you.

Take your inner experiences seriously. Process them fully. Give yourself adequate contemplative time. Put your thoughts down in a daily journal. Write down your dreams. Learn to become familiar with your inner world through meditation. By so doing, you show dedication to yourself as worthy of being listened to and honored.

It’s the only way to build a strong inner self of your own. Watch and you will see how your inner world uses inspiration and intuition to nudge you toward happiness and well-being. Only by making a conscious, deliberate decision to honor your inner counsel can you get centered and self-directing. Once you start attending to your inner feedback, you know how things are really affecting you.

Your authentic self will always let you know when you have gotten too far away from who you really are. Start paying attention and listening to this inner guidance. It tracks your inner state, updating you through your emotions, energy levels, and unexpected thoughts. It constantly monitors whether you are happy or not. It shows what’s best for you by raising or lowering your energy as you consider choices. As your thoughts and plans line up more with the needs of your true self, you will feel light, energized, and uplifted. When your interest surges and you feel focused and intent, you are probably onto something that is right for you. Start paying attention and listening to this inner guidance.

Conversely, if your energy sinks as you consider something, it’s probably a poor match. A significant energy drop means there’s little about the situation that feeds the real you. It would seem almost unnecessary to mention this, but it’s astounding how often we feel our energy drop and yet proceed anyway because we tell ourselves it’s the right thing to do. As most of us know, this usually turns out badly in the long run.

You have the ability to flourish and nurture yourself as a human being. You can’t be good to others if you don’t value yourself first. If you feel guilty and put
yourself last, you may secretly expect others to take care of you because you aren’t doing it for yourself. But don’t give in to the pernicious idea that others should be more attentive to your needs than you are.

If you need more proof about the value of a good relationship with yourself, think about all the accomplished people who got that way by paying deep attention to their inner world. We grant that right to famous actors, Nobel scientists, great musicians, and world-renowned artists. Nobody ever questions if such people should be paying so much attention to their thoughts and inspirations or if it’s okay for them to safeguard their time and energy from other people’s demands. We should do no less for ourselves.
Injuries to self-esteem come from feeling that your uniqueness was rejected.

When someone mentions having low self-esteem, I think of that old cartoon with the man in the doctor’s office complaining of a headache as he sits there with an arrow stuck through his head. The joke is that the headache is the least of his worries, and that is the same story with low self-esteem. People with poor self-esteem have a deeper problem than they think. Their deeper problem is that, somewhere along the way, someone has made them feel uncertain about whether they deserve to be here at all.

There are countless people walking around, holding jobs, and raising children who continue to question whether or not they are entitled to be here in the first place. They never quite have that rock-solid feeling that they belong and are valued. They may think their roles and jobs are worthwhile, but they are not so sure about the inner essence of themselves.

Yet all children come into this world with unquestioning self-acceptance of their needs, which is the root source of all self-esteem. A person with secure self-esteem knows the reality of his or her inner needs and knows that those needs are worthy of fulfillment. Doubting the legitimacy of these needs undermines the very foundation of one’s self-worth.

People with low self-esteem come into my office wondering, What’s the matter with me? But I think instead, “What happened to you?” I think this because I know these people did not enter the world feeling flawed or doubting their right to be here—that is, not until they encountered the bow and arrow of another person’s rejection or criticism.

Ask yourself just who it was in your life that enjoyed archery so much. EI parents often carry quivers filled with debasing comments to shoot at you. Low
self-esteem is exactly like going through life with a head full of their arrows. You cannot think without running into those internalized, sharp, piercing arrowheads.

Injuries to self-esteem come from feeling that your uniqueness was rejected. People with low self-esteem carry this story in their body language; they are constantly trying to make themselves appear absent.

Yet the longing for life and belonging is so strong that even arrow-shy people may one day question their low opinion of themselves. They wake up to their existential right to be here and to express what they need, finally overcoming their low self-esteem.

It is up to each and every one of us to sit ourselves down and accept that because we are here, we are supposed to be here. Once you have settled that question for yourself—and figured out who the archers were in your life—it is no longer just about improving self-esteem. It expands into the joys of self-expression and the right to self-protection. Self-esteem means you have decided you have the right to be here—and on top of that, to enjoy it too.
A Case of Mistaken Identity

Nobody finds it easy to be someone else.

I always notice it when a person in therapy says, “That’s just not me” or, another favorite, “I’m not the kind of person who...” When people talk about themselves this way, I can hear the tinny echo of a distorted self-concept. Their denial just does not ring true.

Instead it sounds like a hand-me-down belief that the person took on about herself or himself, like something picked up at the flea-market of other people’s opinions. What such individuals are rejecting is a trait or behavior that doesn’t fit their overly narrow concept of themselves. Maybe that tinny off-note I heard was the sound of anxiety about stepping outside of their family’s concept of them, imposed by EI parents.

A rigid or easily threatened parent will make it very clear that certain traits and behaviors are bad and deserve rejection or punishment. At the same time, such a parent may show warmth or approval if the child acts in ways that the parent can relate to.

When a child’s nature is compatible with the parent’s personality, there is harmony inside the child because the child fits nicely into the parents’ expectations. The child feels secure being similar to Mom or Dad. Such identification allows for both connection and growth. But when children have to be something they are not in order to please the adults, especially EI parents, anxiety, shame, or depression soon follow. They start to feel like an imposter or feel they never do things well enough. That is because, at some level, the parent has given them the message they ought to be different than what they really are. These children must strain to fit in.

Naturally cooperative, malleable children—which fits the description of internalizer children of EI parents—will try hard to convince themselves that
they must be wrong because the parent must be right. These children form an identity based on what they think they should be. Traits that don't fit are disowned.

Maybe this could work if it were not for the tremendous energy it takes to not be who you really are. The more you must please a parent, the less energy you have for mature self-development and finding your own path. Burying your true nature for the sake of family acceptance is both physically and emotionally exhausting.

Your ambitions, attractions, interests, and dreams tell you who you really are. They pull you toward the things that give you the best return on your efforts. Following them increases energy, optimism, and hopefulness because they are inherently empowering. They may cause anxiety if EI parents disapprove, but just remember that anxiety is often the by-product of growth. We all feel a little odd or scared when we try a new behavior.

So if you catch yourself saying, “I’m not that kind of person,” ask yourself, “How do I know that?” Is it true deep in your soul, or is it because you were made to feel uncomfortable about those interests? Part of the fun of doing psychotherapy is watching people start to ask themselves these questions, as they open up to being different from how their families saw them. There is nothing like the joy that comes up when you discover that your inhibitions and self-limiting beliefs were just a case of mistaken identity.
4 Be Proud of Yourself

Pride is the natural sensation of delight in growth.

Nothing grows without delight. Green-thumbed gardeners know this, and so do parents who cherish their children. Showing delight in someone’s growth gives the person fuel to keep trying. Good bosses do it, the best spouses do it, and we should do it too. Enthusiasm for our own progress is the most powerful motivator we have.

Praise from others can be as big as a whoop of joy or it can be as subtle as a softening of the eyes. But whatever form it takes, the person being praised feels proud he or she did it right. In childhood, praise guides the way, like a light along the path. There is no mystery to it; you just follow the smiles. Later on, you learn to give yourself that good feeling by feeling proud of yourself. Pride is the natural sensation of delight in growth.

But all too often, healthy pride gets confused with narcissism. If you are proud of yourself, you might fear you will be disliked or taken down a notch. As a result, some people superstitiously deny pleasure in their accomplishments in order to ward off a comeuppance. Pride has even been labeled a sin, and acting conceited is a social no-no.

Another practice that has given healthy pride a bad name is excessive praise for the smallest childhood success, from earning tokens in the classroom to the trophy glut at Little League. Many adults are turned off by this over-praise, sensing that the children are being done no favor. In fact, research has shown that many children overpraised for success end up becoming more cautious and less motivated than the kids who were praised only for their amount of effort, successful or not.
However, if you as an adult are trying to make positive changes in your life, then you must notice and take time to feel good about even your smallest successes. To do so is just as important as figuring out what you wanted to change in the first place. You encourage yourself to grow, taking pleasure in your progress. The pleasure you feel tells the brain to keep strengthening these new tracks of changed behavior.

Unfortunately, instead of noticing and celebrating your positive changes, you might tell yourself not to get a swelled head. Even worse, you may tell yourself that because you feel so good, something bad might happen, just to even things out. The brain then puts the brakes on that new outlook or behavior because your mind senses anxiety, not pleasure.

Instead of dashing past your best moments, just when things are changing for the better, you ought to be asking yourself how you did it. If you don't analyze and take pride in what you did right, you will not know how to get there again, nor will you have the enthusiasm to keep trying. Analyzing how you got to a better place makes it more than a happy accident; you become conscious of a skill that you can hone further.

Deliberately pausing to feel delight encourages more growth. But many people find it hard to feel proud of themselves for very long. They squirm and resist, minimizing the fact that their changes had a huge impact for the better. Many times, people do not think it’s possible to really change, and they ignore the evidence of it as soon as they do it. Embarrassed to praise themselves, they undo their delight and accomplishment, insisting they are the same old people—which is exactly the way to guarantee they will stay the same old people.

If you want to keep having good feelings and a better life, notice what you did right and make a point to feel good about each accomplishment. You are not being prideful or vain; you are learning to feel proud of yourself for well-earned success. That warm glow in your chest and broadened sense of possibility are the natural, organic results of getting it right. If you make a point to pause and enjoy the moment, you can fan that spark into a sustaining fire of...
motivation. If you snuff it out too quickly, you extinguish not just the good feeling of the moment but your energy for the future. Take every chance you can to feel good about feeling good. Learn to enjoy the sensation of pride. It is what successful people have always done to keep their motivation strong. You won’t be an egoist; you will be an enthusiast—a self-enthusiast. Then you can pass it along to others.
It’s time to make you a priority!

Learn more