

Emotional Child Abuse

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Parental Emotional Abuse

This artwork is about the mental journey of a child living through an emotionally abusive environment. I wanted to explore this idea after spending a lot of time reflecting on my life and how I was raised. There was a time in my life in which my once loving household turned into a very emotionally abusive one. After reflecting on that time in my life, it made me wonder, what would have happened if I had been raised like this my whole life? What entices parents to emotionally abuse their children? What, exactly, is “emotional abuse”? Children who are emotionally abused feel inferior, inadequate, and worthless. Along with this, children of a young age who are emotionally abused and neglected develop at a slower pace than children who are not. Emotional abuse is centered around the need for superiority, control, and domination over a child.

This installation represents the effects of emotional abuse, the mental state of a victim. I believe that sketchbooks are the best way to visually record one’s thoughts and feelings in expressive and abstract ways. This series follows the journey of a person suffering from emotional abuse. I used different mediums and art styles to represent each age. For example, the crayons and childish drawings represent one’s childhood and the colorful ink drawings represent the adult stage in life. The middle book, the teenage years, is chained together to represent the suppression and control that happens during emotional abuse. The books end on a high, happy note to proclaim that there is a way out and that things can get better for people in emotionally abusive environments.

This topic is extremely important because abuse has long lasting effects on a child. Emotional abuse is so hard to identify that, in most cases, the emotionally abusive parents don’t realize that they are being abusive. There are little to no physical signs of emotional abuse; the abuse can only be seen in behavior. With smaller children, it is even harder to identify. I hope that my work can help people understand the severity of this topic.

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I consider myself to be a very fortunate person. My childhood was very good for the majority and I believe that my parents did a good job of raising me. Because they raised me well, I was able to see when I was no longer being treated like a child should. My father had changed due to the arrival of a new woman in his life. He suddenly became more controlling and scary yet more distant and reserved. Living with him during this time was one of the worst times in my life. I felt like I couldn't be myself and I was being controlled by threats.

I only saw and interacted with my father when I would be driven to school and during dinner. Dinner is the only meal that was given to me, and I barely ate due to me constantly being sick to my stomach. I was malnourished at that house, but my father did not notice. I was also in constant fear due to my stepmother having unpredictable outbursts of anger. I felt suppressed, unloved, unwanted, depressed, and scared. Only after I was kicked out of his house by my stepmom was I able to be myself. I never want to feel like I did at that house ever again, nor would I ever want anybody else to go through what I did. I don't want to be scared of someone who I once loved. Only because I was older did I realize that what he was doing was wrong and that I was extremely unhappy. Because I was old enough, I had the option to live full time with my mother and not live with my father.

This, however, got me thinking. What would have happened if I had been raised like this my whole life? Would I have known that that is not the way that I should live? Or would I think that it is normal due to me being born and raised in such an environment? My little sister still goes to my dad's house and from an outside perspective, it is an extremely emotionally abusive household. No child should ever be raised to be controlled or neglected by someone who should be their greatest support. Does she know that what our father is doing is not good for her? She is hurt by him yet she still continues to go to his house and be with him. I can tell that she is scared of our stepmom and that she is scared of our father because of the way he treats her. She expresses her desire to spend more time with my mom, but my father threatens her by using my older sister's and my futures. He had threatened to write me and my older sister out of his will and take away our trust funds if we testified against him in court. My younger sister cares too much about us that she told us this, frightened. She has also told us that he had threatened to call the police if she did not go to his house. Maybe the reason she still lives with my father is because of hope that my father will return to how he was, or maybe its because of fear and obligation to protect me and my older sister. This kind of strain should not be placed on a child as young as her, nor any child for that matter.

Even my mother knows that what my father is doing is wrong; that the way that he is choosing to raise my sister now is not the way a child should be raised. My mother is scared for my sister, and she believes that she is not in a good environment in that household. He treats her like an extension of himself, like his last hope for the life he used to live. He does not put my sisters and me first in his life, nor second nor third. Even though he is hurting me through his actions and decisions, I still doubt that he is intentionally doing these things to hurt me. I still believe that my father is good at heart, but has made some poor decisions. He is not the type to intentionally hurt me or cause me harm, and maybe even wants the best for me.

Just like my father, a lot of the time, emotionally abusive parents don't realize what they are doing to their child. According to an article by Bernardine Craft¹, emotional abuse is the result of insecurity of the parent and the result of the need for perfection and control. Their actions come from their subconscious thoughts and feelings. The parents put their child on a pedestal and see them as an extension of themselves. They feel the need to control the child because of this and can't accept the fact that the child is an entirely different person. In an article

by Barbara J. Meddin and Anita L. Rosen⁴, they mention that emotionally abusive parents also have unrealistic expectations for their children. They also mention that emotionally abusive parents rely on their children to fill their emotional or social needs. This leads to the child disappointing the parent in some way, and the parent blaming the child for their unhappiness. This makes the child feel guilt and shame for bringing unhappiness upon their parent.

Craft also talks about the main things that emotional child abusers tend to do that inflicts damage to the child's emotional state. The first one being, the desire of the parents to have a "perfect" child, and they become "helicopter parents". This means that they begin to control the child, this could include checking cell phone usage, making the child to some activity that they don't want to do (like track or piano), going through the child's room to make sure they aren't hiding anything, being strict about grades to the point where it is detrimental to the child's mental health and more. A lot of the time, at least in my experience, the child either submits or rebels. Being a helicopter parent reflects onto the child that there is a lack of trust between the parents and the child. The child will feel more inclined to lie and go behind the parent's backs. This creates a mutual distrust and is harmful to the emotional state of the child because they lose trust in what should be their greatest supports. Communication between the child and their feelings and the parents becomes limited and vague. This distance creates a wall between the parent and child.

The second thing that emotionally abusive parents tend to do is impose their dominance over their child. This is done by the parent picking fights and anger outbursts towards the child. This also includes overprotection. Overprotection is dangerous because when presented with the situations and problems of the real world, the child takes them in all at once and it can be damaging to their emotional and mental health. By overprotecting the child, this could also lead to the child never developing enough confidence to do things in life that doesn't involve the help of their parents. It creates a dependence and doesn't prepare the child for the real world as well as fuels the parent's need for the child's dependency and encourages the parent's control of the child. The anger outbursts and parents picking fights creates not only a lot of tension in the family but a lot of fear in the child. In the Barbara J. Meddin and Anita L. Rosen article, it was stated that children become fearful of doing something wrong and angering the adults, so they tend to become more reserved and disconnected from social situations.

Another thing that tends to happen is the parent/parents try to assert their power or to "get even" or a loss of respect or hurt. A child could potentially indicate a loss of respect or "hurt" the parent by challenging their beliefs or sometimes breaking rules. This includes outbursts of anger, arguments, name-calling, hurtful statements, neglect, severe punishment and more. According to Craft, this is the area in which emotional abuse is most likely to happen. Neglect is a very dangerous aspect of emotional abuse because it deprives the child of the nurturing and love that a child needs to develop. According to David H. Skuse² in his journal article, Emotional abuse and Neglect, neglect from the parent can cause developmental delay, learning difficulties, and social difficulties. He states that children require lots of attention and care, and if they are neglected this care by their parents, the children will not develop at the normal rate, and instead develop slower. They do not have the encouragement and support from their parents, and therefore take more time to learn how to crawl, walk, and talk. The result of the hurtful statements and name calling is very detrimental to the child's mental state. The child will lose confidence and self-worth, as well as feel guilty and depressed.

According to Craft, the last thing that emotionally abusive parents tend to "demonstrate inadequacy." This means that the parents relinquish responsibility for their child. An example of

this is to blame the child for the parent's own unhappiness; to make the child seem at fault for "destroying" their family or not being good enough. This is obviously damaging to the confidence and emotional state of the child. The burden of "ruining" someone's life is put on a child who didn't have the decision to be born. This goes along with the hurtful statements and name calling. In the frenzy of angry emotions, the parent could not think through what they say, and state things like blaming the child for their unhappiness, saying the child is worthless, and more.

Emotional child abuse often makes the child feel worthless, inadequate and inferior to not only their parents but to society as well. No child should ever have to live in these conditions and be restricted to the boundaries that were set by the parents without the child's happiness and health in mind. These living conditions can impact the child for a long time even after they stop living with their parents. The way they handle social situations and their emotions are affected due to the environment in which they were raised.

I decided to interview two of my friends who I know have struggled with emotional abuse and with their relationship with their parents. Person A describes their relationship with their parents as being unhealthy and their parents and them having "conflicting opinions all the time." They also mentioned in the interview that their parents and they argue every day. They argue "about [them] being able to go out (even if just to see a friend) because they overly complicate every plan [they] make, and get mad at [them] for trying to plan something in the first place." This is an example of emotional abuse because their parents pick fights with them and desire control over them. They also mentioned that because of their parents "being excessively strict, [they] have felt the need to be sneakier and more 'rebellious' at times, increasing how often [they] lie." This is an example of the mutual distrust that happens when parents become over controlling and lose trust in their child. They feel like they can no longer trust their parents and confide in them with their concerns or feelings. They also stated that because of their parents, they have become more insecure about themselves. Self-confidence is very important in daily life, and to be insecure presents new challenges and issues in social settings and situations. This person, when asked to describe what they think emotional abuse is, described it as the "excessive anxiety and stress induced by someone who doesn't consider the opinions of others." Which, in part is correct, however, it does not cover all the areas and psychology of emotional abuse. This is understandable, however, because emotional abuse is something that is rarely taught or researched.

The next person, Person B, describes their relationship with their parents as "not the best. [They] would describe it as having unintentional emotional and verbal abuse that has led negative effects such as low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, and more." These are the most common psychological results of emotional abuse. They also mention that their "mother has a temper and does not know how to control her anxieties, so they get put on [them]. [Their] father tends to drink and gets extremely irritable and angry/in a mood where he wants to argue." In the article by Barbara J. Meddin and Anita L. Rosen, they mention that an emotionally abusive environment can lead to an adult abusing substances. Craft also talks about how the subconscious anger and anxieties are taken out onto the children through various fights and control. Person B mentioned that them "and [their] parents argue and it's usually about school and stress about applying for colleges. Sometimes it's about staying out with friends and how late [they] can be out." It is usual for some parents and children to fight, especially with stress about college and school. However, it becomes unhealthy when it drives the child into a bad mental state. This person described emotional abuse as "a type of abuse that is used to control

someone in harmful ways by inflicting pain on their emotions.” This is a summary of one of the tactics used in emotionally abusive environments, where threats of neglect and lovelessness are used to control the child. This person considers themselves to be a victim of emotional abuse on many levels, not just parental emotional abuse. They stated that their relationship with their parents has “changed how [they] talk to others because [their] self-esteem is lower and [they] are more cautious about what [they] say before [they] say certain things.” This is an example of a sign of emotional abuse, where the child withdraws themselves from a social situation for fear of saying or doing something wrong and angering people. It creates issues when they are confronted with certain social situations and settings.

Now, the issue is, how do we resolve, or begin to resolve this social issue? How do we get the parents to not only stop emotionally abusing their children but to realize that they are doing it? According to W. R. Guirguis³ in a medical journal about the physical indicators of emotional child abuse, it is hard to detect and therefore is very hard to treat and prevent. Craft, in their article, discussed a way that could potentially decrease the amount of emotionally abusive household.

Craft wrote about something called parent education groups. What these groups do is provide a safe space for parents to talk about their worries and concerns about their children and to talk to other parents. They also learn about problem-solving strategies and ways to connect and communicate with their child. Along with this, parents are given an outlet so that their anger goes towards something other than their children. This is good because a lot of emotional abuse comes from the ignorance of the parents, especially when raising children. This safe space gives them the opportunity to learn from other parents and professionals so that they can be more aware of their impact on the child's emotional and physical state. This is also great because a lot of emotional abuse comes out of anger and aggression, and through these outlets that the support group provides, the child is not in as much danger to these outbursts and pent-up anger.

These support groups are a great approach to a solution since they provide a lot of tools for parents to succeed in parenting their child. However, not every parent is able/chooses to go to these support groups. There need to be other options to help combat the issue. According to the article by Barbara J. Meddin and Anita L. Rosen, the key to discovering and reporting emotional child abuse lies within the children's school teachers.

The school teachers are the adult that, besides the parents of the child, sees and interacts with the children the most. Therefore, the teacher would be the first person to notice any signs of abuse. However, in the article by Barbara J. Meddin and Anita L. Rosen, only 13% of reports of emotional abuse have been made by school teachers. Some of the reasoning behind this may be that the teacher does not have a wish to interfere with the child's family drama, or that the teacher is simply unaware of the signs of abuse. Emotional abuse and neglect are a lot harder to notice than physical abuse because the signs are not physical but behavioral.

These signs are very subtle. Some signs are if the child is taking food from other children, or if they are reluctant to leave school. I believe that teachers should be educated in not only in recognizing physical abuse but emotional abuse and neglect as well. By doing so, there is a higher chance that the signs will be noticed and a report can be made so that the child can live in more suitable and healthy living conditions.

Along with this, I believe that everybody should be educated on not only emotional abuse but all types of abuse so that everyone can be aware. Emotional abuse is a type of abuse that doesn't seem to be fully understood by most people, which can be dangerous for their future or current children. There needs to be more support for those being emotionally abused as well;

they are not getting the support that they need from their parents, so it is harder for them to deal with day to day tasks, such as school work or friendships. I believe that we need to keep an open mind and work towards implementing solutions to identify and prevent this issue.

After researching articles, reflecting upon myself and my life, and reaching out to others who have gone through similar experiences to mine, I have learned a lot about who I am and have made sense about my emotions. I was very unclear emotionally about this time in my life before researching. Often times, I also felt like I was alone in this experience, and that nobody could know how it felt. In a way, I have come to terms on my past so that I can turn towards the future.

Works Cited

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