

INVISIBLE DAMAGE

Recovering from an emotionally unavailable or narcissist parent

A quick guide to a long and complicated subject, with practical tips

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Healing from an emotionally unavailable or narcissistic parent

A 'quick' guide to a very long and complex subject, with practical tips towards recovery

"If you could watch me suffer and it does not inspire you to change or do better, then you've told me all I need to know." — Maria Consiglio

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♡ Thanks to all my kind friends that encouraged me and gave me feedback on my writing. Thanks too to my daughter Isla, and her friend Olivia, for their line drawings. ♡

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Who is this survival guide for?

This is for anyone who ever wonders about the role of their *parent(s) in their current struggles, their lack of self worth, anxieties, over-thinking, addictions, illnesses or unhealthy coping mechanisms. This is a highly complex issue with widespread causes and effects. This guide is a summary, an overview, that will not cover everything you need, and is aimed at moving you towards awareness. Essentially, it's a quick(ish) summary of a very long and tricky road towards awareness and healing.

*[*Note: I use 'parent(s)' throughout this guide based on my own experience, though this could refer to any influential caregiver from childhood. I also refer to 'child' and 'children', this can equally refer to the 'adult child' that you are now.]*

It could be that it seems that your parent's needs have always had to come first; you might feel overly responsible for them; you could feel very affected by their moods; you might fear saying 'no', setting a boundary, or standing up to them. You may feel confused or on edge around them. They may have a fantastic, warm reputation outside of your immediate family unit; but often act in ways to make you feel put down, scolded, small, uncertain, lacking, or criticised. When you do express yourself, you may get an extreme and baffling reaction of denial, upset, anger, or avoidance. Any apology from them may be non-existent unless it fits their story of blame or victimhood. In their view, they are never wrong unless they can tie it into a story of their lack of responsibility. There is never any attempt to understand your feelings or to honestly repair after any sort of upset.

Your emotions as a child would likely have quickly been shut down through mockery, threats or dismissals.

Things will seem relatively peaceful when you are in agreement with them, performing your expected role, only saying 'yes', towing the line. This is a 'fawning' trauma response which was useful as a child to allay the parent's negative reactions; but the huge cost will be your own identity, authenticity, inner peace, and energy.

They could hurt you deeply one minute and pretend it did not happen the next. The 'put downs' may be sandwiched between multiple doses of niceties, apparent kindness, and they may seem empathetic at times. They could also be very socially perceptive, knowing what to say at the right moment in order to protect their image as 'good'. You may have internalised a belief that you had an ideal, balanced family life because that is the image

projected; you considered your upbringing as 'normal' because that is the only family setup you ever knew.

These parents will likely see any disagreement with their views as an argument, and show very quickly that your fear of standing up to them was justified by attacking you and putting you down. Your voice will be deemed wrong, silly, worthy of dismissal, or irrelevant.

Such parents will value being 'right' and 'winning' over any relationship, even with their own child.

To add to your pain, any disagreement with such a parent will ensure you are labelled as a bad, rude, disrespectful child within the family and to anyone outside of the family that the parent wants to recruit against you. Essentially a smear campaign to seek sympathy, compound their reputation as the victim, and to gain support against you. This is a painful and isolating experience. The parent's sense of reality is so fragile that they seek strength in numbers to help them to justify their position and they are often socially perceptive enough to persuade people.

Although no emotionally abusive behaviour will be off limits behind closed doors, your parent may default to 'overt' or 'covert' behaviours around you.

The Overt emotionally unavailable or narcissistic type - This is the classic critical bully, likely to 'explode' easily, loud, overtly aggressive, and never feeling at fault. The overt emotional abuser will show quick and obvious anger, but only within the immediate family unit. As a child you would have been hyper-alert to any suggestion of mood change, and have felt a need to try to calm things or placate. Any attempt to stand up for yourself will be met with aggression and shut down. As a child you may have been expected to act and know things like an adult, even being set perfectionist tasks with consequences for failing. Rare praise came from perfectly meeting the role expected from you.

The Covert emotionally unavailable or narcissistic type - This is a well-masked passive aggression that causes extreme confusion and lack of safety. The covert emotional abuser will make displays of performative care, empathy and compassion, but their passive aggressive actions will not match their words. Outside of the family unit, they will be viewed as loving, caring parents and even pillars of the community. Their behaviours include quiet mocking, ignoring boundaries, expecting to be cared for, never taking responsibility, and martyrdom. Every request from a child will seem too much trouble for them. They will seem extremely sensitive, act as if they are highly charitable, and even humble with an aim to gain sympathy.