

From the desk of: Randall W. Stier; LMFT, LPCC

6 Simple Truths to Overcome The Legacy of a Dysfunctional & Painful Childhood.

The truth is, we are all our own work. We are all formed by the life choices that we make. That's the way it has to be. That is the natural law of life. Psychiatrist David Viscott, M.D. affirmed this belief by noting: "If there is any justice in this world, it is that you must spend your life as yourself, reaping the discontent of your cowardice and the satisfaction of your best efforts. It's a fair system and no one escapes."

No matter what we have gone through as children- the good and the bad, the highs and the lows, as adults we have the choice to alter the story of our lives, to change the narrative of our future, to forge a new path. No one else can do the hard work of finding a path to overcome a painful past, of finding our own truth about it and finding the clarity of purpose to move beyond it. Of course we are always free to avoid the issue entirely, to take the path of least resistance, to repeat the generational cycle, to go with the flow, to go the easy way that doesn't challenge ourselves. The choice is always ours to make.

The following "truths" are from my own perspective, my own attempt at finding a path beyond the legacy of an emotionally painful and difficult childhood.

1) Remember that you are not alone (even when you feel alone)

That's right-you are not alone-really. Take heart in knowing that whatever particular struggles and emotional wounds you experienced growing up would likely elicit empathy from others' if they knew what your childhood was really like for you. Even when you feel alone, so many others are with you in spirit and would relate to your particular struggles in some meaningful way that connects them to their childhood experiences.

So many people struggle with the pain and the legacy of dysfunctional childhoods. I should know-in one way or another the powerful impact of one's past invariably comes out in the present day problems with the people I work with in my professional counseling role.

Unhealthy parenting and unhealthy childhood experiences comes in many forms like: unrelenting family chaos and unpredictability, extreme permissiveness and neglect, divorce and subsequent parental abandonment; parents who reject their gay children for coming out; racist parents who model hate and intolerance; chronic foster care; emotional abuse; frequent shaming (treating a child as if he or she is a bad person); parental drug addiction; repeated exposure to domestic violence; repeated moves and relocations; chronic financial instability; physical abuse; sexual abuse with an unprotective parent who sides with the abuser; parents favoring some children over other; extreme parental rigidity and perfectionism; extreme parental religious dogma;

emotionally absent or detached parents; self-absorbed/selfish parents; parents living secret double lives; parents who scapegoat particular children; etc., etc., etc.

In the most toxic and destructive families, parents or caretakers offer their children little or no protection and instead intentionally, systematically and repeatedly exploit their children's vulnerability solely for their own needs-solely for how it benefits them without concern about their child's welfare.

But somehow, through all the good and bad, through everything that you have endured, you have made it, you survived your childhood and made it to this very moment in your life. You are truly a survivor.

Maybe there is more to consider, a larger, more complicated context to your life (as there always is), but first honor your ability to have made it to this very moment in your life. Honor yourself for keeping that vulnerable, fragile child inside yourself safe enough to make to this very point in time. You have used your best survivor skills to get this far and that is something to recognize and affirm.

The key now is to build on your momentum of overcoming, to keep growing, and to be in a relentless pursuit to find your own truth, your own sense of clarity that understands more and more what you have overcome-and to subsequently find your voice and express your most free and best self; to find your clearest energy, your clearest imperative for the purpose and meaning of your life. As part of this journey you must be your own best friend-you must be the biggest cheerleader for your life and clear away anything that holds you back.

2) Strive to come to a position of clarity, of truth for you-and stick to it.

So often in dysfunctional families, there is pressure to maintain the status quo. To not rock the boat, to "go along to get along", to keep the homeostasis going no matter how dysfunctional, repressive, controlling or abusive the family system dynamics may be.

As a child, maybe you had to survive by not rocking the boat, by being quiet, perhaps by acting out and distracting your parents from other family problems, by being a loyal child "soldier" by perhaps taking on adult responsibilities for the good of the family stability. And most likely you did your best to give the family what it needed to keep the predictability and stability going whether you consciously thought about this or not. As a child you were just doing the best you could to survive, to help your family survive and get your needs met the best way you could. Your actions were honorable.

This family pattern is part of the power of dysfunctional families dynamics-to have children feel responsible (often unconsciously) for the emotional needs of their parents-at the expense of the child's own evolving emotional and developmental needs.

As an adult, the higher imperative is to come to the belief, the realization that you are no longer responsible for your parents needs at the expense of your own. In terms of one's growing up family-one's family-of-origin, this means refusing to take on the role that you played as a child to maintain the family equilibrium. It means refusing to put

the emotional and psychological needs of others ahead of your own needs to cope and grow and learn from one's past. In essence, refusing to take responsibility for things that you are not responsible for.

In more rigid, dysfunctional families-taking a stand means facing increasing pressure to get back in line, to be told that you are wrong, and to be threatened with some kind of repercussion, some kind of backlash for rocking the emotional boat (like being ignored and emotionally cut-off, being shamed by being told you are bad, etc.) if one does not do what he or she has always done to survive-to be emotionally responsible for parents or others in the family system.

Your healing depends on tolerating the displeasure of others, sticking to your guns, and honoring the belief that your feelings and emotional experience of what is true for you is a part of your own healing that you refuse to surrender for anyone. Take courage, be a little braver, and when you feel ready, take a risk to speak your own truth in some context that honors and validates your inner experience. Sometimes this isn't possible or even advisable to do directly with family members. Sometimes a caring psychotherapist or close friend can help-but what is inside must be processed-thought through into a organized narrative and expressed outwardly with a trusted person-so that you can begin to come to terms with your own reality and gain a greater sense of mastery and empowerment and that promotes healing.

3) Avoid Self-defeating behavior (getting in your own way)

I know, I know-we have all done it. We have all acted in self-defeating ways at some time that reinforce the belief that we are not worthy of more. Maybe you have taken the safe route rather than truly test yourself at important points in life. Maybe you have taken the wrong job, acted on destructive impulses, pursued the wrong career or even married the wrong person just to avoid the insecurity of risking more. Maybe you avoided risking entirely via using distracting behavior like drug addiction or by just refusing to look at deeper problems. But this is not the end of the story, this is not the higher point.

The higher point is to come to the point in life where one does not punish oneself for disappointing oneself. In other words-to outgrow the belief that your parents (or whoever impacted your painful childhood most) were right in treating you poorly-as if you did not deserve better and are not worthy of more. Even if you are disappointed with yourself for the wrong or unhealthy decisions you have made as an adult, the higher point is that you must find a way to forgive yourself and move forward by building momentum toward a better path-one step at a time. And every step-every decision, every act along this journey matters, and makes a difference.

4) Refuse to be a victim

Refusing to be a victim really means refusing to use one's abusive or dysfunctional childhood as an excuse not to grow as an adult and take more responsibility for one's current life and one's current life choices. Even if you suffered more than can be fully

understood by those who care most about you, you still have more power to affect change in your life more than you may give yourself credit for.

Even if there are cultural, religious, financial or health considerations that seem to limit your options, you still have more power in your mind to make choices each day than often seems possible. I know of know better example of this truth than the example of Victor Frankl who spent years in a concentration camp with death and horror around him. By surviving this unsurvivable experience during World War II, he highlighted his belief in the minds capacity for making a consious choice by writing: "between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom".

Don't underestimate your own resilience, your ability to bounce back and build a more hopeful future because a person can often do more than he or she might think they can. You are more than your past, more than being stuck in your past, and you empower yourself by not allowing your past to define your future.

5) Accept what cannot be changed

Part of the process of healing is to find clarity-to come to a clear a point as possible about what is actually true and what is not true-that is based on the best understanding you have about your situation. Sometimes-despite one's best efforts-adults never do receive the love and validation from their parents or childhood caregivers that they deserve. Sometimes things are not made right, no apology will ever come, and no validation of just how deeply one was hurt ever acknowledged.

You know that you must accept situations and people for what they are-not for what you want them to be. And in the end, only the love for yourself can make up for the love you missed out on. This is not to say you that you do not need the love and support of others-of course we all do. What I am saying is that your sense of worth and love for yourself must lead the way as an imperative that others will take their cue from in how they see you-by you defining how you see yourself. They will believe in you if you believe in yourself first. Others will treat you how you treat and value yourself.

6) Build your own support system

Sometimes things just can't be resolved or made better in a way that helps you feel more supported, validated, understood and resolved. Sometimes part of the grip that families have on family members is to withhold emotional support and contact from "wayward" members who dare challenge their authority and the family status quo. Withholding emotional support and cutting off (or threatening to cut off) relationship contact is a powerful tool to keep the "wrong" ones back in line. When the only acceptable choices become either falling back into a familiar, but unhealthy family role or experiencing relationship cut-off if you don't get back in line becomes clear - that is when the reality of the situation must be faced head on.

If things cannot be made better-this reality must be accepted. If you don't accept the situation for what it is when it is staring you in the face you are doomed to repeatedly

feel disappointed in trying to change and control what cannot be changed or controlled. Coming to this realization often brings a sense of loss, grief and sadness-which makes perfect sense-because it is a profound loss. It's just that despite the depth of the loss and pain-you must accept the reality of what is true for you-rather than wishing for an outcome that will never happen. Your future depends on it.

Part of healing is facing difficulty realities as they are-not how we would like them to be. At some point, in some situations-your "family" must be defined in a new, more inclusive way to include any supportive person in your life that you trust, is generally consistent and is emotionally available to you. Sometimes the imperative is to build a new "family" network, a new group of trusted people who you can rely through good times and bad when your original family is just not available to you. Having more supportive people in your life also reinforces the belief that you are lovable, worthy or more and deserve to be treated with respect.

Final Thoughts:

The great poet Maya Angelou penned: "there is no greater agony then bearing an untold story within you". I truly believe this. You are here to share your life story, to share your own hard won truth and find a path to integrate the meaning of your own childhood losses into your life story that makes you ever stronger and clearer about your life-that propels you to transcend the self-defeating beliefs that held you back.

Others who know you need to hear from you, others close to you need to hear your "truth" to understand and learn from what you went through-and they need you to give them the opportunity to support you because you are now able to accept their desire to give to you and you now feel worthy of receiving their support. Just try to be brave enough to let in those who support you without letting the doubting part of yourself win out.

Your past does not define you and never did-it's just that when you were treated poorly by those who you relied on for your very survival, it makes it so much harder to not believe that you deserve to be treated as poorly as you were-that you must have done something to deserve or to cause such poor treatment toward you. Sometimes the pain is so deep that it feels like a lifetime sentence, but even so-the point is that your life has more purpose and more value than to let the power of your past to define your future, and you can still grow and feel a little stronger every day.

You were not responsible for the abuse you endured as a child, you were just an innocent, vulnerable, fearful child just trying to survive and protect yourself the best you knew how at the time. You did a magnificent job back then-you survived and made it to this moment in your own life story.

Now it's time for you to chart your own course, to build momentum for a more hopeful future everyday, to always be looking for greater and greater clarity for your own truth, to trust yourself and to just keep going. You must find your own way, learn your own lessons and find your own truth. No one else can do the hard work of finding your best life, finding your highest self that is free to be yourself and free to speak your own

truth. That's the way it has to be, that is the imperative of life. We are all are own work, whether we choose to take responsibility for this reality of not.

So take heart, your mission is to outgrow the legacy of a painful childhood and build a new legacy, a legacy that honors the expression of your highest and best self. A legacy that is not so much about the past, but is more about mastery in the present moment- to be who you were wonderfully created to be- a precious, priceless, free to be yourself- original.

We need your bright light in this world, we need your help in building healthier families for the next generation, so share your own wisdom so that together we can all do our part to make this world just a little better for those now and for those who come after us. That is truly a legacy that you, and collectively- we all can be proud of.

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