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# Adult Children *of* Emotionally Immature Parents

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*How to Heal from  
Distant, Rejecting,  
or Self-Involved  
Parents*



LINDSAY C. GIBSON, PsyD

*“Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* is written with the wisdom and heart of a seasoned therapist and the mind of a scholar who’s spent decades poring over psychological research and theory. In this book, Lindsay C. Gibson seamlessly blends this impressive body of knowledge with the real-life experiences of her clients to create a user-friendly and highly readable book. ... This book is not about blame but rather about understanding oneself on a deep level and learning to heal.”

—**Esther Lerman Freeman, PsyD**, clinical associate professor at the Oregon Health and Science University School of Medicine

“Children cannot choose their parents. Unfortunately, many individuals grow up suffering the life-shaping adversities of having emotionally immature, neglectful parents. With wisdom and compassion, Lindsay C. Gibson enables readers to recognize and better understand these toxic relationships and to create novel, healthy paths of healing. This book provides a powerful opportunity for self-help and is a wonderful resource for therapists to recommend to clients in need.”

—**Thomas F. Cash, PhD**, Professor Emeritus of psychology at Old Dominion University, and author of *The Body Image Workbook*

“Lindsay C. Gibson’s insightful book offers the ‘emotionally lonely’ a step-by-step journey toward self-awareness and healing. Gibson’s revealing anecdotes, enlightening exercises, and honest insight lead the reader to a better understanding of how to connect more fully with oneself and others. This is an excellent book for anyone who feels isolated from family members and seeks to enjoy a more emotionally connected life.”

—**Peggy Sijswerda**, editor and publisher of *Tidewater Women* ([tidewaterwomen.com](http://tidewaterwomen.com)) and *Tidewater Family*

([tidewaterfamily.com](http://tidewaterfamily.com)), and author of *Still Life with Sierra*

“Lindsay C. Gibson’s *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* is an insightful and compassionate guide for anyone seeking to understand and overcome the long-term impact of growing up in an emotionally barren family. Here you will find sage advice and simple practices that will help you break free from old patterns, connect more deeply with yourself and others, and, ultimately, be the person you were always meant to be.”

—**Ronald J. Frederick, PhD**, psychologist and author of *Living Like You Mean It*

“Lindsay C. Gibson, a very experienced psychotherapist, wrote *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* to provide guidance to adults for self-help in resolving anxiety, depression, and relationship difficulties that result from having emotionally immature parents. It is a thorough and detailed description of immature parents, children’s experience of their parenting, and methods to resolve the resulting problems. There are many useful examples from Gibson’s psychotherapy clients. The book includes helpful exercises for self-understanding. A person can use the book to develop emotional maturity and deeper relationships.”

—**Neill Watson, PhD**, research professor and Professor Emeritus of psychology at the College of William and Mary, and clinical psychologist who does research on anxiety, depression, and psychotherapy

“Based on years of reading, research, and working with patients, psychologist Lindsay C. Gibson has written an outstanding book about the multiple ways that emotionally immature parents impact the lives of their adult children. I highly recommend *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* for all readers who

want to understand the parent/child dynamic. This is an uplifting book that provides hope and superb coping strategies for those who find it difficult or impossible to bond with parents who lack empathy and sensitivity. ... *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* is full of wisdom that will enable you to relate to your family members and friends in the healthiest way possible—no matter what age you are—and possibly even to recognize what’s behind some of the dysfunctional exchanges depicted in the news and in popular culture.”

—**Robin Cutler, PhD**, historian and author of *A Soul on Trial*

“Lindsay C. Gibson’s book, *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents*, is filled with clinical vignettes that will resonate with adult children of emotionally immature parents. The book also offers practical advice and exercises for identifying one’s true self and avoiding the pitfalls of self-images, relationships, and fantasies that undermine one’s psychological well-being. Finally, the book provides solid guidelines for interacting with one’s emotionally immature parents in a manner that avoids painful and damaging recreations of the past. Readers will find relief from recognizing that they are not alone and that they are understood by this remarkable clinician.”

—**B. A. Winstead, PhD**, professor of psychology at Old Dominion University and the Virginia Consortium Program in Clinical Psychology, and coeditor of *Psychopathology: Foundations for a Contemporary Understanding, Third Edition*

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To Skip, with all my love

# Contents

**Acknowledgments**

**Introduction**

**1. How Emotionally Immature Parents Affect Their Adult Children's Lives**

**2. Recognizing the Emotionally Immature Parent**

**3. How It Feels to Have a Relationship with an Emotionally Immature Parent**

**4. Four Types of Emotionally Immature Parents**

**5. How Different Children React to Emotionally Immature Parenting**

**6. What It's Like to Be an Internalizer**

**7. Breaking Down and Awakening**

**8. How to Avoid Getting Hooked by an Emotionally Immature Parent**

**9. How It Feels to Live Free of Roles and Fantasies**

**10. How to Identify Emotionally Mature People"**>10 >How to Identify Emotionally Mature People

**Epilogue**

**References**



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# Introduction

**A**lthough we're accustomed to thinking of grown-ups as more mature than their children, what if some sensitive children come into the world and within a few years are more emotionally mature than their parents, who have been around for decades? What happens when these immature parents lack the emotional responsiveness necessary to meet their children's emotional needs? The result is emotional neglect, a phenomenon as real as any physical deprivation.

Emotional neglect in childhood leads to a painful emotional loneliness that can have a long-term negative impact on a person's choices regarding relationships and intimate partners. This book describes how emotionally immature parents negatively affect their children, especially children who are emotionally sensitive, and shows you how to heal yourself from the pain and confusion that come from having a parent who refuses emotional intimacy.

Emotionally immature parents fear genuine emotion and pull back from emotional closeness. They use coping mechanisms that resist reality rather than dealing with it. They don't welcome self-reflection, so they rarely accept blame or apologize. Their immaturity makes them inconsistent and emotionally unreliable, and they're blind to their children's needs once their own agenda comes into play. In this book, you'll learn that when parents are emotionally immature, their children's emotional needs will almost always lose out to the parents' own survival instincts.

Myths and fairy tales have been depicting such parents for centuries. Think of how many fairy tales feature abandoned children who must find aid from animals and other helpers because their parents are careless, clueless, or absent. In some stories, the parent character is actually malevolent and the children must take their survival into their own hands. These stories have been popular for centuries because they touch a common chord: how children must fend for themselves after their parents have neglected or abandoned them. Apparently, immature parents have been a problem since antiquity.

And this theme of emotional neglect by self-preoccupied parents can still be found in the most compelling stories of our popular culture. In books, movies, and television, the story of emotionally immature parents and the effects they have on their children's lives makes for a rich subject. In some stories, this parent-child dynamic is the main focus; in others, it might be depicted in the backstory of a character. As you learn more about emotional immaturity in this book, you may be reminded of famous characters in drama and literature, not to mention the daily news.

Knowing about differences in emotional maturity gives you a way of understanding why you can feel so emotionally lonely in spite of other people's claims of love and kinship. I hope that what you read here will answer questions you've had for a long time, such as why your interactions with some family members have been so hurtful and frustrating. The good news is that by grasping the concept of emotional immaturity, you can develop more realistic expectations of other people, accepting the level of relationship possible with them instead of feeling hurt by their lack of response.

Among psychotherapists, it's long been known that emotionally disengaging from toxic parents is the way to restore peace and self-sufficiency. But how does one do this? We do it by understanding what we are dealing with. What has been missing from the literature on self-involved parents is a full explanation of why there are limits on their ability to love. This book fills that gap, explaining that these parents basically lack emotional maturity. Once you understand their traits, you'll be able to judge for yourself what level of relationship might be possible, or impossible, with your parent. Knowing this allows us to return to ourselves, living life from our own deeper nature instead of focusing on parents who refuse to change. Understanding their emotional immaturity frees us from emotional loneliness as we realize their neglect wasn't about us, but about them. When we see why they can't be different, we can finally be free of our frustration with them, as well as our doubts about our own lovability.

In this book, you'll find out why one or both of your parents couldn't give you the kind of interactions that could have nourished you emotionally. You'll learn exactly why you may have felt so unseen and unknown by your parent, and why your well-meaning efforts at communication never made things better.

In [chapter 1](#), you'll see why people who grew up with emotionally immature parents often feel emotional loneliness. You'll read the stories of people whose lack of deep emotional connections with their parents affected their adult lives in significant ways. You'll get a detailed picture of what emotional loneliness looks like and also see how self-awareness can help reverse feelings of isolation.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the characteristics of emotionally immature parents and the types of relationship problems they cause. Many of your parent's puzzling behaviors will start to make sense when you see them in the light of emotional immaturity. A checklist is provided to help you identify your parent's areas of emotional immaturity. You'll also gain some insight into possible reasons why your parent's emotional development stopped early.

[Chapter 4](#) describes four main types of emotionally immature parents and will assist you in identifying which type of parenting you may have had. You'll also learn about the self-defeating habits that children can develop in an effort to adapt to these four parent types.

In [chapter 5](#), you'll see how people lose touch with their true selves in order to take on a family role, and how they build up subconscious fantasies about how other people should act in order to heal them from past neglect. You'll learn about the two very different types of children likely to emerge from emotionally immature parenting: internalizers and externalizers. (This will also shed light on why siblings from the same family can be so vastly different in their style of functioning.)

In [chapter 6](#), I describe the internalizer personality in greater detail. This is the personality type most likely to engage in self-reflection and personal growth, and therefore most likely to be drawn to this book. Internalizers are highly perceptive and sensitive, with strong instincts to engage and connect with other people. You'll see whether this personality type fits you, especially the traits of tending to feel apologetic for needing help, doing most of the emotional work in relationships, and thinking about what other people want first.

[Chapter 7](#) addresses what happens when old patterns of relating finally break down and people begin to wake up to their unmet needs. This is the point at which people are likely to seek help in psychotherapy. I'll share stories of people who woke up from their self-denying patterns and decided

to be different. In this process of admitting the truth to themselves, they regained their ability to trust their instincts and truly know themselves.

In [chapter 8](#), I'll introduce a way of relating to people that I call the maturity awareness approach. By using the concept of emotional maturation to assess people's level of functioning, you'll begin to see their behavior in a more objective way and can observe the defining signs of immaturity as they occur. You'll learn what works and doesn't work with emotionally immature people and how to protect yourself from the emotional distress they can cause. All of this will help you gain new peace and self-confidence.

In [chapter 9](#), you'll hear about individuals who have experienced a new sense of freedom and wholeness after using this approach. Their stories will help you see how it feels to finally get free of the guilt and confusion that parental immaturity causes. By focusing on your own self-development, you can get on the road to freedom from emotionally immature relationships.

[Chapter 10](#) describes how to identify people who will treat you well and be emotionally safe and reliable. It will also help you change the self-defeating interpersonal behaviors common to adult children of emotionally immature parents. With this new approach to relationships, emotional loneliness can be a thing of the past.

After reading this book, you'll be able to spot signs of emotional immaturity and understand why you've often felt alone. It will finally make sense why your attempts at emotional intimacy have failed to create closer relationships with emotionally immature people. You'll learn to manage the overdeveloped empathy that may have held you emotionally hostage to manipulative, nonreciprocal people. Finally, you'll be able to recognize people who are capable of genuine emotional intimacy and satisfying communication.

I'm excited to share my results from years of reading and research on this topic, along with fascinating stories drawn from my work with real clients. I've been on a quest to understand this topic for most of my professional life. It seems to me that a great truth has been hiding in plain sight, obscured by the social stereotypes that put parents beyond the reach of objectivity. I'm so happy to share the discoveries and conclusions that

have been confirmed over and over again by the many people I've worked with.

My hope is to provide relief from the confusion and emotional suffering that emotionally immature parents arouse in their children. If this book helps you understand your emotional loneliness or helps you create deeper emotional connections and more rewarding intimacy in your life, then I will have accomplished my mission. If it helps you see yourself as a worthy person who is no longer at the mercy of other people's manipulations, I will have done my job. I know you've suspected much of what you are about to read, and I'm here to tell you that you were right all along.

I wish the very best for you.

# Chapter 1



# How Emotionally Immature Parents Affect Their Adult Children's Lives

**E**motional loneliness comes from not having enough emotional intimacy with other people. It can start in childhood, due to feeling emotionally unseen by self-preoccupied parents, or it can arise in adulthood when an emotional connection is lost. If it's been a lifelong feeling, it points to the likelihood of not being sufficiently emotionally responded to as a child.

Growing up in a family with emotionally immature parents is a lonely experience. These parents may look and act perfectly normal, caring for their child's physical health and providing meals and safety. However, if they don't make a solid emotional connection with their child, the child will have a gaping hole where true security might have been.

The loneliness of feeling unseen by others is as fundamental a pain as physical injury, but it doesn't show on the outside. Emotional loneliness is a vague and private experience, not easy to see or describe. You might call it a feeling of emptiness or being alone in the world. Some people have called this feeling existential loneliness, but there's nothing existential about it. If you feel it, it came from your family.

Children have no way of identifying a lack of emotional intimacy in their relationship with a parent. It isn't a concept they have. And it's even less likely that they can understand that their parents are emotionally immature. All they have is a gut feeling of emptiness, which is how a child experiences loneliness. With a mature parent, the child's remedy for loneliness is simply to go to the parent for affectionate connection. But if your parent was scared of deep feelings, you might have been left with an uneasy sense of shame for needing comforting.

When the children of emotionally immature parents grow up, the core emptiness remains, even if they have a superficially normal adult life. Their loneliness can continue into adulthood if they unwittingly choose relationships that can't give them enough emotional connection. They may go to school, work, marry, and raise children, but all the while they'll still

be haunted by that core sense of emotional isolation. In this chapter, we'll look at people's experience of emotional loneliness, along with how self-awareness helped them understand what they were missing and how to change.

## Emotional Intimacy

Emotional intimacy involves knowing that you have someone you can tell anything to, someone to go to with all your feelings, about anything and everything. You feel completely safe opening up to the other person, whether in the form of words, through an exchange of looks, or by just being together quietly in a state of connection. Emotional intimacy is profoundly fulfilling, creating a sense of being seen for who you really are. It can only exist when the other person seeks to know you, not judge you.

As children, the basis for our security is emotional connection with our caretakers. Emotionally engaged parents make children feel that they always have someone to go to. This kind of security requires genuine emotional interactions with parents. Parents who are emotionally mature engage in this level of emotional connection almost all the time. They've developed enough self-awareness to be comfortable with their own feelings, as well as those of other people.

More importantly, they're emotionally attuned to their children, noticing their children's moods and welcoming their feelings with interest. A child feels safe connecting with such a parent, whether seeking comfort or sharing enthusiasm. Mature parents make their children feel that they enjoy engaging with them and that it's fine to talk about emotional issues. These parents have a lively, balanced emotional life and are usually consistent in their attentiveness and interest toward their children. They are emotionally dependable.

## Emotional Loneliness

Parents who are emotionally immature, on the other hand, are so self-preoccupied that they don't notice their children's inner experiences. In addition, they discount feelings, and they fear emotional intimacy. They're uncomfortable with their own emotional needs and therefore have no idea how to offer support at an emotional level. Such parents may even become nervous and angry if their children get upset, punishing them instead of comforting them. These reactions shut down children's instinctive urge to reach out, closing the door to emotional contact.

If one or both of your parents weren't mature enough to give you emotional support, as a child you would have felt the effects of not having it, but you wouldn't necessarily have known what was wrong. You might have thought that feeling empty and alone was your own private, strange experience, something that made you different from other people. As a child, you had no way of knowing that this hollow feeling is a normal, universal response to lacking adequate human companionship. "Emotional loneliness" is a term that suggests its own cure: being on the receiving end of another person's sympathetic interest in what you're feeling. This type of loneliness isn't an odd or senseless feeling; it's the predictable result of growing up without sufficient empathy from others.

To round out this description of emotional loneliness, let's look at two people who vividly remember this feeling from childhood and describe it well.

### **David's Story**

*Here's how my client David responded when I commented that growing up in his family sounded lonely: "It was incredibly lonely, like I was utterly isolated. It was a fact of my existence. It just felt normal. In my family, everyone was separate from each other, and we were all emotionally isolated. We lived parallel lives, with no points of contact."*

*In high school, I used to get this image of floating in the ocean with no one around me. That's how it felt at home."*

*When I asked him more about the feeling of loneliness, he said, "It was a sensation of emptiness and nothingness. I had no way of knowing that most people didn't feel that way. That feeling was just daily life for me."*

### **Rhonda's Story**

*Rhonda remembered a similar aloneness when she was seven years old, standing by the moving truck outside her family's old house with her parents and three older siblings. Although she was technically with her family, no one was touching her and she felt totally alone: "I was standing there with my family, but nobody had really explained what this move would mean. I felt totally alone, trying to figure out what was going on. I was with my family, but I didn't feel like I was with them. I remember feeling exhausted, wondering how was I going to deal with this on my own. I didn't feel like I could ask any questions. They were totally unavailable to me. I was too anxious to share anything with them. I knew it was on me to cope with this alone."*

### *The Message Within Emotional Loneliness*

This kind of emotional pain and loneliness is actually a healthy message. The anxiety felt by David and Rhonda was letting them know that they were in dire need of emotional contact. But because their parents didn't notice how they felt, all they could do was keep their feelings inside. Fortunately, once you start listening to your emotions instead of shutting them down, they will guide you toward an authentic connection with others. Knowing the cause of your emotional loneliness is the first step toward finding more fulfilling relationships.

## *How Children Cope with Emotional Loneliness*

Emotional loneliness is so distressing that a child who experiences it will do whatever is necessary to make some kind of connection with the parent. These children may learn to put other people's needs first as the price of admission to a relationship. Instead of expecting others to provide support or show interest in them, they may take on the role of helping others, convincing everyone that they have few emotional needs of their own. Unfortunately, this tends to create even more loneliness, since covering up your deepest needs prevents genuine connection with others.

Lacking adequate parental support or connection, many emotionally deprived children are eager to leave childhood behind. They perceive that the best solution is to grow up quickly and become self-sufficient. These children become competent beyond their years but lonely at their core. They often jump into adulthood prematurely, getting jobs as soon as they can, becoming sexually active, marrying early, or joining the service. It's as though they're saying, *Since I'm already taking care of myself, I might as well go ahead and get the benefits of growing up fast.* They look forward to adulthood, believing it offers freedom and a chance to belong. Sadly, in their rush to leave home they may end up marrying the wrong person, tolerating exploitation, or staying with a job that takes more than it gives. They often settle for emotional loneliness in their relationships because it feels normal to them, like their early home life.

# Why the Past Repeats Itself

If the lack of emotional connection with emotionally immature parents is so painful, why do so many people end up in similarly frustrating relationships in adulthood? The most primitive parts of our brain tell us that safety lies in familiarity (Bowlby 1979). We gravitate to situations we have had experience with because we know how to deal with them. As children, we don't recognize our parents' limitations, because seeing our parents as immature or flawed is frightening. Unfortunately, by denying the painful truth about our parents, we aren't able to recognize similarly hurtful people in future relationships. Denial makes us repeat the same situation over and over because we never see it coming the next time. Sophie's story illustrates this dynamic well.

## **Sophie's Story**

*Sophie had been dating Jerry for five years. She had a great job as a nurse and felt lucky to have a long-term relationship. At thirty-two, she wanted to get married, but Jerry was in no hurry. In his mind, everything was fine the way it was. He was a fun guy, but he didn't seem to want emotional intimacy and usually closed down when Sophie brought up emotional topics. Sophie was feeling deeply frustrated and sought therapy for help in figuring out what to do. It was a difficult dilemma: she loved Jerry, but she was running out of time to start a family. She also felt guilty and worried that she was asking for too much.*

*One day Jerry suggested that they go to the restaurant they had gone to on their first date. There was something about the way he asked that made Sophie wonder if he might propose. Sophie barely made it through dinner trying to contain her excitement.*

*Sure enough, after dinner Jerry pulled a small jewelry box out of his jacket pocket. As he pushed it across the linen tablecloth, Sophie*