

***The Pain Of Being Your Parent's Parent:
There Is Hope!***



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Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, King James
Version, Cambridge, 1769.

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Proverbs 22:6 “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.”

Parentalizing a child, also known as emotional incest, is a little discussed phenomenon in which a parent treats a child as if the child is a partner or parent rather than offspring. Acts such as confiding in the child about problems in the parents' marriage or dating relationships, expecting a child to be responsible for the physical and emotional well being of the parent or treating the child as an equal and not allowing him or her to be a child fall into this category of abuse. An excessive interest in the developing body of a child, discouraging of normal dating/romance or even excessive interest in the normal dating/romantic life of the child also fall into this category of abuse. Parentalizing children is most often found among only children, or children of divorced parents or single parent households. When a mate is absent, either physically or emotionally, some parents fill that void by treating their child more as a partner than a child. For example, a divorced working mom may confide in her son about how disappointing a husband his father was.

This parentalized child will grow up with an overdeveloped sense of responsibility for others, guilt when having his or her own feelings, needs, and wants. He or she will most likely put Mom or Dad's wants and needs first in life, above his own, and that of his spouse and children. He or she is willing to stifle his or her own needs in favor of Mom or Dad's, no matter what the cost.

Does this describe your childhood? Does it describe the way you now, as an adult, interact with your parents? If so, then please read on...At first, admitting this behavior is abnormal may be very painful to you, but it is your first step towards recovery. You may not want to admit your parent wasn't the ideal, loving parent you always thought they were. You may be thinking things like "we were just close... after all, Dad was not around much, and Mom needed someone to confide in." Being close to your parents is great, but when closeness crosses that line, and you were made to feel

responsible for your parent, instead of your parent being responsible for you, then something is truly wrong with that picture. Parents are supposed to be the adults, the caregivers, the older and wiser ones in your relationship. Your parents should be there for you to go to in your time of need as a child, NOT the other way around. Once you admit what happened, it is important to put the blame where it belongs- on your parent for engaging in this behavior. You did nothing to encourage it or deserve it! What could any child do to deserve abuse? NOTHING!

At this point, you are going to feel anger, hurt, sadness and more. Those emotions need to be dealt with. Personally, I write letters. Not to send, but to purge myself of the negative emotions. I let it all out in a letter, then throw it away. Sometimes I also write out my feelings in my journal. For me, writing is cathartic. For you, maybe writing isn't so therapeutic. Maybe you just need to talk to a trusted friend or counselor. Another practice may be to get an empty chair, pretend the parent who hurt you is sitting in that chair, and get it all out! Yell, scream, cry... it doesn't matter! No one need know about this activity but you. It is also vitally important to mourn for the childhood you were deprived of. Mourn for the damage done to that little child you once were. Mourn for the fact that you will never have the kind of mother or father you want to have. I know it may sound like a silly step, but you will see it is important in time.

Talk to God during this entire process. I talk to Him about specific events one at a time, because that is easier for me, but I encourage you to do this however works best for you. For the purpose of explaining this step, I will tell you how I do it, and you can adapt this step for yourself from there. When something traumatic happens, or I remember something traumatic, after I purge the emotions and calm down, I ask God questions, such as, "That incident made me feel (fill in the blank here). Are my feelings true? If not, what is the truth? Please speak truth to me, Father!" It never fails- God tells me every time that although a certain incident may have made me feel certain things, such as responsible for my parents' emotional well being, that isn't true. And, He tells me the truth, such as I am His beloved child, I am the righteousness of

God in Christ, and more, often including sweet little comments such as how proud He is of me. He also often reminds me how the offending person is emotionally wounded, and acting out of the pain of those wounds. I seldom hear an audible voice saying these things. Instead God speaks to my heart in a still, small voice that is unmistakable. Once God speaks the truth about the situations, its power to hurt or anger me diminishes. I see things clearer, through God's eyes. It truly helps more than I can say. It enables me to forgive and to understand why it happened. I believe that parents who commit emotional incest are seldom aware of what they are doing- they are too wrapped up in their own pain, loneliness, anger, etc. to realize the emotional damage they have done to their own child. Once you realize what was done to you isn't personal, it makes it easier to let the negativity go. Also, as a survivor of this abuse, it is important to realize that you are valuable! Most survivors don't realize they are valuable, that they matter. But, my dear reader, you DO matter! God made you for a reason, to fulfill a purpose. That makes you very valuable! So treat yourself as valuable, as you deserve nothing less! Be good to yourself. Do things that make you feel good, such as spend time relaxing with a good book after a long day at work, indulge in bubble baths, start your day with a cup of gourmet coffee. Whatever you enjoy! The more lovingly you treat yourself, the more valuable you will see you are. Are you still enduring parentalizing behavior? If so, then treating yourself as valuable will help you realize that you do not have to tolerate such garbage. It is our responsibility, as adult children, to take care of our parents physical needs if they are unable to do so. But, that does not mean we are ever to be responsible for their emotional health- that responsibility belongs to each individual, never to another person. You need to give yourself permission to no longer be responsible for the emotional well being of your parent.

Sometimes, distance can be a good thing. That distance from your abusive parent may be permanent or temporary- only you can decide that. But, if you are considering cutting ties, then I strongly suggest much prayer, and efforts to change the situation first. Cutting ties, even temporarily, is a huge step, and one that should not be taken lightly. I regret that I had to end the relationship with

my mother for a season, and it was extremely difficult and painful. I tried everything I knew to improve our relationship, but nothing changed. She was not willing to put forth any effort, so the relationship could not improve. It takes two to make a relationship work, after all. One person cannot do it all alone. Temporary distance, however, will give you some time to grasp all this information, to make a plan on how to cope with the situation, and to clear your head. It can be extremely beneficial.

You are probably thinking about the commandment of honoring your parents, wondering how it fits into this situation. Trust me- I understand that! I thought of that constantly when I was considering severing ties with my mother. I was sure there would be no honor in cutting her out of my life, but God posted a question to me during prayers one day. "Where is the honor in the strife with your mother? Where is the honor in allowing her to mistreat you, and therefore making you angry or hurt?" Truly, there is no honor in that, I realized.

Doing something different with your parent may also have tremendous benefits. Instead of meeting your parents at their home, which makes you feel as if you turn into a child again, invite them to dinner at a local restaurant you like. Do you go home every Christmas? Then this year, go to a spa instead.

Set and enforce healthy boundaries. If Mom insists on complaining about how unaffectionate Dad is, tell her you do not want to listen to this anymore, and if she insists on continuing, then you will hang up the phone. Many parents respect these boundaries, and their behavior changes with your newfound strength. Remember- you are not to blame. Your abusive parent is to blame! You did nothing to deserve this or to make your parent do this to you! Keep that blame where it belongs- on the parent who hurt you! Proverbs 22:6 says, "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." Nowhere in this passage does it say parents should raise a child to be responsible for Mom or Dad.

Your responsibility is to fix what was damaged by your parent's behavior. Thankfully, with God, all things are possible, and you can be made whole. Your Heavenly Father is a better parent than any earthly parent- He will love you more and do for you what your biological parents never can do. Psalm 27:10 is one of my favorite verses in the Bible. It says, "Although my father and mother forsake me, the Lord has taken me up and adopted me as His own child.."

If you are wondering how I can write about this topic even though I am not a mental health professional, I will tell you- I was an only child, who was parentalized by both of my parents. Both of them came to me with complaints about the other often, and even sometimes brought me into the middle of their arguments when I was a child. To this day I still have problems with my parents telling me things about their marriage that I really do not care to hear. When these issues come up, I change the subject. I have to constantly remind myself that it is not my place to be their emotional caregiver, as it is very easy for me to slip into that role.

Always remember, Dear Reader, you have a Heavenly Father who loves you more than anyone else, and knows you are a treasure!