Healing The Scars of Emotional Abuse

Keys to Healing the Invisible wounds

by Gregory L. Jantz, Ph.D.

David knew he’d hate it.

So did his mom, Melissa. But she knew she had to do something fast. David’s anger and rebellion were getting so bad that his mother knew professional counseling was the only way for both of them to keep what little sanity they had left.

“I kept wondering why David had become so mean to me. I figured it was probably because of the divorce when he was only six, and I was willing to accept my part in that. But did David’s out-of-control behavior have to go on forever? I knew what I wanted to hear, but I was not prepared for what the therapist would tell me that hot summer afternoon,” said 41 year-old Melissa.

With her hands soaked in sweat and trying to hide a nervous cough, Melissa sat glued to the counselor’s burgundy colored leather chair. With arms crossed and anger etched in his 16 year-old face, David sat as far away from his mom as possible, obviously wishing he were in a different zip code.

“I’m so glad we’re here. Finally, someone would finally tell David to clean up his act and start treating his mom like a human being,” Melissa told herself.

“Ain’t nobody gonna tell me what to do,” thought a defiant David.

Showdown at Not-OK Corral.

Mother’s Agenda

Melissa thought the counselor would move right in on David’s behavior. That’s why she’d come, wasn’t it? You could see it in her eyes -- that look of “Please, counselor, do your stuff. Make David be good to me. Give me a second opinion and tell me I’m right and he’s wrong. Yes, that’s what I want. Confirmation that I’m a good single mom. Please, counselor. Please.”
But that’s not how the conversation progressed. Instead, Melissa was politely challenged by the counselor to take a hard look at the way she was treating her teenager and the messages she was transferring to him.

The Solution Emerges

Later, in a private session with David’s mom, the counselor suggested, “Melissa, you may need to consider turning your view around from the adult you expect David to be to the child David still is.”

Melissa began to discover that David did want to please his mom, but felt he could never hit the mark. Frustrated after many years of trying unsuccessfully, he had not only given up, but in anger and outrageous behavior he had rebelled against everything he knew his mother wanted him to be.

Melissa learned that the anger David was feeling was brought on by a deep sense of loss that he could never really gain her approval. But over time, David learned that his mother loved him deeply -- so much in fact that she wanted him to be perfect so that nothing bad would ever happen to him.

However, all David really wanted was positive, affirming messages from his mom so he could grow emotionally and be the person he wanted to become. Melissa learned it was okay to show David her love, her fears, her hopes and her own emotions.

Today, their relationship is not perfect by any means, but David has learned to start trusting his mother, and Melissa is beginning to accept her son for who he is -- a person created in the image of God and not one to be fashioned into her own.

Understanding Emotional Abuse

Unlike a physical beating or sexual invasion, the signs of emotional abuse are easier to overlook. There is no scar tissue to stretch. No bruises to yellow and heal. No gaping wounds to point to. Yet, in spite of these invisible wounds, the effects of emotional abuse can damage a person for a lifetime. Worse yet, they can become a legacy that rears its ugly head for generations to come.

Not only does emotional abuse damage a person’s self-esteem at the time it happens, it also sets up a life-pattern that can daily assault the inner-being.
This is what David was feeling. The events of his life and the strained relationship with his mom were being filtered through negative messages of the past that kept recurring in the present. That’s the first clue that emotional abuse may be present. When someone unknowingly modifies his or her behavior to produce results consistent with an unhealthy established life-pattern, the underlying cause is often emotional abuse.

Who Are those Guys, Anyway?

In my 15 years as a counselor, I have observed that emotional abusers seem to fall into specific categories. Here are six of the most common . . .

1. The Stand-Up Comic. “My ex-wife Susan is such an airhead, it’s a wonder she doesn’t just float away into the wild, blue yonder.” Or, “Like Mike really deserved that raise? Come on, get serious. The only thing he ever worked that hard for was to pretend he didn’t have the child support payment.” Funny? Not really. The stand-up comic never laughs with you; he laughs at you. Through sarcasm and exaggeration, your self-image is beaten down.

2. The Great Guilt Giver. “You’re so lucky you’re not stuck with your father. You can thank your lucky stars you’re with me!” While the jokes of the stand-up comic can hit you like a ton of bricks, the weight of the guilt-giver comes flying one brick at a time. Brick after brick of guilt, year after year, message after message. If the great guilt-givers in your life didn’t have you to pick on, they would have to be responsible for their own failures. Unfortunately, life hasn’t turned out how they wanted it to, so they just pick up another brick.

3. The Screamer. Most of us have cringed at being in the grocery store when a parent verbally unloads on a child. “Put that candy down,” the father screams, “or I’ll beat the living daylights out of you before I take you home to your mother -- that is if you ever get home!” The screamer is like a volcano who erupts in violent fits whenever the pressures of life get to be too much. When the rage is vented, the person feels powerful, invincible, in control. But woe be to the victim, because if this behavior becomes standard operating procedure, it may produce emotional scars for life.
4. The Intimidator. You may be well acquainted with this person. "If you don't take Johnny with you this weekend, you won't see him until Christmas. And that's a promise!" Here's the formula: "If you... then I." The classic pattern of an intimidator. The primary means of conversation is threat... even when it slips into a conversation in a whisper.

5. The Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This person is the master of disguises because it's the only way he feels he can survive the emotional inconsistencies of his growing up years. Now you see him, now you don't. It's like the ex-spouse who talks one way when speaking to her ex, and another way when alone with their child. She's one individual one minute, and an alien from a distant planet the next. This person learned early in life to become two people: the one on the outside has it all together; the one on the inside is filled with fears, hurt and frustration. And just like Dr. Jekyll, the person learned to conceal his or her identity at all costs. It's a terrible secret. No one knows the pain that comes with living with a monster.

6. The M.I.A Parent. "He never called me or wrote me, not once," cried Kimberly. "My daddy said he would but he was always too busy. I kept hoping, like an idiot, every birthday, every Christmas that he'd call, but he never did." One daddy -- missing in action. No body recovered. No end to the hope that someday he might surface. No end to the pain when he never does. No closure to a wound that stubbornly refuses to heal completely. It's called... emotional abuse.

All of us find ourselves taking much of our feeling of worth from other people. It's only natural. Especially when we look to those we value for acceptance and approval. But what if it's never there? What if we have lived with a stand-up comic? A great guilt-giver? A screamer? An intimidator? A Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? Or what if our child must endure the pain of an M.I.A. parent? Then what? Are we going be like the unwise mouse that keeps going into the hole time and again even when there's no cheese there?

Fortunately, there is hope. The answer is not to give up trying to gain acceptance and approval completely. The answer is to open your eyes and see that

In the same way you learned to adjust to emotional abuse in the past, you can now learn to adjust again -- and move toward a healthy, loving, appreciation of yourself as a person designed and created

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there are other places to gain the acceptance and approval you need. The answer is to seek out those who won’t withhold their acceptance and approval and who will maintain a relationship with you and not leave. The answer is to learn to become a healthy problem solver.

Within any of your relationships, the time will come when a problem or conflict arises. Your past model of how to deal with that challenge will be faulty if you still live in a past mode of emotional abuse. Try these 15 steps to working your way through a solution.

15 Characteristics of a Healthy Problem Solver

☐ 1. Seek to resolve and deal successfully with the problem and don’t demand to be declared the winner.

☐ 2. Face your conflict instead of avoiding it.

☐ 3. Understand that different people can have different points of view concerning the problem and the best way to solve it.

☐ 4. Be clear about what is and what is not acceptable in solving your problem. Do not accept abusive behavior of any kind.

☐ 5. Remember that people do make mistakes and have a need for forgiveness.

☐ 6. Tough as it may be, take the initiative and forgive first.

☐ 7. Avoid the temptation to exact vengeance for any hurt inflicted on you. It will hurt you more than the intended victim.

☐ 8. Realize that there are times when the world is simply unfair, and sometimes you will be treated unfairly by others.

☐ 9. Approach the solution to your challenge in a whole-person manner: intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and relationally.

☐ 10. Only attempt to solve one problem at a time. One is generally enough! Don’t go on overload.

☐ 11. Anticipate a positive outcome to your problem-solving.
12. Be consistent in your effort to come to a resolution without trying to force a predetermined solution.

13. Understand the power you have to provide a solution through a deep understanding of who you are.

14. Search for a commonsense solution. What’s the practical way to deal with this challenge? Do your best to uncomplicate the problem.

15. Be aware of verbal and nonverbal communication. Try to stand alongside yourself and listen and observe how you are coming across. Do you like what you see? Are you comfortable with how you are approaching the issue?

As you work through this important check list, it’s wise to remember that getting over past emotional abuse and preparing for your better present and future are not one-time revelations. Instead, view your new path to emotional health as a healing process. Just as physical injuries and illnesses are seldom healed overnight, your emotional injuries will also need time to heal.

Recognize your Whole Person

You are a person trying to raise a child or children all by yourself. It’s tough. A constant challenge. And perhaps you feel it’s all so unfair. The harder you work the more enormous your task, and you need all the help you can get. That’s why it’s vital that you start right where you are -- with yourself with your new, emotionally healthy self. This means you are committed to breaking unhealthy emotional abusive patterns of the past. It means you are determined not to transmit those abusive patterns to those young lives who now look to you for love and guidance.

Healing your whole person is possible. It happens when you get over a hurtful past and start living your exciting, better future. Now is the time to face up to your truth and say good bye to former hurts and welcome to your new life. It is happening to Melissa and David right now. . . and the same good thing can happen to you and the ones you love. That’s the good news. The very good news!

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Have you Met These Types of Emotional Abusers?

- **The Overbearing Opinion** -- One who refuses to consider your opinion and forces you to accept his or hers.
- **The Judge and Jury** -- A person who incorporates harsh judgments of you as a person in an attempt to make you feel shameful or guilty.
- **The Historian** -- This person tells you you’re forgiven, but then proceeds to bring up every one of your past fault.
- **The Commander in Chief** -- The one who has a great plan for your life -- if you would just follow his or her rules.
- **The Roller Coaster** -- This person’s moods and behavior swing from one extreme to another, removing any sense of safety and consistency from your relationship.
- **The Wrath of God** -- One who misuses scripture to get his or her own way, and who equates his or her own opinion with that of God.