

UNCOMMON ABANDONMENT

By Ginger E. Blume, Ph.D.

When you hear the word “abandonment”, what comes to mind: an infant being left in a basket on a church doorstep or a mother walking out on her children and never returning home? Our common understanding of abandonment typically involves physical desertion of a child or elderly person who is totally dependent upon another person for his/her survival. This month’s article is about another type of abandonment---emotional abandonment.

Infants need more than their basic survival needs to be met if they are to survive and/or thrive. In the early 1900’s psychological research that was conducted in orphanages where the ratio of staff to children was poor, demonstrated that babies could die simply from a lack of emotional and physical contact. While this is an extreme result, we now understand that during the course of normal social-emotional development, people need to be nurtured both physically and emotionally to grow into psychologically healthy adults.

Many people I see in therapy have been emotionally abandoned, but don’t consciously realize it. What qualifies as emotional abandonment in childhood? Perhaps a client recalls a childhood with all their physical needs being well tended to, adequate financial resources, and growing up with a semblance of a normal family life. However, when this same client can’t recall any open signs of affection or emotional connectedness among their family members, I begin to suspect they’ve been emotionally abandoned. When they can’t remember their emotional needs being acknowledged or addressed as a child, there are often telltale signs in their adult relationships. Being raised in an emotional desert oftentimes results in a sparse emotional vocabulary and poor recognition of what s/he is feeling.

When asked what they’re feeling, these clients appear genuinely clueless. They tend to group their feelings into three broad categories: angry, sad, or happy. Without an empathetic parent to help label the subtleties of their emotions, these children grow up with an “emotional deficit” in expressing feelings. As a form of compensation, self-expression becomes focused on how one thinks; not how one feels. When parents ignore feelings, the *unspoken* message is quite clear: feelings are either irrelevant nonsense or feelings are basically dangerous. In an effort to survive the trauma of emotional abandonment, children learn to protect themselves as best they can. Hence, they slowly form protective, psychic defenses that are constructed to shut feelings out of consciousness.

By the time these children grow, their personal relationships tend to be either superficial and mistrustful, or volatile and impulsive. A childhood emotional deficit results in excessive denial and suppression of feelings. Whether through defense mechanisms or the use of drugs and alcohol, emotions become actively pushed away from awareness. When this happens on a chronic basis, feelings may be indirectly expressed through actions, rather than words. Oftentimes, these actions are inappropriate and confusing to the individual, as well as to others. Without adequate self-awareness, an emotional deficit creates problems both for the individual and for friends and family. This confusion further reinforces the earlier childhood messages that feelings are somehow

useless, scary, or even dangerous. If unrecognized feelings aren't diverted into inappropriate actions, they may become indirectly expressed in another physical way. For instance, a psychosomatic illness may represent a feeling that is being denied. A person with a chronic backache may be ignoring the feeling that they are resentful about "carrying more than their share of the financial burden" in the family.

Another fallout from emotional abandonment and the resulting deficit is that the ability to empathize with others becomes extremely difficult. Empathy requires a willingness to recognize, verbalize, and remember feelings in you that are currently being expressed by someone else. Emotional closeness is impossible without the capacity to empathize. Hence, interpersonal relationships will feel empty and unfulfilling to the adult who was emotionally abandoned.

Psychotherapy can be extremely helpful in teaching people how to become acquainted with what they are feeling and to express their feelings in words, not actions. The most effective treatment approach allows adequate time for the client and therapist to form a trusting relationship. Within this context, they can begin to sort out and understand their hidden emotions and start to experience more rewarding relationships with others.

In today's age of "managed care," finding a healthcare organization that will cover the costs of intensive individual therapy is difficult. Managed Care is a form of corporatized healthcare. The welfare of stockholders comes first, before the welfare of healthcare recipients. Like other Western corporations, Managed Care is focused on quick fixes and immediate outcomes. But, like other habits that have been developed over a lifetime, an emotional deficit does not change easily or quickly.

Contrary to Managed Care's "one size fits all approach," a lifetime of being alienated from one's emotions cannot be repaired in a six or ten session therapy model. In short, a determination to improve the quality of your life is necessary to overcome a childhood of emotional abandonment.