

Chapter 1

Your Emotionally Immature Parent

What It's Like to Be Involved with Them and How They Got to Be That Way

Emotionally immature (EI) parents are both frustrating and demoralizing. It's hard to love an emotionally blocked parent who expects honor and special treatment but tries to control and dismiss you at the same time.

A relationship with an EI parent is characterized by not getting your emotional needs met. They have little interest in experiencing *emotional intimacy* in which two people come to know and understand each other at a deep level. This mutual sharing of deepest feelings creates a satisfying, deep bond that makes the participants precious to each other, but this is not something EI parents feel comfortable doing.

Sometimes you glimpse a fleeting desire in them for real connection, and this keeps you reaching out to them. Unfortunately, the more you reach out, the further they recede, wary of real intimacy. It's like being in a dance with someone who is moving away from you in perfect synchrony to your efforts to get close. Their demands for attention, coupled with wariness about intimacy, create a push-me, pull-me relationship that leaves you unsatisfied and emotionally lonely. You care about your parent, but you can't get close enough to have a real relationship.

Once you understand them, however, your experiences will make perfect sense to you—and so will your emotional loneliness. By comprehending the EI psyche, you will be able to deal with your EI parents—or

any emotionally immature person (EIP)—in ways that free you from their *emotional coercions* and create a more genuine relationship based on knowing what you can and can't expect from them.

In this chapter, we'll explore what it's like to be intimately involved with such emotionally ungiving parents. You'll learn about the *emotionally immature relationship system* (EIRS) they use as a substitute for love, and you'll get to see how EI parents probably got to be the way they are.

As part of your discovery process, it's a good idea to keep a journal about what you learn as you go along. Throughout this book, you'll find exercises to help you process what you read about. As you record your self-discoveries—hopefully in a new journal especially for this purpose—you'll be giving yourself vital emotional support and validation, two things that EI parents have in short supply.

The writing process will help you finally put words on previously elusive and undefined experiences. Be sure to take notes on the feelings, memories, and insights that arise as you read. These entries can be about your parents or any EIP you have known. As you record your experiences and realizations, leave a couple of blank lines after each entry for later insights. It will be invaluable to look back later and see where you began. In that spirit, let's look at how you came to be reading this book.

Exercise: Why You Picked Up This Book

Take a moment to think about what attracted you to this book. In your journal—or just on some paper for now—write down what intrigued you when you saw the title. What did you hope you would find out and about whom? How has this person made you feel? How do you wish your relationship with this person were different? If this person is no longer living, how do you wish your relationship could've been?

Now let's examine what it is like to be in a relationship with an EI parent or other EIP and how they make you feel. This can stir up old issues, so—as in any self-discovery process—please be sure to seek out a psychotherapist for extra help and support as needed.

What It's Like Being Involved with Them

EI parents and other EIPs have a recognizable interpersonal style. The following ten experiences describe what to expect in a relationship with them.

1. You Feel Emotionally Lonely Around Them

Growing up with EI parents fosters *emotional loneliness*. Although your parent may have been physically present, emotionally you may have felt left on your own. Although you may feel a family bond to your EI parent, that's very different from an emotionally secure parent-child relationship.

EI parents like to tell their children what to do, but they are uncomfortable with emotional nurturing. EI parents may take good care of you when you're sick, but they don't know what to do with hurt feelings or broken hearts. As a result, they may seem artificial and awkward when trying to soothe a distressed child.

2. Interactions Feel One-Sided and Frustrating

EI parents' self-absorption and limited empathy make interactions with them feel one-sided. It's as if they're imprisoned in their own self-involvement. When you try to share something important to you, they're likely to talk over you, change the subject, start talking about themselves, or dismiss what you're saying. Children of EI parents often know a great deal more about their parents' issues than the parents know about theirs.

Although EI parents require your attention when they're upset, they rarely offer listening or empathy when you're distressed. Instead of sitting with you and letting you get it all out, EI parents typically offer superficial solutions, tell you not to worry, or even get irritated with you for being upset. Their heart feels closed, like there's no place you can go inside them for compassion or comfort.

3. You Feel Coerced and Trapped

EI parents insist you put them first and let them run the show. To this end, they coerce you with shame, guilt, or fear until you do what they want. They can flare into blame and anger if you don't toe the line.

Many people use the word *manipulation* for these kinds of emotional coercions, but I think that word is misleading. These behaviors are more like survival instincts. They do whatever's necessary to feel more in control and protected in the moment, oblivious to what it might cost you.

You can also feel trapped by their superficial style of relating. Because EI parents relate in a superficial, egocentric way, talking with them is often boring. They stick to conversation topics they feel safe with, which quickly become stagnant and repetitious.

4. They Come First, and You Are Secondary

EI parents are extremely self-referential, meaning that everything is always about them. They expect you to accept second place when it comes to their needs. They elevate their own interests to the point that yours feel downgraded. They're not looking for an equal relationship. They want blind allegiance to their need to be considered first.

Without a parent willing to give your emotional needs a high priority, it can leave you feeling insecure. Wondering if a parent will think of you or have your back can make you vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and depression. These are reasonable reactions to a childhood environment in which you couldn't trust a parent to notice your needs or protect you from things that overwhelmed you.

5. They Won't Be Emotionally Intimate or Vulnerable with You

Although they're highly reactive emotionally, EI parents actually avoid their deeper feelings (McCullough et al. 2003). They fear being emotionally exposed and often hide behind a defensive exterior. They even avoid tenderness toward their children because this might make them too

vulnerable. They also worry that showing love might undermine their power as parents because power is all they think they've got.

Even though EI parents hide their vulnerable feelings, they can show plenty of intense emotion when they fight with their partner, complain about their problems, blow off steam, or fly into a fury with their kids. When upset, they don't look like they are at all afraid of what they feel. However, these one-sided eruptions of emotion are merely releases of emotional pressures. That's not the same thing as a willingness to be open to real emotional connection.

For this reason, comforting them is hard to do. They want you to feel how upset they are, but they resist the intimacy of real comforting. If you try to make them feel better, they may stiff-arm you away. This poor *receptive capacity* (McCullough 1997) prevents them from taking in any comfort and connection you try to offer.

6. They Communicate Through Emotional Contagion

Instead of talking about their feelings, EI people express themselves nonverbally through *emotional contagion* (Hatfield, Rapson, and Le 2009), coming across your boundaries and getting you as upset as they are. In family systems theory, this absence of healthy boundaries is called *emotional fusion* (Bowen 1985), while in structural family therapy it is called *enmeshment* (Minuchin 1974). This is the process by which EI family members get absorbed into each other's emotions and psychological issues.

Like small children, EI parents want you to intuit what they feel without their saying anything. They feel hurt and angry when you don't guess their needs, expecting you to know what they want. If you protest that they didn't tell you what they wanted, their reaction is, "If you really loved me, you would've known." They expect you to stay constantly attuned to them. It's legitimate for a baby or small child to expect such attention from their parent, but not for a parent to expect that from their child.

7. They Don't Respect Your Boundaries or Individuality

EI parents don't really understand the point of boundaries. They think boundaries imply rejection, meaning you don't care enough about them to give them free access to your life. This is why they act incredulous, offended, or hurt if you ask them to respect your privacy. They feel loved only when you let them interrupt you any time. EI parents seek dominant and privileged roles in which they don't have to respect others' boundaries.

EI parents also don't respect your individuality because they don't see the need for it. Family and roles are sacrosanct to them, and they don't understand why you should want space or an individual identity apart from them. They don't understand why you can't just be like them, think like them, and have the same beliefs and values. You are their child and, therefore, belong to them. Even when you're grown, they expect you to remain their compliant child or—if you insist on your own life—at least always follow their advice.

8. You Do the Emotional Work in the Relationship

Emotional work (Fraad 2008) is the effort you make to emotionally adapt to other people's needs. Emotional work can be easy—such as being polite and pleasant—or deeply complicated, such as trying hard to say the right thing to your distraught teenager. Emotional work is comprised of empathy, common sense, awareness of motives, and anticipating how someone is likely to respond to your actions.

When things go wrong in a relationship, the need for emotional work skyrockets. Apologizing, seeking reconciliation, and making amends are among the strenuous emotional labors that sustain healthy long-term relationships. But because EI parents lack interest in relationship repairs, reconnection efforts may fall to you.

Instead of amends or apologies, EI parents often make things worse by projecting blame, accusing others, and disowning responsibility for their

behavior. In a situation where it would seem easier just to go ahead and apologize, EI parents can be adamant that it was something you did—or failed to do—that warranted their hurtful behavior. If only you had known better and done what they asked, this problem never would've occurred.

9. You Lose Your Emotional Autonomy and Mental Freedom

Because EI parents see you as an extension of themselves, they disregard your inner world of thoughts and feelings. Instead, they claim the sole right to judge your feelings as either sensible or unwarranted. They don't respect your *emotional autonomy*, your freedom and right to have your own feelings.

Because your thoughts should reflect theirs, they react with shock and disapproval if you have ideas that offend them. You are not free to consider certain things even in the privacy of your own mind. ("Don't even think about it!") Your thoughts and feelings are filtered through their comfort level as either *good* or *bad*.

10. They Can Be Killjoys and Even Sadistic

EI parents can be awful killjoys, both to their children and to other people. They rarely resonate with others' feelings, so they don't take pleasure in other people's happiness. Instead of enjoying their child's accomplishments, EI parents can react in ways that take the shine off the child's pride. They also are famous for deflating their children's dreams by reminding them about depressing realities of adult life.

For instance, as a teenager, Martin proudly told his father that he had made fifty dollars on his first music gig. His father's immediate reaction was to point out that nobody can support a family on that kind of wage. Lacking empathy, his father completely missed the emotional point.

Sadism goes beyond being a killjoy and takes actual pleasure in inflicting pain, humiliation, or forced restraint on a living being. Sadism is also a way of claiming the role as the most powerful and important person in the relationship. Sadistic EI parents enjoy making their child suffer,

whether by physical or psychological means. Physical abuse is obviously sadistic, but hidden sadism is often expressed in “teasing” and “joking around.”

For instance, when Emily introduced her fiancé to her family, her physically abusive father “joked” that the young man should throw her out if she ever got too mouthy. Her mother and sisters chimed in to “tease” Emily, and they laughed at Emily’s excruciating embarrassment.

Sadistic parents like it when their child feels powerless. They secretly enjoy making their children feel desperate by giving them extreme physical punishments, refusing to interact with them for long periods of time, handing down unfathomably long restrictions, or making them feel trapped. For instance, when Bruce was a little boy, his father would squeeze him tightly on his lap and refuse to let him down. If Bruce started to squirm or cry, his father would send him to his room and beat him with a belt. Later his father would apologize but explain that Bruce brought it on himself by being so “bad.”

In the next section, we’ll look at how EI parents affect other people’s emotions and self-worth. Their relational style has an immediate subconscious impact on your emotions and self-esteem. How they react to you can make you feel bad or good about yourself, depending on whether they want to control you or get you on their side.

The Emotionally Immature Relationship System (EIRS)

Emotionally immature people don’t regulate their self-esteem and emotional stability well on their own. They need others to keep them on an even keel by treating them just so. To accomplish this, they act in ways that make other people feel responsible for keeping them happy. They do this through complex, extremely subtle cues that influence others to feel certain ways. I call this the *emotionally immature relationship system* (EIRS).

This EIRS draws you into being more attentive to the EI parent’s emotional state than to your own self. Under the influence of this relationship system, you attune to the EI parent’s emotional needs instead of listening

to what your instincts are telling you. It feels imperative to pacify the EI parent's moods at all costs. You find yourself putting their needs and feelings above your own emotional health. This unhealthy overconcern with keeping them calm focuses you on them and their reactions, to the point where you can become obsessed with the status of their moods. Once this happens, they have done an *emotional takeover* on you. An emotional takeover is when their emotional state has become the center of your attention.

In the early stages of human life, the EIRS is normal. The EIRS is a necessary emotional arrangement between babies and their caretakers. To survive and grow, babies require loving adults to be attuned to their needs and soothe them when they're upset. A baby's cries distress normal parents to the point where they will do anything to calm their child. With sensitive parents, the child's distress instantly becomes the parents' distress, and they will be just as concerned about the child's emotional state as the child's physical comfort (Ainsworth, Bell, and Strayton 1974; Schore 2012). This crucial emotional assistance is critical during infancy and toddlerhood.

With normal children, the need for constant engagement and soothing lessens as they mature. But for EI parents, their emotional self-regulation didn't fully develop as they grew up. Unable to modulate their own emotions and disappointments, they still expect others to make them feel better immediately by knowing just how they want to be treated. If they aren't made the priority, they threaten to fall apart. Like little children, they need a lot of attention, compliance, and positive feedback to keep them stable. Unlike children, however, they don't grow from the attention. Their early emotional wounds and deprivations promote psychological defenses that keep them stuck in the same old defensive patterns no matter how much nurturing they get.

How Their EIRS Affects You

You probably won't notice when you first are getting caught up in someone's EIRS. The emotional contagion (Hatfield, Rapson, and Le 2009) in this interpersonal system is so instantly compelling, you are in it before you

know it. That's why understanding their relationship pressure up front is so important for protecting your boundaries, emotional autonomy, and sense of self-worth. You have to be alert and prepared in order for it not to take you over.

You Feel Responsible for Their Feelings

Think of the EIRS as a kind of spell they put on you, convincing you that *their* happiness is *your* responsibility. You likewise are held accountable for their anger and bad moods, as though you should've prevented their discomfort in the first place.

When EIPs and EI parents get upset, their distress worms its way into your mind and takes center stage. You worry obsessively about how to make things right with them, and you can't get what they said or did out of your mind. Even while you are doing other things or perhaps trying to sleep at night, their discomfort hovers over you, prompting constant thoughts like, *What did I do wrong? What can I do to make it better?* or *Have I done enough to help them?*

As you are infiltrated by their unhappiness, you feel like it's up to you to make everything all right. Their EIRS has pulled you into their experience to the point that their pain is your pain. You lose sight of your own feelings and needs. Once their EIRS takes you over emotionally, their problem feels like *your* problem, even if rationally you know better.

————— **John's Story** —————

John's elderly mother lived in a nice retirement community, but she frequently called him with problems that the facility's staff could easily fix. She always sounded so urgent that John felt he had to drop everything and hurry over there to help. Actually, she didn't need a handyman; she just needed to know she could have access to her son at any time. Even though John knew his mother wasn't as desperate as she seemed, he found himself unable to rest when she sounded upset.