

Another Beautiful Life

Emotional Childhood + Emotional Adulthood

Emotional childhood occurs when grown adults have not matured past childhood in terms of managing their emotions. This means they react to their emotions, act out, or avoid emotions rather than taking full responsibility and choosing thoughts that will create more desirable and appropriate emotions. In short, emotional childhood is not taking responsibility for how you feel.

We call ourselves adults, but most of us are still functioning as emotional children. It's not something we do on purpose—most of our parents still function as emotional children, perpetuating the cycle. One of the most rewarding things I can experience as a coach is to watch a client grow and become an emotional adult, fully empowered and responsible for their own life.

We are responsible for how we feel in every moment. We are in charge of how we think, and we are in charge of how we feel. When we are functioning as emotional children, we are blaming other people for how we feel, how we act, and for the results we get in our life.

WHY IT'S A COMMON PROBLEM -

There is no class offered in college or high school that teaches us how to be emotional adults. The truth is, however, that once we have reached adulthood, our brains are developed enough to be able to understand what we are thinking. We are capable of reflecting on our thoughts, and therefore we can decide what to think and what to feel in any given moment, no matter what anyone else does in our lives.

As children, we don't have this capacity. In fact, we think that everything going on in our lives is what causes our feelings, and this assumption is only perpetuated by how we are raised. Adults constantly make comments to children such as "Sally, you really hurt that little girl's feelings. You need to say you are sorry for hurting her feelings" or "Did it hurt your feelings when that boy said those mean words to you?" We teach children at a young age that other people are responsible for how we feel, and it becomes so ingrained in us that we don't even question it or recognize how disempowering it is.

While children don't have the capacity to make this distinction, many people continue to function this way as adults. Not only is this a debilitating way to live, but it also locks you in a space of blame. We blame the government, the economy, our bosses, other people, ex-husbands, our mothers, our fathers, and our childhood. We blame people not only for how we feel, but for the actions we take and the results we get in our lives.

The only way to achieve emotional maturity is through self responsibility.

Emotional adulthood means:

- Taking responsibility for our pain and also for our joy.
- Not expecting other people to "make" us happy.
- Not expecting others to "make" us feel secure.
- Appreciating that we are the only ones who can hurt our feelings and that we do so with our own thoughts.

Taking full responsibility for every single thing we feel, no matter what someone else does or doesn't do, is no small feat. For most people, it's a huge challenge, but it's worthwhile when we are able to do so. Let's look at why. Many people feel like victims, as if they are at the mercy of other people in their lives. For example, a single mother who is trying to raise a child with her ex-husband might believe that her ex is making her feel frustrated, sad, or disappointed. However, as an adult, she's responsible for everything she feels can change her perspective. Furthermore, when she blames her ex-husband for the way she's feeling, it's usually a feeling that fuels an action she doesn't want to be taking or one she may later regret.

Emotional adulthood behaviors occur when we take responsibility for how we feel and make choices for how we want to feel. When we do this, we end up so much more empowered and get to be the people we truly want to be instead of existing in this default emotional childhood space. Rather than acting like a child out of control, we can allow ourselves to feel our feelings without acting out to avoid, distract, or blame others. From a clean place, we take the kind of action that produces the results we really want.

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THE EFFECT ON RELATIONSHIPS

Allison gives her husband power over the way she feels. She believes he's responsible for making her happy and that it's usually his fault when she is frustrated or sad. She believes that the things he does cause emotions in her. Because she's in that space, she's constantly trying to control him. She regularly tells him what to do and how to do it, and then she gets mad when he doesn't follow through on her requests. Her emotions are all over the place because she's trying to control his actions. He's the pawn on her emotional chessboard.

Allison is in an extremely disempowered place, and it's frustrating because as much as she tries, she cannot control her husband all the time. Furthermore, he doesn't like it when she tries. Sometimes in a situation like this, a therapist might suggest that Allison and her husband should be more open about how to meet each other's needs. But focusing on someone else's needs instead of your own is often the precise obstacle one faces when stuck in emotional childhood.

If you tell your husband, "Here are my needs, and you need to meet them," you are like a dependent child who needs someone else to make you happy. If he, in turn, tells you what he needs you to do to make him happy, you have both put your happiness in each other's hands, which is not a good place to be. Most people can't even make themselves happy, never mind someone else. Whether they realize it or not, most people don't want to spend all their time and energy trying to make others happy because they're trying to manage their own emotional life. Delegating that responsibility to someone you love can affect the relationship in a very deep and painful way.

Instead, the best relationships happen when two people come together, agree to meet their own needs first, and then meet in the middle to enjoy their time together. If one person is having a hard time managing their emotional life, it's unreasonable to expect the other person to be able to do so for them. Emotional adults are responsible for their own happiness, as well as their own unhappiness. They're responsible when their feelings get hurt, and they're responsible for their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

WORK IT OUT

Fill out the Taking Responsibility For Your Emotions worksheet