



WHEN
PARENTS
HAVE

THIRD EDITION

PROBLEMS

A Book for Teens and Older Children Who Have a Disturbed or Difficult Parent

SUSAN B. MILLER, Ph.D.

WHEN PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS



You

You can stand behind the elephant and push till your head
explodes
but the elephant is rocksolid in his position.
You can light your hair on fire and fly off a tower
or twist yourself into a tuba and blare "I AM SORRY"
for everything.
Apology is required 24-7,
for one foot placed before another
for blowing your nose, hair combed too high,
being late, or early, for tacos with friends.
How dare you? Hard words stick to your skin. Sensitive,
selfish, liar, bitch.

You cannot dig the hole deep enough
to hide yourself,
you who have refused to rescue, winced at worship.
What worth have you in this scheme of things?
Dig
Dig deeper
You have not even begun.

Or
sigh deeply
abandon effort
float up for air.
Feel the wind caress your hair
as if it just happens to fancy you,
sense the sunshine's delight in drizzling love letters across
your back.
Take a selfie with a friend.
Can you believe that nothing is wrong?
Earth and breath are your birthright
I kid you not.

Susan B. Miller

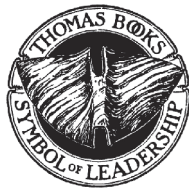
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**A Book for Teens and Older Children
Who Have a Disturbed or Difficult Parent**

By

SUSAN B. MILLER, PH.D.



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In memory of my aunt, Rose M. Wovell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan B. Miller is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She works with young people and adults in psychotherapy and also spends time writing fiction and non-fiction. She is the author of a novel, *Indigo Rose* (Bantam Dell, 2004) and four books on psychology: *The Shame Experience* (The Analytic Press, 1985), *Shame in Context* (The Analytic Press, 1996), *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (The Analytic Press, 2004), and *Emotions of Menace and Enchantment: Disgust, Horror, Awe, and Fascination* (Routledge, 2018). Favorite pastimes include painting, natural areas stewardship, and time spent with kids and animals.

PREFACE

In writing the third edition of this book, I have made changes throughout in order to update and refine my ideas. I have also added two chapters. The first addresses parents who tell lies. Dishonest parents are motivated in a number of different ways, but all dishonest parents pose special problems for their children. The second chapter I have added discusses the idea that all parents have problems some of the time. In this chapter, I help young people look at the challenges posed by recognizing that all parents, even excellent ones, have shortcomings. Recognizing and accepting a parent's shortcomings is a difficult part of normal development. I try to help readers differentiate between the ordinary shortcomings that all parents have and more serious problems in parenting.

Many books have been written for adults who grew up coping with troubled parents. Often the adults who read these books say, *I wish someone had told me that when I was a kid; it might have helped me so much.* Unfortunately, not much has been written for the kids who are coping in the present with difficult or troubled parents. In part, that's because young people may be hesitant to read books about tough subjects, so publishers hesitate to invest money in publishing them. It's also because kids sometimes get their books from parents and troubled parents may be slow to recognize their own problems or are reluctant to encourage their kids to read books about living with those problems.

It's also true that young people with troubled parents sometimes feel funny about recognizing their parents' shortcomings. They may feel even more uncomfortable about bringing home a book that talks about troubled mothers and fathers, or keeping a book like that in a school locker. Some kids or teens would feel guilty or disloyal reading such a book, even though it's a smart, sensible thing to do and it isn't something that will hurt their parents. So there are lots of reasons few books have been written for young people who have parents who are ill, alcoholic, abusive, or troubled in some other way.

There are also some very good reasons to write such a book and to encourage young people to read it. Difficult childhoods often lead to unnecessary pain and struggle later in life. This book is written out of the belief

that intelligent kids can use sound ideas to improve their lives, either on their own or with the help of healthy adults. In the chapters ahead, I try to offer help in sorting out whether a difficult situation may be a result of a parent's problems.

My goal isn't to belittle or undermine your parents or to blame them for things that are your responsibility. My aim is to be realistic about the sources of a problem. If a parent's difficulties is one of those sources, you may benefit from some help dealing with your situation. I try to give you an idea of the kinds of problems or challenges your parent's troubles can cause for you. I also offer you ideas on how to deal constructively with your parent's problems so that you can keep on track with your own development.

You may agree with some of my ideas and disagree with others. Some you will find useful and others may not be of value to you because they do not relate to your situation. Take what is of use to you and leave the rest. I hope that reading the book and considering the ideas presented will help you take some steps along a road worth traveling.

S.B.M.

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Many people were helpful to me during the writing of this book. I would especially like to thank my father for the support he has given me for my writing, over many years, even when little success was coming my way. My thanks also to my sisters, Lisa Sablosky and Laura Eligator, who are my constants. My aunt, Rose M. Wovell, has died since the publication of the first edition. She was a special source of love and wisdom, and a person of courage to whom this book is dedicated. I am grateful for the support and editorial help of friends during the writing of the third edition of this book. These friends include but are not limited to Judy Gray, Julia Davies, Ann Pearlman, Nancy and Irv Leon, Rose and Moses Everett, and Judith Saltzman.

The idea for this book came from my work with a bright young woman who was finding it hard to make sense of her life with a troubled parent. As I began to think about writing about this topic, many other young and older people came into my thoughts, all of whom had told me their stories of growing up. My thanks to them for sharing portions of their lives with me. Finally, my thanks to Charles C Thomas Publisher, for their willingness to publish this book on a difficult topic and their responsiveness throughout the process. Special thanks to Michael Thomas for reaching out to me regarding a third edition of this book and supporting the process.

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WHEN PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS



Chapter 1

GETTING STARTED

I've written this book for kids whose parents have problems. Of course, all parents at times have problems, but some parents have problems that are serious and lasting, which makes them poor parents a lot of the time. This book is especially for kids whose parents have major, lasting problems. If you are one of these kids—whether a younger child, a teenager, or even a young adult—you have special challenges in growing up since your parents often are unable to help you; sometimes they stand smack in your way. I've tried to write this book in plain language so it will be within reach of kids not older than ten or eleven, but the ideas presented hold true for people of all ages.

Troubled parents are not all the same. Some parents are abusive or neglectful; their kids may find them cruel or uncaring. Some parents suffer a great deal because of a mental illness or a painful loss or a difficult set of experiences they've not been able to overcome; their children may pity them and feel helpless about their suffering. Other parents have dangerous habits such as drug or alcohol abuse, shoplifting, lying, or gambling; or they do distressing things such as carrying on extramarital affairs. You wish they'd stop what they're doing, but they don't, no matter how much they hurt the people around them. I will look at the special challenges that come with each of these situations.

You may be wondering why you should read a book like this one. Thinking about parents' problems isn't pleasant. Many kids work hard to believe their parents have no serious problems, even when the evidence points in the other direction. You may love your parents very much, or want to love them, and feel it's not right to think of them as troubled. But, unless you're an ostrich, it's best not to stick your head

in the sand (actually, real ostriches don't do that!). Seeing what's true—even if that truth isn't pretty—helps you to cope better with the real situation you're in. Seeing an unpleasant truth is never a reason to feel guilty. Recognizing what's there doesn't make you disloyal or unkind; it doesn't mean you're trying to hurt or shame your parent. You're not creating the problem; you're just seeing it, which is better than closing your eyes and your mind.

Another approach kids may take to their parents' problems is to try to live as if their parents mean nothing at all to them and as if they need no parents. That's an understandable strategy if your parent causes you pain and difficulty, but it has its limitations. All young people need parenting. Nature designed us that way. We grow up gradually, over many years, and we need a great deal of help along the way. That help can come from people other than our parents, but it is natural that we look first to our parents for support and advice.

Depending on the particular parent you have, some parts of this book may be more meaningful to you than others. For example, if you have an overanxious parent who is generally kind and attentive, the part of the book about mistreatment may not speak to you as much as other parts will. If you have an abusive parent who terrorizes you or your brothers or sisters, the parts of the book about feeling sad about your parent's suffering may not be what you need, since you may feel much more angry than sad. On the other hand, some kids with abusive parents do feel sad for their parents, and also angry. If some of the sections don't seem to apply to you, you can skip them or you may want to read them anyway. Maybe they will help you better understand a friend.

You might wonder why I got interested in writing this book. One reason is that I am a psychologist and my work has given me many opportunities to see how often kids with troubled parents can make good use of a little advice and a bit of support. I'd like to offer those things to more young people through this book. A second reason is that I myself was one of the many kids who grew up having to cope with a troubled parent. I know how confusing it can be and how much a young person can use some help sorting things out. Kids with troubled parents have strengths they can use to cope with their situation. I'm hoping this book can help you make fuller use of your strengths.

I want to say a bit more about the particular kinds of problems parents can have. Sometimes a parent's problems show up most clear-

ly as behaviors a child wishes the parent would stop, but the parent doesn't stop. For example, your mother drinks too much and gets nasty or sexually inappropriate when she's drinking. Or your father gambles and wastes the family's money and tells lies about his behavior. Because of his gambling, there's not enough money for rent, school expenses or good food. Or maybe your father or mother has affairs, making for lots of tension between the two adults on whom you rely. Often they seem to hate each other and you may wish (but fear) that they would just divorce. Or your mother uses drugs and may be spaced-out or doing irresponsible, frightening things like feeding your baby sister food that's not good for her or driving recklessly; maybe she gets arrested or she makes you angry by lying in bed all day.

Parents' problems can come in less obvious, more subtle forms as well. Some parents are always unhappy and they complain to their children about how miserable they are. Kids worry that their mother or father might go on feeling sad forever or might even commit suicide. Some parents feel very anxious and jittery, or they can't go out of the house without getting panicky. And some parents have a mental illness so they can't function at all normally; they have odd experiences, like hallucinations, that their kids don't understand; or they talk a mile a minute about crazy-sounding things and stay up all night; or they're convinced against all reason that the neighbors are trying to poison them. A mentally ill parent may have too much on his mind or too much wrong with his mind to take care of you. He may neglect you entirely or confuse your needs with his own or your brother's, or he may attend to you but give you bad advice that's due to his mixed-up thinking. For example, a paranoid parent may tell you to wear a disguise if you have to go to the neighbor's to borrow the lawn mower, or to watch out for the woman that lives in the green house because she's trying to kill your family, or to listen in on your thoughts. Or a manic parent may insist you go out shopping with him at four in the morning. Or he might want to spend hours showing you sexy pictures on the Internet and think that's incredibly funny and fun but then snap at you if you're not amused.

Some troubled parents have no obvious illness, but yet something seems to be wrong with them. They may get along poorly with other adults. For example, your mother may get into arguments and she is rude to people so that you feel nervous and embarrassed when you're

out in public with her. She may blow up at a waitress over some tiny thing or insult your schoolteacher. Some parents show their problems by being overly critical of others. They get down on everyone around them; or they may pick one child or adult on whom to harp, for no good reason; they may choose one person to fault today, and someone else tomorrow. Other troubled parents are overprotective and overanxious, or they are huge perfectionists who cannot relax and can't let you relax. They're nice enough but you don't feel very good around them.

You may feel confused about whether the problems you experience at home are yours or your parent's. That distinction can be hard to make, especially because both you and your parent may be making a contribution. Nevertheless, it can be valuable to try to sort it out, especially if you are the kind of person who tends to take blame for everything that goes wrong.

Let me give you a few guidelines that can help you get a better perspective on whether you have a troubled parent. These guidelines focus less on extreme behaviors (such as drug abuse or physical mistreatment) than on how your parent feels about you and acts toward you. They concern the relationship between you and your parent. Let's start with the idea that all people, whatever their age, have their own unique feelings and thoughts and their own needs and wishes. Each person has the right to expect that her feelings, thoughts, needs, and wishes will be treated with respect and taken into consideration by the people around her, especially by the adults who are there to care for her. Having your feelings and needs respected and considered does not mean that you'll always get what you want or that your needs will be put above everyone else's. It does mean that your parents will have an interest in knowing what your feelings and needs are and that they will not ignore or ridicule them.

One clear sign that a parent has serious problems is when the parent cannot look at the needs and wishes, feelings and thoughts of his or her child. The "not looking" may take a variety of forms. The parent may be too preoccupied with himself or caught up in the symptoms of his mental illness or addiction to notice or care. Or she may resent that her child's needs and feelings are different from her own, so she ridicules the child. Or he may pay close attention to the child but come up with a very distorted view of the child's inner self, so that the child does not even recognize herself in the picture her parent