

Dealing with an Emotionally Detached Parent

Q: My father, Jack, has always been cold and distant. Now, I'm an adult, and we don't talk at all.

I know he had a difficult childhood. His career didn't go exactly the way he wanted either. I'm trying to understand him better.

Why is he so detached and distant?

A: Many adults and children have to deal with emotionally detached parents. It's actually more common than many people realize. Unfortunately, statistics can't diminish the pain you feel, but it's important to remember you're not alone and didn't cause this.

First, it's important to understand that a difficult childhood can leave behind deep emotional and psychological scars.

Your father may be dealing with a lot of pain from his early years. This can cause him to pull away from other relationships and avoid showing love. He may have grown up in a household where love was seen as a defect and vulnerability.

Second, you mentioned that his career hasn't been a success. This can also create emotional scars.

Your father may also have other psychological issues that prevent him from being able to express love.

I know this may be difficult to hear, but your father may actually deserve sympathy. If the wounds of his childhood are deep enough, he may have never recovered. This could explain why he's so distant today.

It's good that you're trying to understand him and want to work through this.

Q: This explains some things, but he's not just distant. He's also very stubborn and angry all the time.

My father sometimes acts like he's a child. If he doesn't get his way, he'll make it known that he's upset by screaming and throwing things.

Why is he like this?

A: Unfortunately, emotionally detached parents tend to have several issues going on at the same time. It's common to also see them being stubborn, rigid, and angry.

One of the issues is that your father is emotionally

immature. This is why he has difficulty showing his love and expressing it. In addition, his lack of maturity can make him look like a child.

There are several common symptoms that psychologists note among those who are emotionally detached and distant. They're often rigid and aggressive. They're unable to tolerate any type of stress and react violently to it. They have outbursts over small things.

In addition, they may have multiple relationships and have a hard time staying loyal to anyone.

What you're seeing is actually a frequent occurrence among emotionally detached parents.

Q: I'm wondering if it's okay to stay away from my father. He's a very difficult person. He doesn't care about me, my husband, or the kids. I used to invite him to everything, and he would just ignore me. I've spent years sending invitations and calling him.

He never wants to attend anything for his grandkids, and he doesn't seem to care even if they're sick.

He's gotten worse over the years. He's stopped answering the phone and ignores messages.

I'm tired of putting in an effort all the time to keep him in the loop. I'm tired of always being the one to reach out to him. I'm tired of begging for him to love us. He never seems to care or notice how hard I try.

I'm ready to give up. I've stopped communicating with him and feel better.

Is it okay to stop making an effort?

A: This isn't an easy situation for you or your family. It's clear that you've tried very hard to keep your father involved in your life. Despite your efforts, he hasn't responded the way you want, and you're hurt.

Although expert opinions vary, most psychologists recommend that you stop communicating with those who create ongoing pain in your life.

You should never have to beg another person to love you. It doesn't matter if it's your father or another significant family member. Begging isn't a normal part of love.

It's good that you realize your father isn't going to respond to your begging or wishes. Unfortunately, he may never be ready to change. This is a painful truth that many adult children have to cope with as they realize their parents can't or won't change.

You've clearly made an effort and have spent years trying to make him care.

It's okay to stop communicating with someone who doesn't return your love. You shouldn't feel guilty or sad about this. You've tried very hard to make things easier for your father by being the one to invite him.

Every time you've reached out to him and have been ignored, you've added to your own emotional pain. It's important to create boundaries and make it clear that you're done accepting this kind of treatment.

It appears that you've made the first step forward by stopping communication with him.

Q: I feel so much lighter and happier without having to constantly reach out to him. Unfortunately, other members of my family don't seem to get it. They think I should keep trying to talk to him and trying to invite him to things. I don't want to do this anymore. I'm tired of being nothing in his eyes.

How can I convince my other family members that this is a good choice for me? ***How can I make them stop trying to force us to have a relationship he doesn't want?***

A: Your other family members may think they're helping. It sounds like they're concerned about both you and your father. They may not understand the extent of his emotional detachment. They may also think that he'll change if you continue to contact him.

You may need to sit down with them and explain to them how much effort you've put in to trying to communicate with your father. This will help them understand how much you're hurting and how painful it is for you to be ignored.

Explain to your family that your father isn't going to change.

He's been emotionally detached his entire life and an extra invitation or phone call won't matter in this case.

Perhaps you also need to set boundaries with your family. They need to understand you're an adult with a family of your own who can't spend her entire life chasing her father's affection.

Q: I've always wondered if therapy would help my father. He hates doctors. He hates pills. He won't even take an over-the-counter pill for a serious cold.

I've tried to get him to go to a therapist in the past. He won't listen and says I'm the crazy one for suggesting it. ***What can I do?***

A: It's difficult to convince an emotionally detached parent that they need help from an outside source. You've mentioned that your father is also stubborn. The combination of his stubbornness with his detachment isn't easy to overcome.

Your father may not see anything wrong with his behavior.

However, you and many others clearly see there's an issue. Nevertheless, you can't force your father to get help or therapy.

Even if you were able to convince him to try it, he would continue to resist change. An emotionally detached parent

rarely sees his or her own faults and can't understand the benefits of therapy.

Although your father may not be willing to go to therapy, you may benefit from it.

Q: Do I really need therapy after dealing with my father all of these years?

A: Therapy is an option for you. It's not the only choice you can make in this situation. However, you may see multiple benefits from it.

A therapist may help you understand your father and his psychological issues on a deeper level. They can also help you create coping strategies and boundaries. Your father's distance and coldness can affect several aspects of your life.

Q: After all these years of dealing with my dad, I'm worried about the type of parent I'm becoming.

Instead of being emotionally detached, I'm scared of letting my kids out of my sight. I worry constantly about how I'm

parenting them and if I love them enough. I've always wanted to be the exact opposite of my father.

How can I ensure I don't turn out like my father?

A: You've already taken the first step by deciding you want to be different. You may share genetic material with your father, but you're not his clone. ***You're not automatically doomed to repeat his mistakes.***

The fact that you're aware of his issues is significant. It means you don't want to be like him and are willing to make an effort to change.

Therapy, meditation, mindful practices, and other methods can help you be a better parent. You can also study books, take classes, and use other techniques to learn new parenting strategies.

It sounds like you're already on a path to be a different parent than your father.

Q: One of the things I worry about is how the kids react to not having their grandfather around. It's hard for them to

hear that grandpa didn't respond to another invitation or call. They get upset because they see other kids have their grandparents around. I can't continue to make excuses for him. They're getting older, and they're smart enough to understand he doesn't seem to care.

What can I do to protect them from my dad?

A: First, if your children are old enough, it's time to have a serious conversation about your father and his parenting style.

Children don't automatically know what an emotionally detached person is like.

Explain to them that your father is an emotionally detached parent, so he's also an emotionally detached grandparent.

Bring up that he's had a hard life and difficult childhood. Your children may be old enough to understand that a difficult childhood can shape a person's entire life. Point out the differences between their upbringing and his.

It's tempting to try to protect them from your father, but hiding the truth about him will only hurt them more. Your other family members may mention something about him that leaves them confused.

You want to be the one that explains things to them and answers their questions.

Since you've decided to stop communicating with your father, your children need to know this. They shouldn't expect grandpa to show up at their events or parties. This may be a difficult transition for them.

In the past, they still had hope that grandpa would come and see them. Your conversation should make it clear this won't be happening. However, this will build a healthier set of expectations for them.

Q: I also struggle explaining my dad to my husband. His father is the opposite and very involved.

His father calls us every week, stops by the house frequently, and loves the kids.

My husband doesn't seem to get that my father is emotionally detached and won't change. He keeps encouraging me to keep reaching out to him. I'm getting tired of telling my husband that my dad isn't like his father.

I'm not sure how to handle this. How can I make my husband understand my dad is different?

A: Your husband can probably see the pain you face each time your father ignores your calls or invitations. Although he may not be helping, he probably thinks he is doing the right thing by encouraging you.

This is a good opportunity to talk to him and explain your father's issues.

Does your husband know about your father's difficult childhood? Is he aware that he's been emotionally detached and unavailable your entire life?

Has your husband ever interacted with your dad on his own?

Your husband needs to know about all of the details you have shared here. It's also important that he respect your wishes to stop communicating with your father.

Q: *Can an emotionally detached parent also be toxic?*

I've often wondered why I feel so unhappy after trying to reach out to him. I end up feeling worthless and sad. I start to question everything I've done or accomplished.

Why isn't it good enough for him? Why am I not good enough to get a call back?

A: Yes, an emotionally detached parent can be a toxic person. This actually happens frequently because they're not capable of having a normal relationship.

Their own psychological issues taint the interactions they have with the people around them, so your feelings of worthlessness are common. Unfortunately, there's no easy way to handle a toxic parent who's emotionally detached.

It's important to try to let go of the negative thoughts associated with him. Instead of worrying about your

relationship with him, find a way to move forward in the best way possible for you and your family.