

Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect

by Jonice Webb, Ph.D

Introduction

What do you remember from your childhood? Almost everyone remembers some bits and pieces, if not more. Perhaps you have some positive memories, like family vacations, teachers, friends, summer camps or academic awards; and some negative memories, like family conflicts, sibling rivalries, problems at school, or even some sad or troubling events. *Running on Empty* is not about any of those kinds of memories. In fact, it's not about anything that you can remember or anything that happened in your childhood. This book is written to help you become aware of what *didn't happen* in your childhood, what you don't *remember*. Because what didn't happen has as much or more power over who you have become as an adult than any of those events you do remember. *Running on Empty* will introduce you to the consequences of *what didn't happen*: an invisible force that may be at work in your life. I will help you determine whether you've been affected by this invisible force and, if so, how to overcome it.

Many fine, high-functioning, capable people secretly feel unfulfilled or disconnected. "Shouldn't I be happier?" "Why haven't I accomplished more?" "Why doesn't my life feel more meaningful?" These are questions which are often prompted by the invisible force at work. They are often asked by people who believe that they had loving, well-meaning parents, and who remember their childhood as mostly happy and healthy. So they blame themselves for whatever doesn't feel right as an adult. They don't realize that they are under the influence of what they don't remember ... the invisible force.

By now, you're probably wondering, what is this *Invisible Force*? Rest assured it's nothing scary. It's not supernatural, psychic or eerie. It's actually a very common, human thing that *doesn't happen* in homes and families all over the world every day. Yet we don't realize it exists, matters or has any impact upon us at all. We don't have a word for it. We don't think about it and we don't talk about it. We can't see it; we can only feel it. And when we do feel it, we don't know what we're feeling.

In this book, I'm finally giving this force a name. I'm calling it Emotional Neglect. This is not to be confused with physical neglect. Let's talk about what Emotional Neglect really is.

Everyone is familiar with the word "neglect." It's a common word. The definition of

“neglect,” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is “to give little attention or respect or to disregard; to leave unattended to, especially through carelessness.”

“Neglect” is a word used especially frequently by mental health professionals in the Social Services. It’s commonly used to refer to a dependent person, such as a child or elder, whose *physical* needs are not being met. For example a child who comes to school with no coat in the winter, or an elder shut-in whose adult daughter frequently “forgets” to bring her groceries.

Pure *emotional* neglect is invisible. It can be extremely subtle, and it rarely has any physical or visible signs. In fact, many *emotionally* neglected children have received excellent physical care. Many come from families that seem ideal. The people for whom I write this book are unlikely to have been identified as neglected by any outward signs, and are in fact unlikely to have been identified as neglected at all.

So why write a book? After all, if the topic of Emotional Neglect has gone unnoticed by researchers and professionals all this time, how debilitating can it really be? The truth is, people suffering from Emotional Neglect are in pain. But they can’t figure out why, and too often, neither can the therapists treating them. In writing this book, I identify, define and suggest solutions to a hidden struggle that often stymies its sufferers and even the professionals to whom they sometimes go for help. My goal is to help these people who are suffering in silence, wondering what is wrong with them.

There is a good explanation for why Emotional Neglect has been so overlooked. *It hides*. It dwells in the sins of omission, rather than commission; it’s the white space in the family picture rather than the picture itself. It’s often what was **not** said or observed or remembered from childhood, rather than what **was** said.

For example, parents may provide a lovely home and plenty of food and clothing, and never abuse or mistreat their child. But these same parents may fail to notice their teen child’s drug use or simply give him too much freedom rather than set the limits that would lead to conflict. When that teen is an adult, he may look back at an “ideal” childhood, never realizing that his parents failed him in the way that he needed them most. He may blame himself for whatever difficulties have ensued from his poor choices as a teen. “I was a real handful”; “I had such a great childhood, I have no excuse for not having achieved more in life.” As a therapist, I have heard these words uttered many times by high-functioning, wonderful people who are unaware that Emotional Neglect was an invisible, powerful force in their childhood. This example offers only one of the infinite numbers of ways that a parent can emotionally neglect a child, leaving him running on empty.

Here I would like to insert a very important caveat: *We all* have examples of how our

parents have failed us here and there. No parent is perfect, and no childhood is perfect. We know that the huge majority of parents struggle to do what's best for their child. Those of us who are parents know that when we make parenting mistakes, we can almost always correct them. This book is not meant to shame parents or make parents feel like failures. In fact, throughout the book you'll read about many parents who are loving and well-meaning, but still emotionally neglected their child in some fundamental way. Many emotionally neglectful parents are fine people and good parents, but were emotionally neglected themselves as children. All parents commit occasional acts of Emotional Neglect in raising their children without causing any real harm. It only becomes a problem when it is of a great enough breadth or quantity to gradually emotionally "starve" the child.

Whatever the level of parental failure, emotionally neglected people see themselves as the problem, rather than seeing their parents as having failed them.

Throughout the book I include many examples, or vignettes, taken from the lives of my clients and others, those who have grappled with sadness or anxiety or emptiness in their lives, for which there were no words and for which they could find little explanation. These emotionally neglected people most often know how to give others what they want or need. They know what is expected from them in most of life's social environments. Yet these sufferers are unable to label and describe what is wrong in their internal experience of life and how it harms them.

This is not to say that adults who were emotionally neglected as children are without observable symptoms. But these symptoms, the ones that may have brought them to a psychotherapist's door, always masquerade as something else: depression, marital problems, anxiety, anger. Adults who have been emotionally neglected mislabel their unhappiness in such ways, and tend to feel embarrassed by asking for help. Since they have not learned to identify or to be in touch with their true emotional needs, it's difficult for therapists to keep them in treatment long enough to help them understand themselves better. So this book is written not only for the emotionally neglected, but also for mental health professionals, who need tools to combat the chronic lack of compassion-for-self which can sabotage the best of treatments.

Whether you picked up *Running on Empty* because you are looking for answers to your own feelings of emptiness and lack of fulfillment, or because you are a mental health professional trying to help "stuck" patients, this book will provide concrete solutions for invisible wounds.

In *Running on Empty*, I have used many vignettes to illustrate various aspects of Emotional Neglect in childhood and adulthood. All of the vignettes are based upon real

stories from clinical practice, either my own or Dr. Musello's. However, to protect the privacy of the clients, names, identifying facts, and details were altered, so that no vignette depicts any real person, living or dead. The exceptions are the vignettes involving Zeke which appear throughout Chapters 1 and 2. These vignettes were created to illustrate how different parenting styles might affect the same boy, and are purely fictitious.

Are you wondering if this book applies to you? Take this questionnaire to find out. Circle the questions to which your answer is **yes**.

Emotional Neglect Questionnaire

Do You:

1. Sometimes feel like you don't belong when with your family or friends
2. Pride yourself on not relying upon others
3. Have difficulty asking for help
4. Have friends or family who complain that you are aloof or distant
5. Feel you have not met your potential in life
6. Often just want to be left alone
7. Secretly feel that you may be a fraud
8. Tend to feel uncomfortable in social situations
9. Often feel disappointed with, or angry at, yourself
10. Judge yourself more harshly than you judge others
11. Compare yourself to others and often find yourself sadly lacking
12. Find it easier to love animals than people
13. Often feel irritable or unhappy for no apparent reason
14. Have trouble knowing what you're feeling
15. Have trouble identifying your strengths and weaknesses
16. Sometimes feel like you're on the outside looking in
17. Believe you're one of those people who could easily live as a hermit
18. Have trouble calming yourself
19. Feel there's something holding you back from being present in the moment
20. At times feel empty inside
21. Secretly feel there's something wrong with you
22. Struggle with self-discipline

Look back over your circled **(YES)** answers. These answers give you a window into the areas in which you may have experienced Emotional Neglect as a child.

Chapter 1

Why wasn't the tank filled?

“...I am trying to draw attention to the immense contribution to the individual and to society which the ordinary good mother with her husband in support makes at the beginning, and which she does *simply through being devoted to her infant.*”

D.W. Winnicott, (1964) *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World*

It doesn't take a parenting guru, a saint, or, thank goodness, a Ph.D. in psychology to raise a child to be a healthy, happy adult. The child psychiatrist, researcher, writer and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott emphasized this point often throughout writings that spanned 40 years. While today we recognize that fathers are of equal importance in the development of a child, the meaning of Winnicott's observations on mothering is still essentially the same: There is a minimal amount of parental emotional connection, empathy and ongoing attention which is necessary to fuel a child's growth and development so that he or she will grow into an emotionally healthy and emotionally connected adult. Less than that minimal amount and the child becomes an adult who struggles emotionally—outwardly successful, perhaps, but empty, missing something within, which the world can't see.

In his writings, Winnicott coined the now well-known term, “Good Enough Mother” to describe a mother who meets her child's needs in this way. Parenting that is “good enough” takes many forms, but all of these recognize the child's emotional or physical need in any given moment, in any given culture, and do a “good enough” job of meeting it. Most parents are good enough. Like all animals, we humans are biologically wired to raise our children to thrive. But what happens when life circumstances interfere with parenting? Or when parents themselves are unhealthy, or have significant character flaws?

Were you raised by “good enough” parents? By the end of this chapter, you will know what “good enough” means, and you will be able to answer this question for yourself.

But first...

If you are a parent as well as a reader, you may find yourself identifying with the parental failures presented in this book, as well as with the emotional experience of the child in the vignettes (because you are, no doubt, hard on yourself.) Therefore, I ask that you pay close attention to the following warnings:

First

All good parents are guilty of emotionally failing their children at times. Nobody is perfect. We all get tired, cranky, stressed, distracted, bored, confused, disconnected, overwhelmed or otherwise compromised here and there. This does not qualify us as emotionally neglectful parents. Emotionally neglectful parents distinguish themselves in one of two ways, and often both: either they emotionally fail their child in some critical way in a moment of crisis, causing

the child a wound which may never be repaired (acute empathic failure) OR they are chronically tone-deaf to some aspect of a child's need throughout his or her childhood development (chronic empathic failure). Every single parent on earth can recall a parenting failure that makes him cringe, where he knows that he has failed his child. But the harm comes from the totality of important moments in which emotionally neglectful parents are deaf and blind to the emotional needs of their growing child.

Second

If you were indeed emotionally neglected, and are a parent yourself as well, there is a good chance that as you read this book you will start to see some ways in which you have passed the torch of Emotional Neglect to your child. If so, it's extremely vital for you to realize that it is not your fault. Because it's invisible, insidious, and easily passes from generation to generation, it's extremely unlikely and difficult to stop unless you become explicitly aware of it. Since you're reading this book, you are light-years ahead of your parents. You have the opportunity to change the pattern, and you are taking it. The effects of Emotional Neglect can be reversed. And you're about to learn how to reverse those parental patterns for yourself, and for your children. Keep reading. No self-blame allowed.

The Ordinary Healthy Parent in Action

The importance of emotion in healthy parenting is best understood through attachment theory. Attachment theory describes how our emotional needs for safety and connection are met by our parents from infancy. Many ways of looking at human behavior have grown out of attachment theory, but most owe their thinking to the original attachment theorist, psychiatrist John Bowlby. His understanding of parent-child bonding comes from thousands of hours of observation of parents and children, beginning with mothers and infants. It suggests, quite simply, that when a parent effectively recognizes and meets her child's emotional needs in infancy, a "secure attachment" is formed and maintained. This first attachment forms the basis of a positive self-image and a sense of general well-being throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Looking at emotional health through the lens of attachment theory, we can identify three essential emotional skills in parents:

- 1) The parent **feels an emotional connection** to the child.
- 2) The parent **pays attention** to the child and sees him as a unique and separate person, rather than, say, an extension of him or herself, a possession or a burden.
- 3) Using that **emotional connection** and paying attention, the parent responds competently to the child's **emotional need**.

Although these skills sound simple, in combination they are a powerful tool for helping a child learn about and manage his or her own nature, for creating a secure emotional bond that carries the child into adulthood, so that he may face the world with the emotional health to achieve a happy adulthood. In short, when parents are mindful of their children's unique emotional nature, they raise emotionally strong adults. Some parents are able to do this intuitively, but others can learn the skills. Either way, the child will not be neglected.

ZEKE

Zeke is a precocious and hyperactive third-grader, the youngest of 3 children in a laid-back and loving family. Lately, he has gotten into trouble at school for "talking back." On one such day, he brings a note home from the teacher describing his infraction by stating "Zeke was disrespectful today." His mother sits him down and asks him what happened. In an exasperated tone, he tells her that, when he was in the recess line, Mrs. Rollo told him to stop trying to balance a pencil on his finger, point-side-up, because he might "stab himself in the face." He frowned and snapped back at Mrs. Rollo by telling her that he would have to bend "alllll the way over the pencil like this" (demonstrating) to stab himself in the face and that he isn't "that stupid." In response, Mrs. Rollo confiscated his pencil, wrote his name on the board, and sent him home with a note.

Before describing how Zeke's mother actually responded, let's figure out what Zeke needs to get from the coming parent-child interaction: he is upset by the incident with his teacher, whom he generally likes, so he needs empathy; on the other hand, he also needs to learn what is expected of him by his teachers in order to succeed at school. Finally, it would help if his mother has noticed (emotional attentiveness) that lately he is very sensitive to "being treated like a baby" because his older brother and sister leave him out a lot due to his age. Zeke's mother needs those three skills: feeling a connection, paying attention, and responding competently, in order to help Zeke with his problem.

Here is how the conversation went between mother and son:

Mother: "Mrs. Rollo didn't understand that you were embarrassed by her thinking you could be stupid enough to stick your eye out with a pencil. But when teachers ask you to stop doing something, the reason doesn't matter. It's your job to stop."

Zeke: "I know! I was trying to say that to her and she wouldn't listen!"

Mother: "Yes, I know how frustrated you get when people don't let you talk. Mrs. Rollo doesn't know that you're dealing with your brother and sister not listening to you much lately."

Zeke relaxes a little in response to his mother's understanding: "Yeah, she got me so frustrated and then she took my pencil."

Mother: "It must've been hard for you. But, you see, Mrs. Rollo's class is very big and she doesn't have time to talk things over like we are right now. It's so important that when any grownup at school asks you to do something, you do it right away. Will you try to do as asked without saying

anything back, Zeke?”

Zeke: “Yeah, Mom.”

Mother: “Good! If you do what Mrs. Rollo asks, you’ll never get in trouble. Then you can come home and complain to us if you think it’s unfair. That’s fine. But as a student, respect means cooperating with your teacher’s requests.”

This mother’s intuitive responses in the above conversation provide us with a complex example of the healthy, emotionally attuned parenting that leads to the sane, happy adult whom Winnicott describes. What exactly did she do?

- First, she connected with her son emotionally by asking him to tell her what happened before she reacted. No shaming.
- Then she listened carefully to him. When she first spoke, she provided him with a simple rule that an eight-year-old can understand: “When a teacher asks you to do something, you do it right away.” Here Zeke’s mother is instinctively attuned to his stage of cognitive development, providing him with a general rule to use at school.
- She immediately follows the rule with empathy and naming his feeling (“Mrs. Rollo didn’t understand that you were embarrassed...”). Hearing his mom name the feeling, Zeke is able to express more of his emotion to his mother (“I know! I was trying to say that to her and she wouldn’t listen!”).
- Again, his mother responds to Zeke by naming or labeling the emotion that drove Zeke’s rude behavior towards his teacher, the behavior of contradicting her that was viewed as disrespectful (“Yes. I know how frustrated you get when people don’t let you talk...”).
- Zeke, feeling understood, responds by repeating this emotion word for himself, “Yeah, she got me so frustrated and then she took my pencil.”
- But the mother isn’t finished yet. She has, in this conversation, demonstrated to Zeke that she understands him and feels for him by demonstrating that she sees his behavior differently than his teacher does. However, she can’t stop there, because his tendency to debate (the likely result of having two highly verbal older siblings) will continue to be a problem for Zeke at school unless he can correct it. So his mom says “It’s so important that when any grownup at school asks you to do something, you do it right away.”
- Finally, she holds her son accountable for his behavior, setting the stage for future check-ins on his feisty nature by asking him, “Will you try to do as asked without saying anything back, Zeke?”

In a conversation that appears deceptively simple, Zeke’s mother has avoided shaming him for a mistake and named his feelings, creating the emotional learning that will allow Zeke to sort his feelings out on his own in the future. She has also supported him emotionally, given him a social rule, and asked him to be accountable for following it. And, in the event that Zeke repeats this

behavior at school, she will adjust her message and her actions to adapt to the difficulty he is having in the classroom.

Remember Zeke, because I will be using him several more times to help describe the differences between healthy and emotionally neglectful parenting.

Here's another example:

KATHLEEN

Frequently, harmful Emotional Neglect is so subtle in the life of a child that, although it may be in play each and every day, it's barely observable, often masking as a form of consideration or even indulgence.

Kathleen is a successful, recently married young woman who makes a great salary as an executive assistant in a small high-tech, start-up company. She persuaded her new husband to buy a home with her in the town in which her parents live. Yet she did so knowing that, as she revealed in therapy, her mother often drove her crazy. She was puzzled by her own decision-making. She recognized that her mother had always demanded a lot of her attention, and was aware that she felt guilty about her mother, no matter how much attention she gave her. At the time she came to therapy, at the height of her success and happiness: new home, new husband, great job, Kathleen felt inexplicably depressed. She was both ashamed of and baffled by this feeling, since there was "no reason for it." What follows is a good example of how Emotional Neglect hides, not in what did happen, but in what didn't happen.

Flash back twenty-five years and five-year-old Kathleen is sitting on the beach, happily making sandcastles with her father. The only child of a successful young couple, living in a pristine restored New England home, people often tell her how lucky she is. Dad is an engineer, and Mom has gone back to school and become an elementary school teacher. Travel to exotic places and being taught meticulous manners are part of Kathleen's life. Kathleen's mom, an excellent seamstress, makes her clothes. Often they wear mother/daughter matching outfits. They spend tons of time together. But right now, on vacation, she has left the matching beach chair at her mother's side. Why? Because her dad has just invited her to play. She has the rare and pleasurable opportunity to be doing something special with her dad. They are digging a hole, collecting the sand to form the first floor of their sand castles.

Mom looks up from her book after a while, and, from the perch of her beach chair, says sternly, "That's enough sandplay with Dad, Kathleen. Your Dad doesn't want to have to play with you all day on his day off! Come over here and I'll read to you." Both Dad and daughter look up from their hole, plastic shovels poised. There is a brief pause. Then her father stands up and brushes the sand off his knees as if he, too, must obey. Kathleen feels sad as the play stops, but she also feels selfish. Mom takes good care of both of them, and Kathleen shouldn't wear her dad out. She goes obediently over

to her smaller, matching beach chair, and sits in it. Her mother begins to read to her. After a while, Kathleen's disappointment passes as she listens to the story.

In our therapy, Kathleen relayed this memory in the course of explaining how distant a relationship she had always had with her father. But when she got to the part where her father stood up and brushed the sand from his knees, her eyes welled up with tears. "I don't know why that image makes me so sad," she said. I asked her to focus on her sadness and think about what else her mother or father might have done differently that day. At that moment, Kathleen began to see that she had been failed frequently by both parents. It wasn't hard to figure out what she would have wanted to be different that day. She just wished that she could have continued digging that hole with her father.

If her mother had been emotionally-attuned to Kathleen:

Mom looks up from her book as they play, and from the perch of her beach chair says with a smile, "Wow, you guys are certainly digging a big hole! Want me to show you how to make a sandcastle?"

Or

If her father had been emotionally-attuned:

Mom looks up from her book as they play, and, from the perch of her beach chair says sternly, "That's enough sandplay with Dad, Kathleen. Your dad doesn't want to have to play with you all day on his day off! Come over here and I'll read to you." Both Dad and daughter look up. There is a brief pause. Dad smiles broadly, first at his wife and then at Kathleen. "Are you kidding? There is no place else I'd rather be than playing with my girl on the beach! Want to help us dig, Margaret?"

What's important to notice about both of these "corrections" is that they are well within the range of ordinary, natural parenting skills. Conversations like these go on all the time. But if there is an absence of such validation of a child's importance to the parent, if a child is made to feel shame for wanting or needing attention from one parent or the other often enough, she will grow up being blind to many of her own emotional needs. Happily, the adult Kathleen came to recognize that there was a good reason for her anger at her mother. She saw that hiding behind the scenes in their mother/daughter relationship all these years had been her mother's lack of emotional attunement to her. Once Kathleen recognized that her anger was legitimate, she felt less guilty for having it. She realized that it was okay to stop catering to her mother and do what was right for her and her husband. Also, a door was opened for Kathleen to understand her mother's limitations, and to try to repair their relationship.

Another important factor in the Kathleen scenario is that Kathleen's parents haven't committed any great parenting offense. Their "mistake" is so subtle that neither was probably the tiniest bit aware that anything damaging was happening for their daughter. In fact, they were probably just living out the patterns that were passed on to them in their own childhoods. This is the danger of Emotional Neglect: perfectly good people, loving their child, doing their best, while passing on

accidental, invisible, potentially damaging patterns to their daughter. In this book, the goal is not to blame the parents. It is only to understand our parents, and how they have affected us.

Now that you have a sense of the difference between healthy and neglectful parenting, let's move on to look at the specific types of neglectful parents. As you read this section, see if you can recognize your own parents among them.

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