

Emotional Incest: The Seductive Fantasy of Being Special

Alysa was 32 years old and struggling with commitment when she decided to seek counseling. It was in one of our early sessions that I asked about her family and in particular, about her parent's marriage.

“My parents had a good marriage—not great, but...you know—good. I know there were times that my dad wasn't happy, but you don't stay together if you're not happy!”

“Really? What makes you so sure?” I asked.

“Look—I saw my parent's marriage. I know that it wasn't perfect. What marriage or relationship is? My mother didn't always appreciate him, but I understood what he was really all about. There were times that he probably wanted to leave. We would talk about it because I'm the one who saw how exasperating his marriage could be. I gave him a perspective on things that no one else did. At times, he was so lonely. But, he felt so much better after we spoke. We had that special bond between us. My older brother and younger sister didn't get him, but I did. They were too busy being kids.”

How Alysa viewed her father and his adulation was cloaked in a seductive fantasy of his love and adoration; a fantasy that would be a therapeutic challenge to explore and delicately reframe. Alysa was already experiencing long standing consequences of privilege. She just wasn't yet aware. Alysa doubted her many partners' attributes despite verbalizing her love for them. She often stated that she felt suffocated by showered affection, but nonetheless chose to date. She became involved with men and on two separate occasions became engaged, only to then suddenly break off the engagements.

What is Emotional Incest and Covert Sexual Abuse?

In working with Alysa and other clients like her, I know that the seduction of being “the special one” is a hard, delusional nut to crack. The challenge lays in breaking through the denial and illusion that the parent's love and attention is destructive and emotionally demanding of the child.

In an otherwise healthy parent child relationship, the child is not required to meet the needs of the parent. Nor is there an inappropriate outlet of sexual charged emotion toward a child. It is a long held belief that without direct sexual contact no harm is done.

Overt sexual abuse speaks to the direct sexual contact and exploitation of a dependent person/victim by caregivers or authority figures. A child, in these circumstances often feels trapped and used. Depending on the nature of the abuse and by whom the abuse was perpetrated, a child often feels shame and fear; perhaps having been directly solicited for the interaction or singled out and “groomed”.

By contrast, covert sexual abuse or emotional incest involves the indirect yet sexualized, emotional abuse of a child or dependent. While no physical boundaries have been crossed and no direct sexual contact has been perpetrated, the parent or parents willingly enlist the emotional support of the child in healing his/her own unmet adult needs. In turn, the child becomes the confidant or emotional spouse of a same-sex or opposite sex parent.

Even within a seemingly functional family where there is not the obvious presence of addictions this otherwise inverted parent-child dynamic evolves. In a stressed marriage or a single family dynamic, the parent begins to burden the child by emotionally soliciting the child for his or her unmet relational needs. In this way an inappropriate discussion of adult concerns are shared with a child.

As the marriage and/or family dynamic continues to unravel, the dependency upon the child increases. This already breached boundary between parental caregiver, nurturer, and protector is crossed and the child becomes the defacto caregiver, nurturer and protector of the parent.

What ensues is the adult's engagement of the child in order to meet the adult's emotional needs; a role that the child is not capable of fulfilling yet might feel special or privileged in so doing. Clearly in this dynamic the child is covertly, emotionally abandoned by the parent(s) and being robbed of her or his childhood. Herein lays the inherent difference between overt and covert sexual abuse.

The privilege or exclusivity in being overtly, sexually abused carries an instinctive sense of danger, fear and shame that is not present with covert sexual abuse or emotional incest. In Alysa's case, at the age of 32, she was not aware of or outwardly burdened by being her father's intimate other. This imbued family role of confidant still held self perceived prestige and power.

Adverse Outcomes from Emotional Incest

Covert sexual abuse is devastating largely in part due to the indirect and insidious nature of the abuse.. Caving to emotional demands that are too burdensome, the abused may experience some or all of the following symptoms as a result:

- Codependent behavior (inappropriate boundaries or no boundaries at all)
- Guilt about practicing self care especially when the offending parent is concerned (an unrealistic sense of obligation to that parent)
- Difficulties related to sexual identity or gender
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Love/hate relationship with offending parent
- Difficulty in maintaining relationships due to abused individual's idealization and devaluation of others and an inappropriate expectations placed on partners
- Compulsivity that can include sex, substances, alcohol, work, food
- Patterns of triangulation (indirect communication) in work, family or romantic relationships
- Issues related to sex addiction/avoidance or love addiction/avoidance

Alysa expressed guilt, confusion and anger about honoring her own wants and needs in her current relationship. Her inability to validate her own self in lieu of putting her boyfriend first was disorienting and confusing. Of particular difficulty was her inability to identify what those needs were. This was the result of having learned to disavow her own self while being emotionally present for her father during his marital crises.

The Way Out

As with most individuals struggling with unresolved emotional incest, Alysa's therapy began with several key issues in her therapy:

- Identify the family of origin and the particular family dynamics involved
- Recognize any patterns of emotional incest between caregivers and the abused individual
- Learn to set boundaries with that parent. In the case of a deceased caregiver work with a therapist who can help facilitate empty chair work or another experientially based modality for grief and loss

- Acknowledge any feelings of abandonment as a result of the emotional incest
- Work toward individuation and separation by learning to reparent the self (Inner child work)

Conclusion

Working through unresolved abuse, and journeying from wounded child to healthy adult does not have to occur in isolation if one is already involved in a committed relationship. Nor, is it necessarily accomplished in individual therapy sessions, alone. Much support can be gained by working with the issues as they arise while in relationship. Further, the sharing of one's experiences can be mutually healing within the context of a 12-step support group or among other healthy interactions.

Seen through the lens of Alysa's journey, an abused individual can attain emancipation and self empowerment with patience, perseverance, and self awareness.

Debra L. Kaplan, MA, LAC, LISAC, EMDR-II is a licensed therapist in Tucson, Arizona. She specializes in Complex Post Traumatic Stress, Sexual Compulsivity and Addiction. You can read about Debra at www.debrakaplancounseling.com