

You and Your Parents

Introduction

Welcome to the You and Your Parents session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session will provide information about styles of parenting, as well as more specific information about the particular roles mothers and fathers play in a child's life. You will also consider how your mother's and father's behavior toward you as a child continues to influence you today.

What is in this session?

This session has three major parts: (1) Parenting Styles, (2) You and Your Mother, and (3) You and Your Father.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - Understand how different styles of parenting have different effects on children
 - Understand how emotional pain can affect you in childhood

- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - Understand the role of a mother in a child's life
 - Consider how your mother's interactions with you as a child continue to influence you as an adult
 - Understand why it may be important for you to look closely at your feelings toward your mother



**SESSION 23 HAS
THREE MAJOR PARTS:**

1. Parenting Styles
2. You and Your Mother
3. You and Your Father

- ✓ After participating in part 3, you will be able to
 - Understand the role of a father in a child's life
 - Consider how your father's interactions with you as a child continue to influence you as an adult
 - Understand why it may be important for you to look closely at your feelings toward your father

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to take an honest look at how your parents raised you and how their actions may continue to affect you. You will also be asked to write letters, which you don't have to send, to both your mother and father telling them how you felt about them while growing up and how you feel about them today.

A note about the word *parents*. Families come in all shapes and sizes. Some families consist of a mother, a father, and children. Some consist of one or two parents; other authority figures such as grandparents, aunts, and uncles; and children. Some consist of one parent and children. To make things easy for you, the word *parents* will be used in this session to describe the parental figures that you had while growing up. In other words, the term *parents* will describe the people who raised you.

A note to facilitators. This session addresses parent issues. These issues can be powerful and deeply personal. Many clients have never personally examined these issues or discussed them with others. Many clients will find it difficult to discuss these issues with others, and especially with members of the opposite gender. This is especially true for clients in early treatment and recovery. Therefore, you might consider structuring the You and Your Parents session as separate male and female groups.



Part 1: Parenting Styles

Just as there are different kinds of families, there are also various approaches to raising children. Some of these approaches are healthy for children, and some are not. Some approaches are abusive. Some parents abuse their children emotionally, physically, and/or sexually.

Many people who have substance abuse problems come from families where one or more parents were themselves addicted or had other serious problems (such as mental illness). This creates a unique stress within the family called *dysfunction*. The word *dysfunctional* means that the relationships among family members and the roles that family members take on are unhealthy and help the family to function or behave in a way that is not healthy. All families have some dysfunction. There really is no such thing as a “normal” family. Yet some dysfunctional relationships cause more conflict and pain than others.



EXERCISE 1

Please answer the following questions:

1. Did either of your parents have substance abuse problems?

Yes No (If yes, please explain.)



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 1:

You will

- Understand how different styles of parenting have different effects on children
- Understand how emotional pain can affect you in childhood

2. Did any other relative have a substance abuse problem, such as a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or adult brother or sister?

Yes No *(If yes, please explain.)*

3. If your family had a family member with a substance abuse problem, especially a parental figure, in what ways did that affect you? How did the substance abuse problem make you feel or influence you?

Parental Strictness

Whether a parent had a substance abuse problem or not, researchers have found that children are more likely to have problems, including substance abuse, if their parents were very strict, very harsh in their punishment, very lenient, or provided inconsistent rules.

Too strict. Some parents are very strict and very bossy. They often don't allow their children to speak up. These parents may use severe punishments, such as spankings or beatings. As a result, their children often grow up to become either very shy or very aggressive, and often unhappy.



EXERCISE 2

Please answer the following questions:

1. What does "too strict" mean to you?

2. Do you think that your parents were too strict?

Yes No

If so, how did that make you feel? If not, how can having very strict parents affect children?



Some parents are very strict and very bossy. As a result, their children often grow up to become either very shy or very aggressive, and often unhappy.

Too harsh. Some parents are not necessarily strict, but have outbursts in which they scream at, embarrass, or strongly criticize their children. Being too harsh does not create a healthy relationship with their children. Being too harsh can reduce children's self-esteem and confidence, making them feel they are worthless or failures.



EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following questions:

1. What does "too harsh" mean to you?

2. Do you think that your parents were too harsh?

Yes No

If so, how did that make you feel? If not, how can having very harsh parents affect children?

Too lenient. Some parents constantly give in to their children's demands. Others don't give their children clear and consistent rules and directions. When parents are too lenient, their children often develop behavior problems because they aren't disciplined when they engage in inappropriate behavior. The natural relationship between parents and children is not one of equality. Parents are expected to guide and protect their children. To do so, parents must be in charge and in control.



EXERCISE 4

Please answer the following questions:

1. What does "too lenient" mean to you?

2. Do you think that your parents were too lenient?

Yes No

If so, how did that make you feel? If not, how can having very lenient parents affect children?

Within each family, there are two biological parents: a mother and a father. However, this does not mean that they both are directly involved with the child's life. For whatever reasons, one parent may not be involved in the child's life or may have a distant or poor relationship with the child. A biological father may not even know about the existence of the child. In a single-parent home, the influence of the one parent may be even greater, because he or she is the primary model for the child.



EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following question:

As you were growing up, what authority figures did you have? Please explain.



In dysfunctional families, parents may take out their frustrations on their children.

Childhood Pain

Different people have very different experiences during childhood. Some people have good relationships with their parents, while others do not.

Even in healthy families, children can experience emotional and psychological pain from time to time. In dysfunctional families, parents may take out their frustrations on their children. As a result, some children are too scared to say or admit certain things to the parent. While some pain in life is natural, there are healthy and unhealthy ways to respond to it.

One of the most serious problems that can happen to a child is to experience emotional pain without anyone recognizing it. When a child suffers in silence, his or her pain may have an even greater effect. If no one realizes or believes the child's emotional pain, the child may hold the pain inside. As a result, children may react to suffering with anger, in order to show others that they are in pain. Some children will hold the pain and anger inside until it grows too strong, and then they will direct the anger at someone else or even themselves.



EXERCISE 6

Please answer the following questions:

1. As a child, were there times when you wanted to admit or say things to your mother or father, but could not?

Yes No

How did that make you feel?

2. What were some of the advantages of not being completely open with a parent? What were some of the disadvantages?

3. Whom did you confide in during childhood?

Did that person help you?

Yes No



Another common painful childhood experience many addicted people have experienced is abandonment by one or both of their parents.

Abandonment

Another common painful childhood experience many addicted people have experienced is abandonment by one or both of their parents. This may occur through a major crisis, such as divorce or death, or it may simply occur when parents are so caught up in trying to meet their own needs that they frequently leave their children at times when the children need them. Abandonment can occur all at once, or over a period of time with repeated experiences of a parent leaving, neglecting, or rejecting a child.

Feelings of abandonment also occur when a parental figure exploits or abuses a child. Children have a natural desire to be protected by their parents. But when parents abuse a child, or permit abuse to occur, whether it is emotional, physical, or sexual, the child also feels abandoned by the parent. The parent does not protect the child from this harm. This often leaves the child feeling alone and afraid—sometimes even terrified. Most children cannot handle or tolerate these feelings, so they bury them inside, and they often remain inside even as the child matures into adulthood. As the person becomes older, he or she may desire to use drugs and alcohol to avoid experiencing feelings of abandonment again.

There is also sometimes a tendency for people to repeat these kinds of experiences in life. Children who grow up feeling abandoned tend to expect other people to abandon them in life. So they enter into relationships where they are likely to be abandoned, repeating the childhood experience and reinforcing the childhood pain. Becoming aware of these feelings and patterns in life can help a person to overcome the repetition of these experiences.



EXERCISE 7

Please answer the following questions:

1. As a child, were there times when you felt abandoned by one or both of your parents, or other parental figures in your life?

Yes No

How did that make you feel?

2. Have you ever found yourself in situations that seem to repeat childhood experiences of abandonment or rejection?

Yes No *(If yes, please describe.)*

3. How do you usually cope with feelings of abandonment or rejection? How do you think you might be able to handle these feelings better? What things could you do?



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Understand the role of a mother in a child's life
- Consider how your mother's interactions with you as a child continue to influence you as an adult
- Understand why it may be important for you to look closely at your feelings toward your mother



Part 2: You and Your Mother

Mother and Child

The first social relationship that people experience is with their parents. Most people have some problems with their parents at one time or another, but still have an overall positive relationship. Many families, especially those in which a family member is addicted, develop dysfunctional relationships and roles. This happens because the individual needs of family members are not met and one family member's problem strongly affects the entire family. In such cases, a poor relationship between parent and child may develop.

Although some people are brought up by both of their parents, many have been raised only by their mother or another female relative (such as a grandmother or aunt). It has been customary in our society for a female family member to take care of the children. Whether the child is a natural, adopted, or foster child, a special relationship between mother and child exists that has a great influence over the child's future.



EXERCISE 8

Please answer the following questions:

1. What female played the most important role during your childhood? Was it your mother, aunt, sister, grandmother, foster mother, stepmother? Was there more than one female “parent figure” in your life? Please explain.

2. How would you describe the relationship between you and your mother? Do you feel like your childhood relationship with your mother was basically healthy or filled with problems? Why?



A special relationship between mother and child exists that has a great influence over the child’s future.

3. Did your mother have a substance abuse problem?

Yes No

If so, did her substance abuse problem have an effect on you?

Yes No

Please explain.

A family may be headed by a single, working mother who is struggling to make ends meet for her children.

The Ideal Mother

On television, the ideal family consists of two problem-free parents and a few very happy children. Television families rarely have the kinds of financial and emotional problems that real people have. Expecting your family to be like these ideal families is itself a problem.

For many people, a family may be headed by a single, working mother who is struggling to make ends meet for her children. Even if there are two parents, and both parents work, the mother often has greater responsibility for raising the children and keeping the house, and therefore more work to do.

Real family life for most people will include periods of financial, physical, and emotional problems. Some families do a good job of solving these problems, while other families may even cause their own problems.

Some people have a lot of problems communicating their real feelings. When these people are also mothers, they may have a hard time being honest with their children, even as the children become adults. On the other hand, some mothers find communicating with their children easy.



EXERCISE 9

Please answer the following questions:

1. Describe what you consider one of the most serious problems in your family when you were growing up.

2. In what ways would you have liked your family to be different?

3. Describe some of your family's strengths and weaknesses.

Your Mother and Your Inner Voice

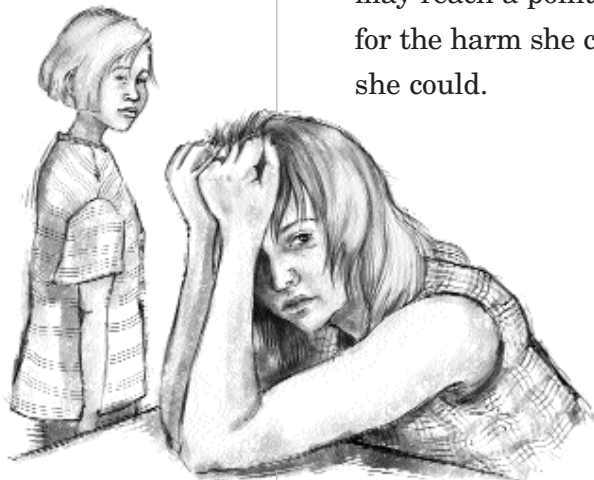
Growing up can be difficult, even under the best of circumstances. Children are trying to understand their world, and they don't understand why certain things happen to them. For instance, they don't understand why their mother may be happy one day and angry or sad the next.

This unpredictability can be frightening to children. One day they feel that they are getting love and trust from their mother. The next day they feel abandoned and unloved. This can even happen in a healthy family, because the mother is having her own ups and downs. In a dysfunctional family, the extremes are more severe. Children in those families may feel that they are the cause of these changes in their mother. They may develop strong fears of abandonment and guilt and have a hard time trusting other people.

As adults, these children continue having a hard time trusting people. They develop an inner voice that is insecure and frightened. When people are frightened, they may feel cornered and strike out at others. Part of the recovery process is to understand these feelings and not allow them to control your behavior.

As you explore your relationship with your mother, you may uncover painful memories. The object of the exploration is not to blame anyone, but to identify what happened and how it might affect you today. Talking about these painful memories at group meetings or in therapy can help the healing process. In some cases, it might be necessary to go through a grieving process. You may reach a point where you simply need to forgive your mother for the harm she caused—simply because she did the best job that she could.

In some cases, it might be necessary to go through a grieving process.





EXERCISE 10

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is the hardest thing for you to accept about your mother?

Do you think that you can ever forgive her for this?

- Yes No

2. How do you think your feelings about your mother will affect your relationship with your spouse? What about your relationships with your children?

Telling Your Mother How You Feel

It helps to express your feelings to someone. It may help the other person, but it also helps you. It may help you better understand your feelings about your mother if you express them. Doing this in writing, rather than talking about it, helps because writing gives you time to think about what you want to say and the chance to review what you've put down on paper.

Writing gives you time to think about what you want to say and the chance to review what you've put down on paper.

Take some time now to write a letter to your mother, sharing with her the thoughts and feelings that you might ordinarily find difficult. You're not going to send this letter, so you can be honest about your feelings without worrying about hurting someone else's. Just writing these things will help you better understand your own feelings. Even if your mother has passed away, it can still help to prepare this letter. In writing this letter, you might consider the following topics:

- Things you regret doing to her
- Things you wish you had done
- Things you regret saying
- Promises that you broke
- Ways in which you resent your mother
- Ways in which your mother hurt you
- Ways in which your mother helped you
- Ways in which you are proud of her
- Things you wish you could do for her
- How you appreciate certain things that she did or said
- Things you wish you had said
- Things you would like to say now
- Things you wish you could change about your relationship with her
- How you felt about your mother in the past
- How you feel about your mother today
- Secrets that you would like to share with her
- Your desire to forgive and/or ask for forgiveness



EXERCISE 12

Please answer the following questions:

1. How did it feel to write this letter?

2. What is the most important thing that you would like to tell your mother? Why?

3. How would you like your relationship with your mother to change? What would you have to do to accomplish this?

Part 3: You and Your Father

Father and Child

Although mothers tend to spend more time with their children in our culture, a father can have a big influence on a child. This influence can be positive or negative, depending on the father and the child and the circumstances of the family.

There was a time in our society when most families consisted of two parents and their children. Historically, the father worked while the mother raised the children and ran the home. This has changed a great deal in recent years, but mothers are still expected to have a more central role than fathers in a child's life.

For those people who had a major male parental figure during their childhood, their relationship with him may have been healthy or unhealthy. There may be pain and resentment that still need to be dealt with, which can affect relationships with other people in one's life.

Although many people had their fathers around during their childhoods, others may have never known their fathers or only vaguely remember them. For those who did have fathers present during their childhoods, the relationship may have been tense, especially if the father had a substance abuse or other problem.



EXERCISE 13

Please answer the following questions:

1. Were you close to your father as a child?

Yes No

Were you close to another male during your childhood?

Yes No

Who was he?

(question 1 continued on next page)



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 3:

You will

- Understand the role of a father in a child's life
- Consider how your father's interactions with you as a child continue to influence you as an adult
- Understand why it may be important for you to look closely at your feelings toward your father

If you were not close to your father or another male parental figure, how did it affect you?

2. What is your relationship with your father like today?
Has your relationship generally gotten better or worse?

3. What things about this relationship do you like, and what things would you like to change?

What Kind of Father?

There are certain styles of fathering that can be used to describe the majority of fathers. While none of these will fully capture the personality of a real person, they can help you understand some of the ways your father's style of parenting may have influenced you.

The absent father. Whether due to death, divorce, or work, many fathers are not able to spend a lot of time with their children. Some absent fathers may write or call, but may not be there for day-to-day decisions. Some may not be a part of the family at all.

The distant dad. Some fathers choose not to or are not able to communicate with their family about their feelings, wishes, or fears. Even though they don't express their needs, these fathers may be angry and disappointed when their needs aren't met. The children of distant fathers may try to guess what their father wants, but they are often wrong. The distant father may be physically present but not involved in the family.

The macho father. Some fathers view their children as their property or an extension of themselves, and they may physically and psychologically dominate them. They may have specific goals for their children and may push them very hard. The macho father may also be physically and/or verbally violent when these goals are not met.

The buddy-type father. Some fathers avoid dominating their children by thinking of themselves as equals to their children. By becoming buddies rather than fathers to their children, especially their sons, these fathers avoid physical and verbal confrontation, leaving rule making and discipline to the mother.

The unpredictable father. Some fathers have psychiatric or medical problems, resulting in alternating periods of calm and violence, or periods of friendliness followed by anger and bitterness. Substance abuse may also cause these kinds of mood swings. Some fathers may be emotionally open at times but then close down emotionally at other times, often without warning.



The healthy father. Obviously, not all fathers are psychologically unhealthy. Many fathers view their children as individuals and encourage their emotional growth while setting rules and boundaries. They are able to put the needs of their children ahead of their own needs and effectively communicate their feelings to other family members. Many fathers enjoy the role of being father.



EXERCISE 14

Please answer the following questions:

1. What kind of fathering style did your father have?

Please explain.

2. How do you think this style of parenting affected you?

3. Did your father have any problems (such as mental illness, physical illness, or addiction) that caused him to act in an unpredictable way?

Yes No

If so, describe how that affected you on the next page.

The Ideal Father

Just as people have ideas of what a perfect mother would be like, people often have expectations of what a perfect father would be like.

Some fathers may be unprepared for the job of fatherhood and may feel trapped and unhappy. They may also have their own problems, including financial, emotional, or addiction problems.

Because men are often taught to be strong and silent, some fathers may have a hard time expressing their feelings to anyone, especially their children. They may hold in their feelings or try to run away from intimacy.



EXERCISE 15

Please answer the following questions:

1. What would you consider to be the qualities of a good father?



Because men are often taught to be strong and silent, some fathers may have a hard time expressing their feelings to anyone.

2. What qualities did your father have that were similar to and different from your idea of a good father?

Your Father and Your Inner Voice

Even as an adult, you will still have feelings about the relationship you had with your father as a child. Even if you never met your father or rarely saw him, he has an impact on your life. Even if he loved you and took good care of you, there are probably things that you wish could have been different. Being a good father is extremely difficult, and the chances are that your father had many problems in his life that made it difficult for him to be a good father.

It is important to come to terms with the feelings left over from your childhood toward your father, stepfather, or other father figure. Whether you feel anger over abandonment, sadness over loss, fear and guilt from abuse, or simply craving for affection, these feelings can keep coming up in new relationships with people. They can reappear in your relationship with your partner, friends, or co-workers.

Sometimes it may help to talk with your father, to rebuild a relationship with him. But many times this is not possible or not even helpful. The problem isn't what your father is doing now; it's what he did when you were three, five, or ten years old. He may not even realize or remember what he did or didn't do. It is only your inner child that remembers, and it is your inner child that must rage or grieve or cry. You may need to get past these feelings and learn to forgive your father, knowing that he did the best he could.



It is important to come to terms with the feelings left over from your childhood toward your father, stepfather, or other father figure.

**EXERCISE 16**

Please answer the following questions:

1. What is the hardest thing for you to accept about your father? Do you think that you could forgive him for this? Please explain.

2. How do you think your feelings about your father might affect your relationship with your spouse and children? How about with friends?

Telling Your Father How You Feel

It may often help you to express your feelings to someone. After doing so, you may better understand your feelings. As you were asked to do with your mother before, you should try to express to your father your feelings toward him. You will not do this to his face, but instead through a letter. Writing about your feelings will give you time to think about what you want to say and a chance to review it once you've "said" it.

Write a letter to your father, sharing with him the thoughts and feelings that you might ordinarily find difficult.

Take some time now to write a letter to your father, sharing with him the thoughts and feelings that you might ordinarily find difficult. You're not going to send this letter, so you can be honest about your feelings without worrying about hurting someone else's. Just writing these things will help you better understand your own feelings. Even if your father has passed away, it can still help to prepare this letter. In writing this letter, you might consider the following topics:

- Things you regret doing to him
- Things you wish you had done
- Things you regret saying
- Promises that you broke
- Ways in which you resent your father
- Ways in which your father hurt you
- Ways in which your father helped you
- Ways in which you are proud of him
- Things you wish you could do for him
- How you appreciate certain things that he did or said
- Things you wish you had said
- Things you would like to say now
- Things you wish you could change about your relationship with him
- How you felt about your father in the past
- How you feel about your father today
- Secrets that you would like to share with him
- Your desire to forgive and/or ask for forgiveness



EXERCISE 18

Please answer the following questions:

1. How did it feel to write this letter?

2. What is the most important thing that you would like to tell your father? Why?

3. How would you like your relationship with your father to change? What would you have to do to accomplish this?



Session 23 Summary

In this session you have looked at how your parents' styles of parenting affected you as a child and continue to affect your behavior today. You have looked at the specific roles that mothers and fathers can play in a child's life, and how your own mother and/or father acted toward you when you were growing up. Finally, you have considered your feelings today about your mother and/or father, and you have put those feelings into words.

This can be an emotionally powerful session, dealing with painful experiences and memories from childhood. If you find that you have strong emotions about these issues, it may be important for you to talk to someone you trust about these issues—a counselor, therapist, or clergy person. It is okay, even healthy, to ask for help with these issues if you need it. Remember, you cannot change what happened to you in the past. You cannot relive your life. But you can overcome painful experiences and use those experiences to make you a better, stronger person. This requires self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and a willingness to ask for help when you need it. And that is part of recovery.