

Coping with the Trauma of “Parental Alienation”

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Enduring the experience of attachment-based “parental alienation” represents a profound form of trauma inflicted on targeted parents. This type of chronic psychological trauma differs from what combat veterans face when they develop PTSD, yet the experience of targeted parents who are caught in the nightmare of attachment-based “parental alienation” is a form of trauma. The technical term for the type of emotional and psychological trauma experienced by targeted parents is “complex trauma.”

It is no coincidence that the pathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent is born in complex trauma from the childhood of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, and that the current processes of attachment-based “parental alienation” are inflicting onto the targeted parent a form of complex trauma. These two features of attachment-based “parental alienation” are definitely related.

It is important for the targeted parent to find ways of coping with the complex trauma of attachment-based “parental alienation.” This post addresses ways the targeted parent can cope with the severe emotional trauma created by the experience of attachment-based “parental alienation.”

The Trauma Reenactment Narrative

The processes of attachment-based “parental alienation” represent the reenactment of the childhood attachment trauma of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent into the current family relationships. The trauma reenactment narrative of attachment-based “parental alienation” represents a false drama created by the pathology of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. The trauma-related roles contained within the attachment networks of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent were created during the childhood experiences of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent’s own relationship trauma with his or her own parent.

The complex developmental trauma experienced by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent as a child was so devastating to the psychological development of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, that this childhood trauma experience led to the development of the narcissistic and borderline personality structures that now drive the distorted family processes called “parental alienation.” The complex trauma of childhood created the narcissistic and borderline personality traits we now see evidenced in attachment-based “parental alienation.”

The attachment system of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent contains representational networks for the childhood relationship trauma experienced by this parent as a child. These internalized working models of the attachment trauma are contained in the pattern of:

“abusive parent” - “victimized child” - “protective parent”

These trauma-related roles from the childhood of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent are now being reenacted in the current family relationships.

“Abusive Parent”: the targeted parent is being assigned the trauma reenactment role as the “abusive parent,”

“Victimized Child”: the current child is being induced by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent into accepting the trauma reenactment role as the supposedly “victimized child,”

“Protective Parent”: the narcissistic/(borderline) parent adopts and conspicuously displays to the child and to others the coveted role as the supposedly “protective parent.”

The trauma reenactment narrative is initiated into the current family relationships by first inducing the child into accepting the role as the “victimized child.” This is a critical initial step in the creation of attachment-based “parental alienation.”

The moment the child accepts and adopts the “victimized child” role in the trauma reenactment narrative, this automatically defines the targeted parent into the “abusive parent” role. The “victimized child” role automatically **imposes** the “abusive parent” role onto the targeted parent, independent of any actual behavior of the targeted parent. By adopting the role of the “victimized child,” this automatically defines the targeted parent as being an “abusive parent.”

The targeted parent is immediately put on the defensive, and must continually try to prove to therapists and others that he or she is not “abusive” of the child. It doesn’t matter that the parenting practices of the targeted parent are entirely normal-range. The moment the child is induced by the distorted parenting practices of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent into adopting the “victimized child” role in the trauma reenactment narrative, the “abusive parent” role is immediately imposed upon the targeted parent.

The child’s acceptance of the “victimized child” role also invites and provides the context for the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to adopt and conspicuously display to the child and to others the coveted role as the all-wonderful, perfect and idealized, “protective parent.” In a circular process of role-definition, the “protective parent” role being adopted and conspicuously displayed to the child by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent invites the child to then adopt the “victimized child” role, and the “victimized child” role invites the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to adopt the role as the “protective parent.”

These two roles in the trauma reenactment narrative are mutually supporting.

The processes of attachment-based “parental alienation” essentially involves a false drama created by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent as an echo of the childhood trauma

that created this parent's personality pathology. In the narrative of this false drama, the narcissistic/(borderline) parent authentically believes that the targeted parent represents an "abusive" threat to the child, and that the supposedly "victimized child" **requires** the protection of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

But none of this false drama is true. It is delusional. The parenting of the targeted parent is entirely normal range, and the child is in no danger and doesn't need any "protection." It is a false narrative born in the childhood relationship trauma of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

The Trauma of the Targeted Parent

In reenacting the childhood attachment trauma of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent (that produced this parent's personality psychopathology), the themes of trauma become alive and active once again.

Abuse – Victimization – Helplessness – Suffering

These trauma themes from the childhood of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent are brought to life once more in the trauma reenactment narrative, and are delivered into the experience of the targeted parent.

The psychological trauma of attachment-based "parental alienation" is an abuse inflicted by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent onto the targeted parent (by means of the child). It could almost be considered a form of psychological domestic violence. Once the controversy over the construct of "parental alienation" is resolved, targeted parents should be able to find allies in domestic violence survivors. Domestic violence and attachment-based "parental alienation" are simply different manifestations of abuse inflicted by a narcissistic personality onto the other spouse.

The trauma themes of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent's childhood are being created into the experience of targeted parent. The targeted parent is being made to experience the emotional and psychological abuse, the immense suffering, and the helpless victimization, that was part of the childhood trauma experience of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent. It was this childhood trauma experience of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent as a child that created the twisted personality pathology that is now driving the family pathology of attachment-based "parental alienation."

The suffering of the targeted parent created by the re-initiated and transferred childhood trauma experience of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, is both deep and unending, just as it was for the narcissistic/(borderline) parent as a child. **There is no escape.** The targeted parent is helpless to make the abuse and suffering end. These are trauma themes being recreated into the experience of the targeted parent, which the targeted parent is made to endure. The childhood trauma of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent is alive once more, only this time in the emotional and psychological suffering of targeted parent.

For the targeted parent, attachment-based “parental alienation” represents a “complex trauma” of profound magnitude. Suffering without end – trapped, and helpless.

Coping with the Trauma

The targeted parent must find a way to process and cope with the trauma experience.

In your suffering, you must strive to achieve the triumph of light over the darkness of trauma. You must find your way out of the trauma experience being inflicted upon you, and into a recovery of your authentic psychological health and balance.

As much as you may want to save your child, you cannot rescue your child from the quicksand by jumping into the quicksand with them. If, in trying to rescue your child from quicksand you jump into the quicksand as well, you will simply both perish.

In order to rescue your child from the quicksand of “parental alienation,” you must have your feet firmly planted on the shore, steady in your own emotional and psychological health, and then extend your hand to retrieve your child.

Even then, your child may not grasp your hand. You will need the support of mental health and the courts, and we’re working on that. For your part, you must strive to find your freedom from the imposed trauma experience. You must strive to find and keep your own emotional and psychological health within the immense emotional trauma of your grief and loss.

The trauma experience captivates the psychology of the targeted parent. The world of the targeted parent revolves entirely around the trauma experience of the family’s pathology. The difficult and challenging relationship with the hostile-rejecting child; the chaos of trying to work with the narcissistic/(borderline) parent to schedule visitations; the blatant and repeated disregard of court orders by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent; and the continual intrusions and disruptions by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent into the relationship of the targeted parent with the child, consume the focus of the targeted parent.

Repeated court dates, lawyers, therapists, custody evaluations, that all occur in the context of continuing parent-child conflict, act to fully captivate the complete psychological involvement of the targeted parent.

And in this upside-down world, the targeted parent is continually being blamed for the child’s rejection, even though the targeted parent did nothing wrong.

“You must have done something wrong if your child doesn’t want to be with you.”

Your beloved child is being taken from you, and no one understands. No one helps.

The emotional and psychological trauma and profound grief of attachment-based “parental alienation” consumes the life and psychology of the targeted parent.

You must find your freedom from this trauma.

The emotional trauma inflicted on the targeted parent is severe, and the grief of the targeted parent is deep. The challenge of the targeted parent is to once more find the light of their joy amidst the darkness of their grief and loss.

We are working to solve mental health, so that mental health will understand and will help you.

Once mental health becomes your ally, we will work to solve the courts, so that the courts too will understand and will help you.

In this process, you can help by taking up the challenge to once more find your emotional health and balance within the trauma of your loss and grief. Your child needs you to have your feet firmly planted on the shore of your own emotional and psychological health and balance in order to help them escape the quicksand of their experience.

That is your challenge.

Finding Happiness

Here are nine ways that targeted parents who are caught in the trauma of attachment-based “parental alienation” can recover and restore their emotional health and balance. The basic ideas for this list are drawn from an article by Belle Beth Cooper in which she cites the various scientifically supported methods for increasing happiness.

1. Practice Smiling

The physical and emotional systems in the brain are interconnected. We can create a small dose of any emotion by acting as if we had that emotion. That’s what actors do. They act as if they felt a certain way, and this creates a small dose of that feeling. Then the actor expands this small seed of the emotion into a full experience of the desired emotion.

We smile when we’re happy. But it also works in reverse. We become happier when we smile. When we smile, we create a small dose of the happy feeling. The physical act of smiling fools the brain:

The brain says, “Why am I smiling? Hmm, I must be happy. Hey emotions, stop slaking off down there and produce some of that happy that you’re supposed to be feeling.”

When we smile we fool the brain into thinking it must be happy, so it then releases a small amount of the brain chemicals for the feeling of happy. It's not much, maybe just a single point on a 10-point scale. But it's a start. The more we practice smiling, the easier it becomes to produce the happy, and we begin to create a little more happy each time.

With the brain, **“we build what we use.”**

When we use a brain network we create structural and chemical changes along the pathways that were used and these changes make the connections in the used networks stronger, more sensitive, and more efficient. This process is called the “canalization” of brain networks (like building “canals” or channels in the brain).

The more we smile, the more we canalize the brain systems for being happy. We essentially groove the happy channel more deeply into our neural networks. It's just like practicing the piano. At first it feels awkward and we're only able to play “twinkle-twinkle little star,” and even then our playing is slow and halting. Yet as we practice, our playing gradually improves. Soon we're playing simple songs, and it actually begins to sound like music, sort of. Eventually we're playing ragtime and Mozart concertos.

Practice smiling. It's extremely simple to do. Just smile.

Smile often. For no particular reason, just smile. Smile in the car. Smile when you're alone. Smile at your spouse (but not a creepy smile; a warm and relaxed smile). See if you can get your eyes to smile too. The more you practice smiling, the easier it becomes to bring forth a feeling of relaxed low-level happy, and the longer it remains.

Smiling is especially useful when something makes us angry. Adding happy to angry softens our anger. Instead of becoming caught up in anger and frustration, when you smile at the same time as you're angry, you'll begin to laugh at the absurdity of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent's all-too-predictable crazy. As soon as you see that email from them in your inbox, smile. Instead of the painful wince of “Oh dear God, not again.” you will begin to experience a relaxed and bemused, “Really? Again?”

Practice smiling. A lot. Whenever. For no particular reason. Just smile.

2. Meditate

Meditation is wonderful. Meditation is the surest way of bringing emotional peace and balance.

There are a wide variety of meditative practices. Try out different types. There are sitting meditations of inner thought. There are moving meditations of integrated flow. There are breathing meditations of relaxation. Try out different ones. Some won't fit for you, but others might. See if one fits for you.

One of the most common forms of meditation is to simply sit in a quiet area and let go of each thought as it comes. Mind will continually offer sentences, our thoughts, that capture us. This type of meditation is simply the active letting go of being captivated by the thought.

Let the thoughts come... and let them go. Don't follow them. Just let them go. The next one comes... let it go. The next one comes... let it go. Oops, thoughts can be so tricky, so captivating, and you find you've been caught by one and have wound up following a line of thought. That's okay. When you become aware of it, simply let it go. Then let go of the next thought. The next thought will come, and let it go too. Soon, mind will quiet. Peace arrives.

Another form of meditative practice is to repeat in your mind or out loud certain sounds, called "mantras." These sounds quiet the mind.

A particularly wonderful and relaxing form of meditation is to focus on developing a rhythmic flow of breath. The inhales and exhales of your breath become deep and circular. Mind turns off as we flow into our breathing.

There are also physically active forms of meditation, such as yoga, tai chi, and qigong. These forms of meditation are especially wonderful. They achieve a profound peace through the active integration of personal being with movement and the body.

Sometimes a calming meditative background music helps, and sometimes people prefer quiet. Up to you. Try out different approaches to meditation and see if one works for you. You've been through a lot, you deserve to nurture yourself. Valuing yourself enough to give to your "self" the gift of time is tremendously healing.

3. Spend Time with Friends and Family

The trauma of "parental alienation" can justifiably consume the life focus of targeted parents. The beloved child is being distorted or has been lost entirely. What could be more important than that?

Yet being consumed into the trauma is not healthy. You cannot rescue the child by jumping into the quicksand as well. You must stand on the shore of your own emotional and psychological health so that, when the time comes, you can reach out your hand to rescue the child.

We are working on solving the problems in mental health so that they become your ally. Once mental health becomes your ally, then we can solve the courts so that they too understand and become an ally. Once we have solved the current "bleeding out" of actively occurring "parental alienation," then we will turn our attention to the adult survivors of childhood "alienation" to see if we can recover these now adult children of "alienation" as well. We're working on it.

Your challenge is to live into your emotional and psychological health, and not allow yourself to be consumed by the trauma, so that when the time comes you can reach out your hand to recover your child.

We belong in community. We thrive in community. Share your life with friends and family. Arrange dinner parties. Go to movies and plays with friends and family. Join groups, join a church, join an organization. Browse the course catalog of the local college extension program and sign up for a class or activity where you meet other people who share similar interests. Join an adult softball or bowling league. Take salsa dancing, square dancing, line dancing, ballroom dancing, tango. Go on dates. Be with people.

In my professional experience with targeted parents, I have met a number of targeted parents who are successfully remarried to wonderful new life-partners. Maybe it's something about having made such a horrendous choice in partners the first time that allows the targeted parent to then make a wonderful choice the second time. But for whatever reason, I seem to have met many targeted parents who are now remarried to truly wonderful partners.

However, living in the throes of "parental alienation" can be very hard on these new spouses. These new partners often become so incredibly angry at the destructive maliciousness of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent, who is willing to destroy the children of the targeted parent if this will create suffering in the targeted parent. The new spouse loves the kindness and love available from the targeted parent, and it is so very hard on them to watch helplessly as immense pain is inflicted the person they love.

If you are a targeted parent who has been fortunate enough to find a new and wonderful life partner, recognize and nurture the joy and love that is available in this new relationship. It's okay to let go of the pain and trauma of the "parental alienation" and to love and laugh with the new life partner. You are not letting go of the child, you are embracing your emotional and psychological health; you are embracing love.

When the time for solutions arrives, you will have created a wonderful nest of a loving homelife that the child will be able to join. You are always available for your child. We know that. You also have a right to your life.

There is a lot we must do to fix so many things that are wrong in mental health and the legal system. You are doing all you can. It's okay to also embrace your life while we work to recover your children.

4. Sleep

Make sure you get enough sleep. Sleep is a basic rhythm of our lives. Disruptions to our sleep create imbalances in the brain chemistry that can lead to increased stress and emotional exhaustion.

One of the most important aspects of achieving balanced sleep is establishing a routine surrounding our sleep. This is called our sleep hygiene.

Make sure your bed is comfortable and use it only for sleeping, not for reading, or watching television, or working on the computer or tablet. Disconnect yourself from television and the computer at least 30 minutes before bedtime. Allow your brain time to relax and get ready for sleep. Brush your teeth, change into your bedclothes, read a book or a magazine in nice comfortable chair or sofa. Nurture yourself by getting ready for the beautiful relaxation of sleep. Allow yourself to rest before you ask yourself to sleep.

If you find yourself going to bed and then lying awake for a long time, go to bed later. If your desired bedtime is 10:00 but you wind up falling asleep at 11:30, go to bed at 11:15 for two weeks. Once you're falling asleep relatively quickly after you go to bed, shift your bedtime back fifteen minutes to 11:00 for a couple of weeks. Once you begin to fall asleep relatively quickly at that bedtime for a while, shift your bedtime back another fifteen minutes to 10:45. Gradually... gradually... begin moving your bedtime back to the desired time. Don't let yourself lay awake in bed.

Also, don't watch the clock. Think about pleasant things. Develop fantasies of desired vacations and things you'll do when your ship comes in. Develop visualizations of mountain pastures, calming ocean vistas, streams and forests. Find a "happy place" in your mind's world and allow this to be your companion at bedtime.

5. Help Others

In his book "The Art of Happiness," the Dalai Lama said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion."

When we help others, we find our own happiness.

We are designed to live and thrive in community. We become happy when we turn outside of our own selfish needs and give of ourselves to something larger than ourselves. The trauma of "parental alienation" draws you inward into your pain and suffering. Giving to others expands you into life and returns you to the human community.

Live into compassion. Give to others. And you will find your happiness.

Two hours a week, give to others. You will be happier.

6. Practice Gratitude

My son is away at college on the East Coast. I am on the West Coast. I see him only rarely and I interact with him infrequently. But I still share in his joy and happiness, even if I don't know exactly what these joys are, because I know he is living into his life. Even if I am not specifically aware of his day-to-day studies, his friendships, his struggles, and his triumphs, I know he is living into his young adulthood, and I am happy with him.

Even though you may be excluded from the day-to-day knowledge of your child's experiences, your child is still living into his or her life, and you can still take joy with them in this knowledge, even if you don't know the specifics.

Your child is bright, and beautiful, and healthy. He or she has a life to live, struggles and triumphs to experience and master. You may not know specifically what they are, but your love shares them as surely as if they were your own. Foster your gratitude for your child's magnificence, even if the pathology of the other parent seeks to inflict suffering on you through your love for your child. Your child is still wonderful.

Find the thousand things in your life for which you are grateful. Break free from the trauma and reenter the magnificent world that surrounds you. The darkness seeks to injure you, to crush you in the trauma of abuse. Don't let it. Find the expansive light of life's riches. Your suffering is real, but it does not need to define you.

Practice gratitude.

7. Plan a Trip

When we plan a trip, we become happy. Taking the trip can be nice, but we are happiest when we are planning the trip. Planning a trip draws us into life. It gives us something to look forward to with eager anticipation.

The grief and frustration of "parental alienation" traps you into the trauma reenactment. You cannot escape, you are helpless, you must simply endure the emotional and psychological abuse of "parental alienation." In your helplessness, the trauma themes from the childhood of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent are being transferred into you. You cannot escape the abuse. You are trapped. You are being abused. This is the trauma.

Fight back. Escape. Get away. Until we achieve the help of mental health there is no solution to the tragedy of attachment-based "parental alienation. But don't allow yourself to be trapped by the trauma. Plan a trip. Where are you going to go? What are you going to do there? What will you see? What adventures will you have? Get away.

Look forward. Escape from the continual focus on the tragedy. In planning a trip, reawaken joyful anticipation. Get away. With all you've been through, you deserve it.

Actually taking the trip can also be fun. But the happiness is actually found in the planning of the trip. Where will you go? What will you do? Escape the trauma.

8. Go Outside

Nature is healing. Feel the sun on your face. Stare up at the stars in wonder. Surround yourself with trees. Hike in the mountains. Listen to the ocean waves crashing on the shore. Take a nap on a Sunday afternoon by the banks of river or stream. Nature is healing.

Pack a picnic and go to the local park. Take a morning walk or an evening stroll. Sit on your porch and watch the world go by. Be outside.

Isn't it marvelous how absolutely blue the sky is? And those clouds are so wispy, so puffy, like cotton. Look how many shades of green are in those trees, and the many colors in the fields; the browns, and golds, and blues, and pinks.

Smell the freshness of the trees. The sound of the birds chirping that invites us into the world that surrounds us. In the smell of the ocean and the crashing of the waves we are at peace. Under the night sky and the stars we are home.

9. Exercise

The emotional and psychological stress of attachment-based "parental alienation" is profound. The type of psychological trauma in attachment-based "parental alienation" is called "complex trauma." It's different from the PTSD type of trauma experienced by combat veterans. The PTSD type of trauma involves intense periods of hyper-arousal that cannot be processed by the brain. Complex trauma is not as intense but we are exposed to it for longer. Complex trauma is an unrelenting stress for days, months, years; exhausting the brain chemistry until there is no psychological coping capacity left.

Stress finds a home in our bodies. Exercise cleanses us of the stress chemicals created by sadness and anger. Not only does exercise cleanse us of the toxic stress chemicals, exercise also releases brain chemicals that feel good. We feel stronger, healthier, and happier when we exercise... and we sleep better.

Exercise is one of the most powerful ways to alleviate stress and feel better.

Escaping Trauma

Attachment-based "parental alienation" represents a form of complex trauma inflicted on the targeted parent. In coping with all of the issues surrounding the pathology of attachment-based "parental alienation," look to find your emotional and psychological health once more.

Your challenge is to free yourself from the trauma themes being imposed upon you. Don't allow yourself to enter a victim mentality. Don't allow yourself to be abused. Rediscover and live into your life and happiness. Be with friends. Love again. Find activities. Give to others. Nurture your emotional health. Escape the trauma.

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