

How to Overcome Being Misunderstood

(week of 12/25/23)

Part of childhood trauma is not having any power over how abusive caretakers see us as children. A toxic parent will overly put their child into a fixed role that is highly shaming. The shame will manifest into adulthood by struggling with what others think about us. We'll put a lot of energy into monitoring how others see us and defending or absorbing the opinions of others around our goodness.

The abusive parent in childhood puts their children into these roles because of their own childhood trauma, their neglectful parenting, and other mental health issues such as projection.

Here are some examples of how toxic parents put their children in roles.

- A parent perpetually criticizing you for being manipulative (when you are a good kid) "I don't want you going to that sleepover because you'll embarrass me and break something."
- A parent pinning you against a sibling that they value more, such as scapegoat / golden child. They need a drama triangle to assert themselves as a victim.
- A parent making you into a surrogate spouse or partner in raising other children. (The stakes are too high here, and you are abused for not meeting adult expectations)
- A parent who severely emotionally neglects their children and assumes that there is connection and closeness when they feel like a stranger. (the connection feels superficial to you, and they are oblivious)
- A parent who makes everything about themselves and gets upset when you don't give unconditional love upfront without ever being a cared-for child.

In these examples, the child who grows up into an adult will experience:

- **Shame** – it's awful to be put on the spot in these ways while having to accept and absorb the role we're being placed in.
- **Feeling invisible**, unknown, and dissociative (there is no healthy and appropriate mirroring because toxic people cannot see us)
- **Powerlessness** - compounded by not having a strong sense of self and unsure, we don't know how to push back on the toxic role and projections from an abusive parent.
- **Defensive** – when triggered to feeling misunderstood by others, we can often overly explain, overly question, become aggressive, feel excluded, and perseverate on how people see us (real or imagined)

Feeling misunderstood ranges from engaging with a parent who says you were always reliable to their needs and feeling invisible in that statement to having your partner be minorly frustrated with you, which overly activates you to need to justify, argue, defend, or explain. We can be misunderstood by anybody: a boss, someone online, or a sibling.

Regardless of the situation or person by whom we feel misunderstood, who could be safe or not, valid or not, the old insecure and anxious feelings come up.

In overcoming the feeling of being misunderstood, we have to start at the source – the abusive parent. The following prompts are designed to help you conceptualize and reparent around both reclaiming a healthy sense of self and finding some power to choose what you take or leave regarding how others see you.

Journal Prompt #1

Write about the dynamics and ways you were not seen as a child by abusive caregivers/parents. Write about the role caregivers put you in within the family system.

Example roles.

- scapegoat
- forgotten child who didn't need much
- cheerleader
- surrogate spouse/partner
- lost child or the kid you can't be helped
- oil and vinegar dynamic, "I just don't get you..."

Journal Prompt #2

Write about situations growing up where you were attacked for that role or dynamics. They put us in roles and don't expect any dysfunction when we rightly can't handle it.

Examples

"My mother would rage at me for not being a perfect mom for my little brother, and I was eight years old."

"I was ignored and forgotten about, so when I started getting into trouble with drugs and bad people."

"I was a surrogate spouse, and my father would get massively wounded if I just wanted to hang out with my teenage friends."

Journal Prompt #3

How do you react or behave when you feel misunderstood by others in the present? Remember that our reactions are more pointed in the present because we had no power to respond growing up.

Examples

“I take everything as an accusation and get highly defensive over little things. I’m known at work to be intense.”

“I apologize for everything because growing up, I was the focus in my family for why things go wrong.”

“I write long, lengthy emails to cover all bases and angles because my family lived in this one up each other – *you’re full of disbelief* that no one was honest. My parents felt like everyone was a liar, including us.”

Journal Prompt #4

What does your inner child believe about what people think about you? Dialogue with your inner child around the issue of being misunderstood and redirect them to the family system. Help reparent them about how the parenting was toxic, and you don’t have to worry about what people think about you, but what you did back then at home.

Example

If your inner child believes that everyone thinks they are bad or a fraud, reparent them by holding the abusive parents accountable for not affirming your goodness because they constantly questioned your motives and morality.

Some healthy ideas about
overcoming being misunderstood.
(power to reparent with)

- We don’t let toxic people tell us who we are anymore.
- We have the choice to accept or reject feedback now.
- Unless the person is close to us, we don’t have to worry about who they say we are.
- If we don’t respect them, why worry about what they think about us?
- You don’t have to lose the fact that you’re a good person anymore.
- It’s just someone’s opinion – no one’s going to die.
- You get to decide who you are now.
- There isn’t a national trial right now about who you are as a person.
- If they didn’t grow up the way you did, they are not an expert on your recovery.
- My family only wants the old me which wasn’t even a real me.
- If my family didn’t get me, I don’t have to defend myself.
- You don’t have to take criticism from people whose lives are in the toilet in terms of growth, intimacy, and kindness.
- You are safe to be misunderstood, but you weren’t growing up.

