

Psychotherapy Newsletter

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Prodigal Protégé

A father, anguished by his young adult child's self-destructive behavior cried out, "Where did I go wrong?" His urgent, heartfelt question resonated deep inside me, something I too have wondered at times raising my children. When our children act out, it spikes our anxiety like nothing else can, and creates a shadow of doubt that is laced with blame and guilt and shame. What is the productive, healing response to this question, "Where did I go wrong?"

It seems all children will 'act out' in certain ways growing up. Unless they are troubled in another way, like being highly compliant and people pleasing, it is natural to make mistakes as they try to learn to self-regulate.

Experimentation with drugs, occasions of overdrinking, some sexual acting out, car accidents or traffic violations – though they can create great anxiety in the moment, can later, in retrospect, seem like part of a normal growth process. These misbehaviors feel somewhat endurable. Maybe we could use the image of a bowling alley where the ball has some room rolling down the lane to swerve toward each gutter, getting a little off track, but still falling within somewhat acceptable and tolerable limits.

Sometimes, however, the bowling ball rolls into the gutter and beyond our ability to manage and cope as a family. Destructive rage, sexual promiscuity, stealing, severe eating disorders, cutting, use of methamphetamines, heroine, or chronic alcohol abuse - these behaviors 'up the ante.' They swing us into crisis mode. We now have to take radical measures to attempt to bring our children back into a range of behavior that will not destroy them and the safety and sanity of our home. It is often critical and necessary to seek professional help to establish healthy limits and 'tough love' strategies. These decisions and a plan of action are hard to make on our own when our anxiety and shame and guilt and fear are so activated.

But still the question lingers in the background and begs to be addressed, "Where did I go wrong?"

Unfortunately, none of us as parents/human beings are immune from hurts and pain. Do we or did we suffer from alcohol or drug abuse? An eating disorder? A deep sense of emptiness or alienation? Sexual acting out?

We all have internal potholes and our own unique method of trying to fill them. Unless we have done an adequate job working through our own pain, it lives on and becomes unconsciously transmitted into our children in some form.

And then what do we do with our history or our current split off behaviors? Do we deny they exist(ed)? Do we try to do the opposite of what our parents did hoping for a different outcome, but without the benefit of a true model of what health really looks like? Have our parenting techniques felt experimental and imposed and unnatural and our children have had to tolerate the 'parenting plan du jour?' Do we create an image of a happy family and insist that our children go along with the program?

Because managing guilt and shame is part of this enormously challenging package, we are tempted at times to blame our children's friends or the fact that drugs exist. We grasp at solutions based on symptoms, not core pain. There will always be substances available, people to distribute them, and people who abuse them.

So, apart from the immediate necessary 'tough love' strategies that are put in place in the short term to manage a crisis situation, what are the other issues that must be addressed and named and worked into the family narrative so health can begin to grow?

Since pain creates a vulnerability to self-destructive behavior to alleviate the pain, our children's disappointing behavior becomes another source of internal unrest they have to manage as well. On some level they know they are hurting us. They also know that part of the pain they feel stems from us. They are trying to manage the fact that I hate the parent I love. The ambivalence can be overwhelming. And though it may temporarily feel good to hear statements like, "You are the best parents in the world and I really messed up," this idea leaves our children carrying the bulk of the burden, and the weight of that load keeps the vicious cycle of trying to medicate pain in place.

As parents we have to be willing to create a family narrative that unloads a lot of that burden off our children in order for them to have a chance to get better and begin to move forward in life and break the pain cycle. An analogy of a garden might be a helpful image in this regard. If a plant is not doing well, we don't assume the plant is faulty. We think of the elements that the plant requires in order to grow and thrive: the right amount of sunshine, healthy soil, adequate water, protection from severe elements and insect infestation, and lots of attention. It is similar within our families. If a member of our family is struggling, it is not helpful to assume since others are doing okay, that it must be this one child that is the problem. In a healthy family each member and all members are growing and thriving. Reality is, if one family member is struggling, the whole family system is struggling.

So, what are healthy answers to the question, “Where did I go wrong?” The following statements and concepts might be a place to start:

- I wasn't the kind of parent you needed and my 'one size fits all' didn't suit you.
- I was so busy trying to prove myself in life that I was not really emotionally available to you enough of the time.
- I was afraid of my own impulses and tried to over-regulate yours.
- I feared making mistakes and didn't let you make your own and learn from them.
- I was too opinionated about 'how things should be' and imposed that on you and there wasn't room for you to develop and express your own thoughts and feelings about things.
- I was too protective, fearful, and anxious and that got internalized by you.
- I avoided conflict and 'messes' and didn't see what I needed to see until it was too late.
- I too often flew into a rage when I didn't like what you were doing and that foreclosed on our ability to work through conflict in a productive way.
- I was depressed and couldn't bring you the joy and enlivenment you needed to feel hopeful about life.
- I medicated myself each evening with alcohol and wasn't fully emotionally present with you and may have inadvertently modeled a system where a substance is used to calm anxiety.
- I forced you into sports and activities that made sense to me rather than pay attention to what naturally interested you.
- I didn't let you work yourself back to a respected place in the family after you misbehaved and instead let you become the family scapegoat.
- There was so much conflict in our marriage that you had to live in an environment where anxiety and tension was too high.
- I was good at doling out consequences for your misbehavior, but not good at reading/listening between the lines of what you were trying to communicate so we could tweak the family system to work better for everyone. You had to get louder and louder and more and more extreme because I was not hearing you.

We know that the quality of the parent/child attachment plays a huge part in what gets internalized by a child. Was my attachment style with you too anxious? Too distant? Too disorganized? Too preoccupied? It takes ego strength on the part of a parent to be able to own their part and name their struggle.

It may be very useful to not only provide a therapy opportunity for our child to process through their pain and be able to speak of their unrest and ambivalence about their family to a professional, but also very important that we, as parents, seek help to begin to be able to formulate a family narrative that incorporates taking responsibility for the dynamics in a healthy way. After all, we are the parents (we created the garden and planted the seed). It is not about getting a reaction from our child about this change of narrative, but letting them hear it over and over until it slowly begins to be internalized and shift the way they see themselves. We want to alter the family story from placing pressure on our child for their 'acting out,' to how we grew as a family because of the challenges we all faced. This is how a parent can shift from, "Where did I go wrong?" to feeling assured, "This is one of the important things I did well."



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