

When
Pleasing
Others
Is *Hurting*
You

DR. DAVID
HAWKINS
The Relationship Doctor



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This book includes stories in which the author has changed people's names and some details of their situations to protect their privacy.

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Getting Lost Growing Up

*The more you listen
to the voice within you,
the better you will hear
what is sounding outside.*

DAG HAMMERSKJOLD

Nearly half the counseling session had elapsed before I realized that the little girl sitting quietly on the chair in the corner of my office had not said a thing. She was dressed neatly; soft, blond curls fell to her shoulders. She clutched a stuffed animal and watched attentively as I talked with her parents and her brothers.

Once I realized my mistake, I took extra care to include her in the remainder of the session. I was glad I did. Though obviously reluctant to participate, she gave added insight into the way her family functioned.

Throughout the session, Mr. and Mrs. Thompson had seemed content to focus on their “problem child.” Their narrow gaze was fixed upon Johnny, a 12-year-old whose behavior had become a source of consternation for his teachers and his family. His younger brother, Jeremy, stirred up almost as much trouble. Compared to the turmoil created by her older brothers, Jessica’s behavior was exemplary.

The Thompsons had scheduled the appointment after having a conference with their sons’ teachers. It seemed that both boys, but

especially Johnny, had been behaving badly of late. Johnny showed up late for school, failed to turn in homework, and disrupted class with his horseplay. A meeting with his teacher and Jeremy's teacher confirmed that both boys were having disturbing problems in school.

The Context

In an initial counseling session, I often try to find the context in which problem behaviors are occurring. Children's behavior never occurs in isolation and always has meaning. In this family, the probable reason for the boys' behavior was obvious. The Thompsons were in the process of separating after a lengthy marriage and several attempts at reconciliation. Both were amicable about the separation, but they were clearly distressed. They had agreed, however, not to let their bickering and imminent separation impact their children. If only it were that easy.

The family impressed me as friendly, engaging, and polite with one another. If anything was unusual about this first session, it was the positive regard each person showed the other family members. I saw no sibling rivalry and heard no harsh words from the parents. The tranquility in my office belied the turmoil in the home.

I asked each person to talk about the impending separation and what it meant to him or her. The boys were nonchalant. "It isn't going to really affect us," Jeremy said.

"It's between them and they'll handle it," Johnny said. "They said we can see them as much as we want."

When I asked Jessica about the separation, her response surprised me.

"I just want Mom and Dad to be okay," she said. "I want them to be happy."

At that point Mrs. Thompson jumped in. "Jessica's our little helper. We can always count on her to make things right. She never causes us any problems."

Jessica's Role

After the session ended and we scheduled a meeting for the following week, I reflected on what I'd learned. Two things stood out. First, although the boys expressed no apparent concern about the separation, their problems at school told the real story. Second, Mrs. Thompson's comments about Jessica made me wonder about the impact such pressure would have on the girl. To her parents, Jessica's role was clear:

- She was their little helper.
- She always made her parents feel better.
- She never caused any problems.

I wondered how these expectations would affect Jessica's development. Would her role in the family become set in stone? Did her parents realize how she was developing and how this behavior might impact her?

Jessica seemed to be taking on the role of "the pleasing personality" while her older brothers acted out the family pain. She seemed intent to make herself invisible, to not cause trouble for her parents. The family had enough trouble, and she was determined not to add to it. She was already taking on many characteristics of codependency, which we will discuss more fully later in this chapter. But first, let's look at another family scenario that can create a pleasing personality.

The Millingers

The Millingers were different from the Thompsons in every way except one: They too were inadvertently raising a child with a pleasing personality. But that is not what brought them into counseling.

The Millingers were a large stepfamily that brought together kids who were “yours, mine, and ours.” But they were not the Brady Bunch. They came to counseling because they wanted to merge more effectively. Bringing two families together had generated conflict and tension. They wanted help in creating a happier family.

As I recorded some initial history, I found that Jim Millinger had been married previously and brought two sons into the family. Brenda Millinger was also previously married and brought two daughters to the family. After they married, they had three children of their own, bringing the total to seven.

The Millingers’ family constellation defied typical strategies. Because of their history, they actually had three “oldest” children and three “babies.” Even completing a geneagram—an outline of a family tree that involves the birth order—was a challenge. But several themes emerged.

Jim Millinger’s oldest son was a distant, athletic youth. He had chosen to have little to do with the rest of the family. He obviously did not like the other children and set out to do his own thing. He checked out emotionally and physically. Jim’s younger son was somewhat more involved, but he too found ways to be emotionally absent from this family that he did not want to be a part of.

Brenda Millinger’s two daughters were much more nurturing and concerned about the welfare of the family. They could both see that unifying this compilation of individuals would take a lot of work. The oldest daughter, Linda, was determined to help the family function. She was obviously the most responsible of all the children. She used her organizational skills and controlling nature for the family’s benefit. She commonly helped the other children off to school and made sure the house was clean when her parents came home in the evenings.

During the first session, I watched the family members’ disjointed attempts to interact with one another. Of course, simply having six children in the same room (one of the older children had

chosen to attend a sports event) was chaotic. Some wanted to dominate the conversation, some wanted to distract, and others wanted to disappear into the cushioned chairs. Linda tried in vain to bring everyone together, to make the family function effectively. She scolded the others for any misbehavior.

Linda's Own Place

As I studied the family, I was reminded of Virginia Satir's groundbreaking study of family roles. In her bestselling book *Peoplemaking*, she notes that each child needs to have a unique and distinct place within the family. In fact, children will go to extremes to create their own place. She found that they will usually take on the role and communication style of the *distracter*, the *placater*, the *computer*, or the *blamer*.

The *distracter* wants to take the focus off anything happening at the moment that may be too intense. The *computer* is disengaged emotionally and handles things matter-of-factly. The *blamer* finds fault with everyone, attacking others and using shame to manipulate them. *Placaters* try to please others. They are the harmonizers, uncomfortable with conflict and tension. They are also the codependents that eventually end up losing their own identity in their marriages and other relationships.¹

Linda was not the oldest of the seven, but she had decided early on that she could bring the three families together. She wanted harmony, and she hated to see her siblings and parents in pain. Slowly, gradually, she lost track of her own feelings and opinions, and she based every decision on her desire to bring peace to the family.

As I came to know the Millingers, I learned that Linda had always been a sensitive child. She could sense her parent's pain. She watched them closely as they struggled to unite this disjointed group. Bit by bit she set aside her own dreams and goals—her very self—as she tried to make one family out of three. When her parents were

busy at work, she supervised the household. When they were too tired to care for the younger children, she became a second mother. When her brothers and sisters got out of hand, Linda did her best to make them behave.

Linda was an astute observer. She noticed the need for a placater in the family. She found a unique role to play, one that offered her self-esteem and a special place in the family structure. She saw that her parents were often exhausted from their jobs and looked to her to care for the younger children. The more she did, the more she demonstrated that she was capable of caring for the family. And the more her parents relied upon her. The stage was set for her to take on a pleasing personality.

For her efforts, Linda was both rewarded and chided. At times the other children liked the attention. She took them to the park to play, helped them pick out clothes for school, and baked them special snacks after school. However, they didn't appreciate her acting as a second mother and disciplining them. They criticized her for being bossy.

Sadly, as I watched the Millingers interact during the counseling session, I saw that Linda had become lost in the family. She was no longer an innocent 14-year-old girl. She was 14 going on 25. The playfulness of youth had disappeared. She spent so much energy protecting, encouraging, and challenging her siblings that she had forgotten to take care of herself. She was lost in the world of codependency.

Codependency

This book is about codependency in families and churches—and how to grow beyond it. These definitions from some of the leaders in the codependency movement will help us understand this important dynamic:

Codependency is the absence of relationship with self, a child's reaction to a dysfunctional family. When children live with people who are not dependable, the child never learns to depend on others or self in healthy ways; they depend on fixes, externals and inappropriate people. They allow people to depend on them, or they isolate and appear independent. Dependency on externals becomes an addiction. Codependency is a symptom of abuse and the loss of identity, which is self-intimacy.²

Codependency is a specific condition that is characterized by preoccupation and extreme dependence, emotionally, socially, and sometimes physically on a person or object. Eventually this dependence on another person becomes a pathological condition that affects the codependent and all other relationships.³

Codependency is a pattern of living, coping and problem solving created and maintained by a set of dysfunctional rules within the family or social system. These rules interfere with healthy growth and make constructive change very difficult, if not impossible.⁴

Codependency is a dependence of focus on another person, on the relationship at the expense of the self.⁵

These definitions help us understand how Jessica Thompson and Linda Millinger began to lose their own identity because of codependency. We can see how Jessica became lost because her parents were caught up in their own pain. Somehow, inadvertently, Jessica received the message that her own sadness over her parents' separation wasn't as important as her family's other problems. She determined that she had to be the good child and not cause more distress for the family. Her parents, caught up in their own troubles, failed to see that Jessica was becoming overly compliant and sacrificing her own well-being for the sake of the family.

In a different context, Linda noticed her parents struggling to bring two disparate families together. She observed their inability to effectively create one new family. She decided, probably unconsciously, to assist them in the process. She also decided, just as unconsciously, to forgo her own youth and act like an adult in an attempt to help her parents. She doesn't understand the dangerous consequences of these decisions.

Jessica and Linda will lose themselves slowly, quietly. The transition never happens in one fell swoop. The counselor who is assisting families with this type of problem must help restore a healthy balance. This means that parents must behave as parents so that children can be children. Then each person can be unique, happy, and responsible.

Families That Create Codependents

Parents do not intentionally make codependents of their children. No one sets out to abuse, neglect, or create dysfunctional family systems. Yet it happens. We are told in the Scriptures that “the sin of the fathers” will be passed down for generations (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Numbers 14:18). The weaknesses in our personalities affect the people around us. Families become dysfunctional, and children lose their way. When children are lost to codependency, they often grow up and become lost in their marriages. Fortunately, God lays out His design for families in which children are loved and nurtured and do not carry the burden of becoming codependent by caring for the needs of their parents.

How do families set a child up to become codependent? As you consider what is happening in the Thompson and Millinger homes, perhaps you see some things that concern you. Perhaps you can even identify with them. These families are very typical, but they are dysfunctional in many ways. They are not functioning as effectively as

they might under ideal conditions. (Unfortunately, life rarely takes place under ideal conditions!) We see a number of common traits in dysfunctional families that can influence children to develop pleasing personalities that are deeply rooted in codependency.

In the dysfunctional family, children learn that they must set their own dependency needs aside in favor of their parents' needs. While these children may appear to depend upon their parents, in fact the parents depend upon the children to meet their needs. A disturbing role reversal takes place. Children may believe that the parents were "there for them" when, in fact, the children were there for the parents. Terry Kellogg helps us understand how this dysfunctional process takes place.

Developmentally we first depend on others and then ourselves, thereby being able to do both, which is first called interdependence. A codependent cannot depend on other people or themselves in healthy ways. They also learn not to depend on their feelings as guides in life. Codependents compensate for this by becoming very dependable and having people depend on them...It is the inability to depend, in appropriate ways, on self and others, which sets up the excess dependency on things that become destructive in our lives, our addictions. This addictiveness moves with us through the spectrum of society including family, community, business, church and government. All have become addictive systems.⁶

And so we see that the problem of becoming overly pleasing at our own expense can begin very early in life. No one wants it to happen. But for a variety of reasons—often because of pain occurring in the lives of the parents—it does happen. Children become lost. Even more tragically, as adults their lives become fully dependent on pleasing others.

Unhealthy Boundaries

Just as travelers need boundaries to keep them from getting off course, family members need clear and helpful boundaries to keep them from developing pleasing personalities. Undefined boundaries can cause several problems. The primary culprit is a process of *enmeshment* within the family. Enmeshment occurs when people are not able to identify where their personality ends and another person's begins. For example,

- They do not know what they are responsible for and what is none of their business.
- They are not able to clearly differentiate what they are feeling from the feelings of other family members.
- They are not able to decide for themselves what they want and what other people want for them.

Life can become horrifically confusing for people in families without boundaries.

When children learn to care for other people but not to care for themselves, they begin to define themselves by other people's standards. Instead of deciding what they value, they look to someone else to determine what is important. They are all right if someone—a relative, friend, teacher, or coach—says they are all right. Can you see how disturbing and confusing this would be to a child?

Inappropriate Rules

Children can also develop unhealthy boundaries when they face rigid, dysfunctional family rules. These rules may be overt and clear, or they may be unspoken and fuzzy. In either case, the helpless children learn quickly that they must conform to this unhealthy set of rules in order to receive the love and attention they so desperately

need. Consider these oppressive rules that Robert Subby, in his book *Beyond Codependency*, found to exist within the codependent family.

- Don't feel or talk about feelings.
- Don't think.
- Don't identify, talk about, or solve problems.
- Don't be who you are—be good, right, strong, and perfect.
- Don't be selfish—take care of others and neglect yourself.
- Don't have fun—don't be silly or enjoy life.
- Don't trust other people or yourself.
- Don't be vulnerable.
- Don't be direct.
- Don't get close to people.
- Don't grow, change, or do anything to rock this family's boat.⁷

Other Messages

Perhaps even more damaging than these rules are other messages codependents receive. Melodie Beattie has determined that many children grow up with the following beliefs:

- I'm not lovable.
- I don't deserve good things.
- I'll never succeed.⁸

Tragically, children may subconsciously buy in to these beliefs. They are not aware that they are swallowing them or that their parents are unwittingly passing them along. No one can see these beliefs, so no one challenges them. Healing can take place when families bring these beliefs to the surface.

Linda's Boundaries

Let's consider Linda's challenge. Her parents are valiantly trying to combine three distinct families with different histories and different values. They are struggling to make this marriage and family work. They need help and are thankful that Linda is willing to sacrifice her own needs for those of the family. But she is caught in a whirlwind of emotions. She lives in a world that is not of her making. Her family has not consciously decided to sacrifice her, but that is what they are doing. They have enough problems already—they do not want to hear anything from her that will make their mission more difficult.

As Linda tries in vain to balance her needs with those of the family, she is aware that she is changing. She is a teenager with the urge to try her wings on for size. Biologically, she is designed to become independent, to push away from the family and try on new behaviors. But what is she to do? At the very time that she yearns to be her own person, her parents need her more than ever. Part of her wants to scream and rebel against the family rules. But such a response would be emotional suicide. Her family has a silent agreement about acting out. The sticky glue of codependence binds her to the family and its unhealthy restrictions.

Slowly but surely, Linda learns the rules that Subby has talked about. If we could hear her talk years later, she might say this to us:

I watched my parents trying to make the family work, but it was too much for them. They could not keep my older brother from opting out. They didn't have the energy to really listen to the rest of us. There wasn't enough time or attention to go around. They were tired and irritable a lot of the time. I think they regretted having so many kids, but they figured that out too late. I learned to keep my mouth shut. The other kids needed more attention than I did. I just wanted the family to be happy, so I helped

out in any way I could. I learned how to make my parents happy. I just didn't figure out until much later that I didn't get the love and attention I needed. No one ever helped me understand my own emotions. I was never encouraged to be the person God designed me to be. I see things so much more clearly now that I am out of the family and on my own. But I know I lost something.

Children Carrying the Pain

In their wonderful book, *Kids Who Carry Our Pain: Breaking the Cycle of Codependency for the Next Generation*, Drs. Robert Hemfelt and Paul Warren examine the seeds of codependence that are sown in dysfunctional families. They suggest that children, without intention, are set up to carry their parents' pain. This cycle can continue for generations if it is not broken.

Each generation is stacked upon another like a multilayered cake. Each layer impacts the next. The boundaries between generations are porous, with values and beliefs seeping through to the next tier.

Fortunately, these patterns can be broken. For example, I knew little about my paternal grandparents. But I knew that my grandfather struggled horribly with alcoholism and died an early death as a result of the disease. I knew that this tragedy impacted my father deeply. He was robbed of a father's love and friendship as a young man. He loathed the snakelike grasp that liquor had upon his father and vowed to never let it impact his life. He passed on that fear to his children.

Additionally, my father was abandoned by his father and was left, in part, to raise himself. He did not have the comfort of two loving parents to help him navigate the complexities of adolescence. As a result, my father has always made himself available to his five children and assisted us in coping with the challenges and rigors of adulthood. I have no doubt that his huge heart was developed

in the crucible of pain and rejection. His courage and strength allowed him to break the cycle.

Attention Hunger

Drs. Hemfelt and Warren go on to say that in addition to carrying their parent's pain, children hunger for attention. Getting lost is unhealthy for them. Hemfelt and Warren suggest that attention hunger is more than just the need for undivided attention; it is also a need for identity. Without an identity, children grow up confused about who they are and where they fit in the world.

The authors identify the basic needs of children as *time*, *attention*, and *affection*. These three primary needs cannot be met by other children. They must be met by nurturing adults.

Attention hunger underlies the other aspects of a child's growth and development. This hunger can be filled by a relationship or attachment to parents.⁹

Hemfelt and Warren note that a variety of abuses within the family can choke a child's need for attention and be extremely damaging to the child. They are convinced that passive sexual abuse is more common in families than we might like to believe. Such conduct includes inappropriate sexual comments and a failure to respect boundaries of privacy. The father who won't allow his daughter to shower in privacy is clearly committing a sexual violation.

Attention hunger can also develop in an atmosphere filled with physical abuse. In such families, discipline may take the form of harsh physical punishment for wrongdoing. Parents may firmly state, "It didn't hurt me to be hit by a switch, and it won't hurt you either." But children learn to recoil and withdraw in fear of their parents' anger.

Verbal abuse is also more common than we would like to admit—even in Christian homes, where we would like to think words are seasoned with grace. Parents call their children names when they fail to behave. Parents' screams can hurt children deeply. A little fear goes a long way in preventing children from developing into healthy adults who speak their minds.

Emotional Incest

Another horrifying prospect for children carrying the generational pain of their parents is identified by Hemfelt and Warren as *emotional incest*. Some time ago, a woman in the midst of a divorce told me that she had told her children about the struggles she was having with their father. As her venom spewed from her, she justified her actions by telling me that the children “have a right to know.” I said that her children were too young to know how to deal with the emotions she was sharing with them. Yet she defended herself by insisting that the father's actions would certainly impact the children as much as they impacted her. In her mind, she was only trying to prepare them.

Many parents vent their frustrations to their children in a similar manner in the name of “open communication.” But when parents reveal what is happening in their marital relationship, they invariably try to align the child with their point of view in opposition to the other parent. This is terribly damaging and confusing to the child.

Another form of emotional incest concerns parental injunctions. These are messages from the parents that tell children they must grow up to meet a particular standard. The children are being used by the parents to solve a problem in the parents' past. For example, the parent may not have done well in sports as a youth, and now the child is expected to make up for the parent's shortcomings. These

types of messages are clearly inappropriate and often conveyed unconsciously.

Drs. Hemfelt and Warren cite several characteristics of the emotionally incestuous family:

- Nurturance is reversed, flowing from child to parent.
- Parents lack good personal identity or solid boundaries.
- Children provide some or all of the three S's:
 1. *Structure*: Authority roles are inappropriate. Control is either lacking or overused. Kids fill adult roles.
 2. *Stability*: Parents are emotionally unstable, so the child stabilizes the family.
 3. *Security*: The child must act as mediator between the family and the outside world or between the family members. The child seeks safety from sources outside the family.

The rule of thumb is easy to remember: *It is never the child's job to be there for the parent. It is the parent's job to be there for the child.*¹⁰

A Child's Needs

No individuals are perfect, so no families are perfect. But we can do a better job of raising our children than we have done. Creating an environment where a child will prosper takes a great deal of love and effort. Many people seem to think that children will be fine if they are given a modicum of affection and attention, but this may not be true. A child needs certain essentials in order to develop in a healthy manner. Let's review some of the basics that a child needs in order to become a healthy adult, free from the difficulties of codependency.

Time

Many busy parents leave their children to raise themselves. Most families are two-income households, and the children often become latchkey kids. They do not receive the time with their mother and with their father that they need to develop a healthy sense of self-esteem.

In my work with families, I notice that parents offer their children bits of time, but rarely are they devoted to the child's individual needs. Parents are so tired and preoccupied that the time they offer to their children is diluted. If children sense that their parents are tired, they may adjust their needs accordingly. They may act out in order to get the parents' attention—even negative attention. Or they may disappear, becoming “the lost child.” They sense that the parent does not really have the time to devote to them. When this happens, they will look elsewhere for attention.

Parents who accept their responsibility to “be there” for the child are refreshing. They may be weary, but they summon the energy to allot valuable time to the child. They are emotionally present and able to enjoy watching the child flourish under their watchful eye.

Attention

Parents must give not only their undiluted time but also their undivided attention to their children. Watchful parents notice the subtle nuances in children's behaviors, moods, and thoughts, and then they express loving concern for those things that are important to the children.

Developmental psychologists teach us that parents can “mirror” their children's emotional lives to help children articulate what they are feeling. In this way, parents can help children navigate difficult encounters with their peers and move beyond painful moods. When we notice our child sitting quietly after learning that she was not

invited to a friend's party, we might say, "Sally, it looks like you are feeling kind of sad about not getting invited to Lucy's birthday party. I'll bet that really hurts, especially after you had already thought about what to give her for a present." We are mirroring her feelings and helping her find words to express them.

Obviously, giving undistracted attention is a rigorous enterprise. It requires that parents set aside their own agenda to enter the child's world. This requires focus and intention. Nothing is as important or as effective as giving the child undivided attention.

Affection

We know that children are desperate for affection. When they don't receive affection from their parents, children will seek out destructive substitutes.

A healthy, loving touch doesn't cost. To see a child sit with a loving parent who offers touch generously is to see a child wrapped in an affirming presence.

Just as time is required to offer attention, time is necessary to offer affection. Hurried affection does little for the child.

Reflection

As you read this book, you may be stirred emotionally. Perhaps you remember situations when you did not receive the time, attention, and affection that you deserved and needed. By recognizing these places of hurt, you can allow the healing to begin. You can identify the destructive patterns that were set in motion long ago, and you can alter faulty beliefs. With an adult mind, you can make choices that are healthier for you and your entire family.

Begin by identifying the destructive beliefs you learned long ago. As you come to understand these beliefs, you will be prepared to replace them with healthier ones. You can learn to...

- talk openly about your thoughts
- share your feelings with someone who is safe
- trust others who will be there for you emotionally
- create a new, loving family with healthy rules

God has given us a model for healthy family functioning. He designed an order to the home in which children are protected, loved, and nurtured, free from the weight of codependent urges to protect others. However, this design is not always followed. Let's learn more about what happens when children are raised with codependent tendencies.