

ADULT CHILDREN TIED TO THE PAST

Dumping your sorrows on
your parents is not the way to grow up

By Melinda Blau

Barbara and her mother are trying to work out their conflicts in a family therapy session. Recovering from the most recent of many love affairs gone sour, Barbara is convinced her shattered romances reflect an abusive childhood. Her anger is palpable.

"How do you have a good relationship?" she asks the therapist, her eyes narrowing as she leans forward in her chair. "If you grew up in a house where relationships were good, you learned that. I'm 44 years old and I'm reading books like *Toxic Parents* to learn what healthy is about!"

The "toxic parent," 75-year-old Evelyn, seems willing to make peace with her daughter. But Barbara has another agenda: "Without some resolution of the past, I can't go forward," Barbara asserts. "Part of this has to do with my mother . . . obviously. Whether she will take any level of responsibility and make it easier for me is questionable."

Barbara sees herself as the victim. "It's very painful. The way I feel has to do with things done *to me*—not because of who I am as a person. I'm dealing with it on several levels. I'm

Paintings by Tim Bower

going to a therapist. I'm also starting to go to ACOA."

The mother looks confused. Her daughter is speaking a foreign language. "AC-what?" she asks.

"Adult Children of Alcoholics and other dysfunctional families," Barbara explains authoritatively. She makes it clear that there was "absolutely no alcohol" in her house—but her childhood was nonetheless "dysfunctional."

The mother inhales deeply and sighs. She asks innocently, "I'd like to

as the best-selling and pointedly titled *Toxic Parents* to guide them, plus magazines and TV talk shows eager to air their dirty laundry, Adult Children are definitely front and center on the American scene.

The movement began about 10 years ago with survivors of extreme abuse: children of alcoholics and drug abusers or victims of incest and physical or mental violence, who very early in life learned the unwritten credo—don't feel, don't think, and don't trust. What once was survival for the child

dren, lies in the embrace of the recovery movement. You must face the reality of your chaotic childhood and reclaim your life by looking at the pain you've never been allowed to talk about, much less feel.

But therapists are concerned. "The whole new 'wounded child' mythology has given people a language for talking about pain, grieving over it," notes family therapist Jo-Ann Krestan, coauthor of *Too Good For Her Own Good*. "But there's really no such thing as an 'Adult Child.' That's a description of



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know—how many *functional* families are there?"

These two generations are worlds apart. The mother, a child of the Depression, was taught to put others' needs first, to repress her feelings and silently endure life's hard knocks. In contrast, Barbara flaunts her distress; she is low on compassion. A grown woman, she laments, "There is a little girl inside of me who never got the mothering she wanted—and she still wants it."

But that's not all she wants. The therapist, who had warned her client "mother bashing" would not be permitted, says, "Barbara wanted someone to hold her mother still, so she could beat her up."

Blaming parents for what they did or didn't do has become a national obsession—and big business. Like Barbara, increasing numbers of people are now referring to themselves as "Adult Children," a curious metaphor. With self-help groups and a spate of books such

became a way of life for the adult. "I lived in constant terror," recalls a 34-year-old incest survivor whose parents were alcoholics. "One time, on the way home from a restaurant, my father was speeding recklessly, shouting, 'I've met my Maker, and I don't care who I take with me!'"

But the scope of the movement has grown enormously. It now includes a cadre of parent-bashing Adult Children eager to tell their parents, It's your fault we love too much or not at all and *never* the right person; that we don't trust ourselves or anyone else; that we are "afflicted and addicted," as a recent *Newsweek* cover story declared; that we are divorced, drunk, desperate and—pardon the jargon—"dysfunctional." These Adult Children are looking for the Answer—and many think their parents are *it*.

If you believe some experts, 90% of us are suffering from the ravages of childhood. And salvation, say the gurus who lead these flocks of Adult Chil-

where you came from, not a diagnosis of who you are today."

Certainly, the Adult Child movement will help many people exorcise childhood demons of shame and isolation. It will also help them understand that what happened to them as children wasn't their fault and that as adults they need no longer be victims. They don't have to stay stuck in the problem—they can *do* something.

But as the media and the fluorescent self-help movement continue to encourage Adult Children to stand up and be counted, many experts now ask: Will those same people get stuck in the solution? In therapy, Barbara dumps her sorrows on her mother; other Adult Children assemble to flesh out forgotten images from painful childhoods. But there may be little talk of forgiveness, much about blame, and, sometimes, fantasies of revenge. Will chronic angst simply be transmuted to chronic anger? And if parent bashing is the prescription, what are the long-



term effects of that "medicine" on succeeding generations? How will the children of these Adult Children view *their* parents?

WHY NOW?

Parent bashing isn't new. Freud sparked the idea around the turn of the century. Convinced that adult problems were reflections of childhood conflicts, Freud unwittingly laid the groundwork upon which modern-day pop-psychology empires have been built, explains psychologist Ronald Taffel, director of family and couples treatment at the Institute for Contemporary Psychotherapy in New York City. In many of the therapies popularized since the '50s—analysis, the child guidance movement, encounter groups—"parents have always been deemed at fault, especially mothers," says Taffel.

Many therapists agree that parent bashing is often a euphemism for mother bashing. Most post-Freudian therapists—reflecting society in general—promoted the basic assumption that mothers, as the family "gatekeepers," were somehow responsible for how children turned out. If the kids had problems, Mother was either too involved or not enough; if Dad was depressed, it was because Mom was emasculating him. If fathers have been blamed for anything, it's that they haven't been there. Even in cases of incest, the mother has often been held responsible—for not stopping it.

In her recent book, *Don't Blame Mother*, psychologist Paula Caplan reports that on reviewing 125 articles published between 1970 and 1982, mothers were blamed for 72 different kinds of problems in their offspring, ranging from bed-wetting and learning problems to schizophrenia.

No segment of our population has been more affected by the prevailing winds of psychotherapy than the children raised by these mothers—the 76 million baby boomers, now 26 to 44 years old. "Children of Dr. Spock," they grew up in a permissive, child-oriented era when it was okay to be rebellious, even to tell parents what was wrong with them. Not only was it no longer a stigma to be "in therapy," the implication was that somehow they could perfect themselves.

To be sure, the boomers have tried just about everything: est and self-actualization, aerobics and health foods, Eastern philosophies and Western materialism, therapy and more therapy—but nothing has "worked." As Taffel observes, "Many of them have been through it all. And guess what? The problems are still there. They can't make their marriages work, their kids are troubled and their own personalities haven't changed that much."

The mere fact that adults are labeling themselves "children" implies that there's some resistance to actually growing up and facing adult responsibilities. Landon Jones, the journalist whose *Great Expectations* tracked these whiz kids through 1980, also suspects it's in keeping with the baby boom mentality. "All of their life stages have been prolonged—their childhood and adolescence—and they stayed in college and were single longer," says Jones. "Now they're approaching middle age, when one of the tasks is to come to terms with your parents. But they're not ready to accept who they really are."

In the '80s, disco glitter began to lose its charm; midlife caught up with the boomers and suddenly they found themselves running out of time and bottoming out on sex and substances, the magical elixirs that had once worked so well. Escalating divorce rates, child abuse, wife battering, drug overdoses and the specter of AIDS have cast a pall upon the boomers' adolescent dreams—that promise of infinite happiness and eternal prosperity.

The boomers' parents had lived through the Depression, witnessed the devastation of World War II and learned to live with it all. In contrast, the children of the Me Generation had the time and money to indulge themselves in the pursuit of perfection. When their dreams began to shatter, say the experts, the boomers began to point a finger at their parents. After all, it must be *someone's* fault.

"When you look at the 'recovery movement,' you see a mass audience turning childhood into an illness you recover from," says Taffel. "They even have networks and support systems to keep it going. These obviously serve a useful purpose—but only if parent bashing doesn't become an end in itself."

TRAPPED IN CHILDHOOD

If the fitness movement belonged to the '80s, then "recovery" may well be the hallmark of the '90s. An influx of alcoholic and addicted boomers caused Alcoholics Anonymous to double its membership between 1977 and 1987. Al-Anon, AA's companion program, now has over 19,000 groups nationwide; and scores of me-too groups,



like Cocaine Anonymous and Shopaholics, have been created to accommodate boomers who didn't drink but found other ways to soothe inner discontent. But none responded to the grassroots call for self-help in greater numbers than the unhappy adults who called themselves Adult Children.

Although ACOA's original focus was on alcohol, the Adult Child movement now reaches out to all kinds of suffering adults. ACOA's growth has been staggering—at last count, from 14 Al-Anon-affiliated ACOA groups in 1981

to over 4,000 meetings nationwide, many of them independent of Al-Anon.

Predictably, big business, always monitoring the pulse of the baby boom generation, has also jumped on—and propelled—the Adult Child bandwagon. Between 1978 and 1984, the number of private residential treatment centers in the country increased 350%, and case loads quadrupled. Thanks to the marketing genius of the

seen. 'I cracked up,' recalls Marianne Walters, director of The Family Therapy Practice Center in Washington, DC. "I told him I'd see him, but as an Adult Person. I'm concerned about these typologies—not that they don't resonate with some truth. But if you're so self-absorbed and only understand yourself this way, you don't take as much responsibility for your own behavior, for others, or for the

terms of 'fear of intimacy.' Meanwhile, the real message comes through: 'I'm damaged goods—so hands off.'"

STUCK IN BLAME

Many therapists encourage clients to attend programs like AA and Al-Anon as an important adjunct to treatment and a safe place to share feelings. After all, the 12-step structure calls



recovery industry, these rehabs, with their promises of "renewal" and "hope," are becoming the spas of the '90s.

And there's no shortage of reading material. A plethora of self-help books describes various "types" of Adult Children and offers a laundry list of characteristics, which are also read aloud at many meetings. But individuals are not so easily quantified.

"I had a man call me and say, 'I'm an Adult Child, and Dr. So-and-So said I'm one of the worst cases he's ever

world you live in."

What's more, Adult Children expect others to understand "where they're coming from." Howard, a recovering alcoholic familiar with many 12-step recovery programs, observes, "It used to be people took time getting to know one another. Nowadays, you go out on a date and within the first few minutes she tells you her father is an alcoholic, her mother committed suicide, a cousin abused her sexually, and she's bulimic—so you'd better watch her boundaries. Everyone talks in

for admitting you're powerless over the problem—whether due to your own behavior or someone else's—and then, with group support, looking honestly at *your own* contribution.

But some Adult Child meetings, which tend to be "younger" than the more established 12-step programs, may encourage just the opposite: blame. There isn't as much guidance from seasoned veterans who've worked through their anger, observes New York City therapist Nancy Napier, author of *Recreating Your Self*.

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"So you've got a bunch of people in pain, and the pain just builds up."

Also, AA and Al-Anon have always urged members to keep the focus on themselves. But at ACOA meetings, parents and other caregivers are fair game.

"I went to ACOA meetings for about a year—but week after week people just dumped." Karen, whose mother was alcoholic, is referring to the litany of complaints common to many of these meetings. One of her resentments was that her parents had refused to send her to college: "I carried that around for years." Her brothers were sent to college, her parents went to Europe, but "poor" Karen had to go to a local junior college. "I'd

their real feelings. "They think if they could only do recovery 'right,' they won't have to feel uncomfortable," she points out. "But if you really begin to look at your own choices, at who you are, it's going to be uncomfortable."

Karen decided to go through the pain. A counselor at an ACOA rehab she attended encouraged her to write letters to each of her parents, telling them everything she was angry about. "When I had to read them aloud and talk about my part, I realized I always blamed *them* when I failed."

Karen, a recovering alcoholic, now takes full responsibility for her choices as an adult. "Sure, there was a lot of anger over my mother's drinking, and for years I blamed my own drinking on

would she have been interested in hearing a basic truth about many supposedly "abusive" parents: Most never intended to hurt their children.

Even Dr. Alice Miller, the Swiss psychoanalyst who unwittingly inspired much of the popular focus on the "inner child," stressed that the issue is not culpability. In *Prisoners of Childhood* (later changed to *The Drama of the Gifted Child*), Miller wrote: "Many parents, even with the best intentions, cannot always understand their child, since they, too, have been stamped by their experience with their own parents and have grown up in a different generation."

Therapist Marilyn R. Frankfurt, of the Ackerman Institute for Family



he mere fact that adults are labeling themselves "children" suggests there's some resistance to growing up and facing adult responsibility.

share it at meetings, but I'd leave feeling worse," she says.

Some meetings were also downright frightening, says Karen. She recalls the time an angry woman screamed about her father and threw a chair across the room. "It scared the s—t out of me. I couldn't take it anymore."

"In ACOA groups, people definitely have to get through the anger and denial," says Michael Elkin, a family therapist at a school for disturbed adolescents in Stockbridge, MA. "But that's only the first step in the process—it's where people have to start. Hopefully, they'll move past the blame. However, some people get stuck—they misuse the program."

Family therapist Jo-Ann Krestan also sees some people using "recovery" in much the same way they used drugs or other substances—to avoid

her. It made it easier for me. She did inappropriate things to me as a child, such as making me her confidante and telling me about her sex life, but I was never physically abused. There is no fault, no blame. Millions of people grow up in the same kind of household I did, and they don't all drink. It was easier to blame than to take responsibility for my own lifestyle."

Equally important, Karen now also understands the context of her own mother's life. "This was the early '50s; my father traveled, my mother was young and knew nothing about having a child. She was lonely. There were no support groups then."

CONFRONTING "TOXIC PARENTS"

Had Karen read California therapist Susan Forward's *Toxic Parents*, she might have gained no such insight. Nor

Therapy in New York City, agrees that parental attitudes of the earlier child-centered *Not-Me* Generation are totally foreign to today's Me Generation. "Those earlier mothers," she says, "were told they had to shape their children and make them conform to cultural expectations. But often they had no emotional attention from their own parents. Despite this, they didn't complain. Now they're being held responsible for how their children feel."

"We're imposing ideas on the past generation that don't apply," says Frankfurt. "These Adult Children act as if their parents knew all of this and chose not to act."

But Dr. Forward offers no such compassion in *Toxic Parents*. Relentlessly presenting case after case of manipulative, selfish parents, she tells readers it's not their fault. That's fine, but as Frankfurt points out, "Forward



also implies, 'Someone's got to be responsible.' The author even goes so far as to warn readers not to be fooled by comments like, 'We did the best we could,' or, 'You'll never understand what I was going through.' She says that's the parents' problem."

Forward declined several requests to be interviewed for this article, but it's clear she has tapped into a ripe market. Drawing its examples from the extremes—people who were terribly abused—the book seems to appeal to anyone along the continuum of an "unhappy childhood." Replete with check lists to help the reader take "your psychological pulse" and "uncover your self-constricting beliefs, feelings and behaviors," *Toxic Parents* also includes a phone number "for persons interested in her methods."

Offering what appears to be a new twist in exploiting the Adult Child craze—dial-a-therapist—Forward (or an associate) charges \$40 for a 25-minute phone consultation or \$80 for 50 minutes. First you send in a check, along with the "intake fact sheet" and "confidential background information form," which incorporates a smorgasbord of 60 "problem areas." Assuming your check has cleared, a counselor will call back to set up an appointment.

Though Krestan doesn't support the idea of blaming parents, she does agree with Forward on one point: "Adult Children need to acknowledge what's theirs and what belongs to their parents—and get through the grieving process. Forward's book will certainly help validate those negative shameful experiences that people have had." Krestan adds, however, "You have to get good and God-damned angry, but that doesn't constitute healing. It's not helpful to confront and cut off."

Janet Woititz, author of the 1983 landmark work *Adult Children of Alcoholics* and an unofficial "grandmother" of the Adult Child movement, points out that an understanding of our childhood "gives us insight into who we are and what gets in the way of our achieving healthy relationships in adulthood—but that's all. If we get stuck in blame, it develops a smoke screen so that we don't have to make changes ourselves.

"Books can just offer awareness," she stresses. "Looking at our parents is step one. Then we have to look at

ourselves and what we're doing to the next generation."

BREAKING THE CYCLE

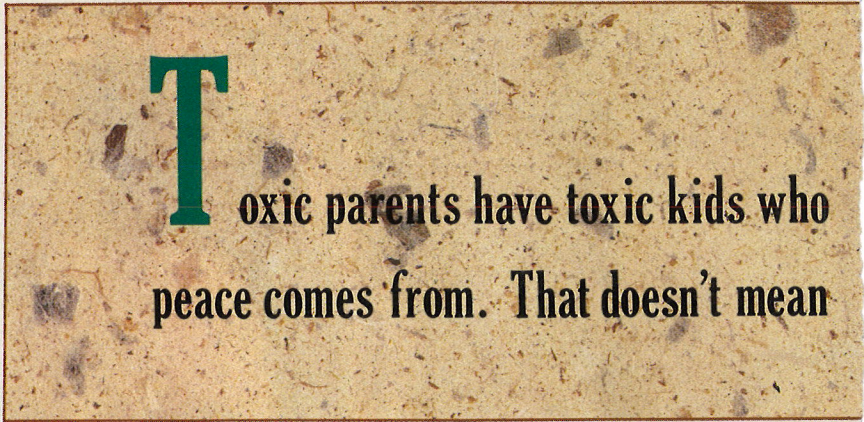
Without doubt, there are abusive parents who willfully brutalize their children, but most are themselves victims. As Michael Elkin puts it, "Toxic parents have toxic kids who become toxic parents and so on. In the end, forgiveness is the only place peace comes from. That doesn't mean overlooking the pain and harm—it means understanding that you have emerged from it."

Psychologist Augustus Napier, director of the Family Workshop in Atlanta and author of *The Fragile Bond*, about intimacy in marriage, is also opposed to "making parents the villains."

mitted across the generations. But there were no 'villains.'"

"Life is basically unfair. Our families are dealt to us like a deck of cards. So it's to the person's advantage to come to terms with the hand you were given," says Betty Carter, director of the Family Institute of Westchester, NY. "It's understandable that the person is furious about whatever happened—and I empathize and try to get him or her to ventilate the feelings. But anger and blame poison them." Forgiveness is important, adds Carter. "I don't mean an intellectual gloss-over; I mean a forgiveness of the heart that comes out of a very long journey."

Marianne Walters concurs: It comes down to "understanding your parents' lives and then negotiating a new kind of



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People have a right to their anger, he stresses, but in some cases, there's a kind of excuse-making going on for the purpose of gaining sympathy. "I help patients express their feelings about the past without having them actually take it out on the parent. My work honors both generations."

Napier tells of a professional in his 30s who was beginning to be abusive to his own son. First, Napier helped the young man look at the past two generations of his family: His abusive father also had been abused by his father (the patient's grandfather), a European immigrant who left home at 11 to become a merchant seaman and was beaten regularly by his shipmates. "There were extremes of abuse, neglect and inhuman treatment in this family—and those forces were trans-

relationship—adult to adult."

As the process of examining the past unfolds, Adult Children begin to see how the forgotten fears and pain of childhood have seeped into their adult lives. A woman whose anxiety-ridden mother forced her to wait up at night until her drunken father came home can now see one reason she's turned into a chronic worrywart. Sometimes, a parent's actions are misinterpreted. Paula Caplan remembers one woman who insisted her mother "never trusted me, never let me out of sight." It turned out that the mother, at age 13, had been molested in an outhouse, and as a parent wanted to protect her own child from similar abuse.

"If you continue to blame your parents, you'll feel all right for a while, but it's no way to live. You then use blame

to resolve other problems," Taffel observes. When many of his clients get into relationships, he says, they try to solve problems by blaming or disengaging altogether. "We need to try to see what our parents were up against," he suggests. His reason is simple: "Until you can see your parents as human beings you can't see yourself as a human being."

"Blaming is a nonproductive perspective that makes future generations suffer," agrees Dr. Harriet Lerner, author of *The Dance of Intimacy*. "When you have your own kids, you pass it on."

There's also the other side of the equation. Dr. E. Joan Emery, a New York City psychotherapist, reminds us: "The way our parents treated us is the way we will treat our aging par-

mas, the theme of blaming parents crops up frequently. Marshall Herskovitz, the show's 37-year-old executive producer, points out that the scenarios have evolved from portraying parents very negatively, to a more even-handed, forgiving view of the older generation.

In one early show aired in 1987, "The Parents Are Coming, The Parents Are Coming," Hope, who had never gotten along with her mother, is relentless in refusing to see the older woman as anything but judgmental and intrusive. "Letters poured in from baby boomers, who, without exception, were relieved to see that other people had the same problems with their parents," says Herskovitz. "Parents, on the other hand, wrote about how distressed they were to see par-

through periods where they want to throw rocks, but that should be short-lived. After that we need to move away from shame and blame and make people aware of how certain types of family systems pass abuse on as if it's a virus."

The recent publication—and instant popularity—of Dwight Lee Wolter's newest book, *Forgiving Our Parents*, also mirrors a hopeful trend. Wolter, 39, in recovery as an Adult Child for the past five years, said he couldn't have written the book earlier. "But I finally walked around angry at my parents long enough.

"I'm not talking about the fact that my daddy wouldn't let me go to Harvard. Mine is an open-and-shut case of child abuse," says Wolter, referring to an anecdote in his first book: One day

become toxic parents. In the end, forgiveness is the only place overlooking the harm—it means understanding you have emerged from it.

ents. We can stop passing the buck if we finally look at the transgenerational picture. And from one generation to the next we can heal some of the wounds."

A MORE FORGIVING FUTURE

The baby boomers are now referred to as the Sandwich Generation—caught between the needs of their children and the needs of their aging parents. Baby boom chronicler Landon Jones suggests parent bashing may be just an evolutionary step toward the Me Generation's finally accepting the burden of middle age. Indeed, there are signs the Adult Child movement is in transition.

On *thirtysomething*, the popular TV series designed to depict real-life dra-

ents shown in such an unfavorable light."

In contrast, on a show two years later, Gary, whose father is now dead, blames his mother for taking his father's side. The mother, as well as Gary's live-in girlfriend, tells him it's time to grow up. Herskovitz sees a trend: "Since I was in college people have been blaming their parents. But I see a movement toward actively dealing with these issues. I think it's extremely positive—we're moving from blaming our parents to forgiving them."

If, in fact, "Life imitates art," he may be right. There are other heartening signs as well. Anthony Jones, founder of the National Association of Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families, contends, "People first have to go

when he forgot to walk his dog, to teach young Dwight a lesson, his father shot the dog. "The question no longer is: 'Who is to blame?' or 'How could they do such things?'" Wolter writes. "The question is: 'Who has been hurt and how can we get [him] back on track?'"

And as Adult Children mature, moving from anger and blame toward forgiveness and acceptance, they might also teach society a valuable lesson about being human. In Wolter's words, "As we begin to forgive our parents, we begin to forgive ourselves. And we begin to forgive the world for not being perfect either." ♥

Melinda Blau is a New York-based writer who reports frequently on mental health and family issues.