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Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



A Family Emergency by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

“Growing up I felt a huge emptiness inside — like I'm a nobody screaming, 'Somebody love me; somebody tell me who I am.’”

— Isabel



Does this sound like you, or someone you know? You are not alone!

What constitutes a family emergency? There is an increase in the national suicide rate! Perceived emergencies, or the inability to cope with internal anxiety, have provided an opportunity to discuss the impact of walls versus boundaries. Individuals who carry a rigid all or nothing, win/lose mind-set, often transfer this dynamic out into the world — into their marriages, their workplaces, their communities, even the government. A parent’s inability to handle anxiety often gets translated into instant-gratification or misery on larger scale. Many families experience problems from time to time, even crises, but in highly dysfunctional families this sense of “emergency” is ongoing and chronic.

Left untreated, things can escalate from misery to tragedy, as it did in the case of Gabriel’s family.

Gabriel

Let me tell you about Gabriel. He was a handsome, intelligent, and artistically talented 16-year-old who suffered from pseudo-seizures, meaning his seizures were psychologically, not neurologically based. They were severe enough to keep him from being able to attend school which meant he was stuck at home with his alcoholic father and his strikingly beautiful but nervous wreck of a mother (whom he adored). Things were so volatile and chaotic on a daily basis that Gabriel felt there was nothing he could count on. There was no secure ground to walk on, no roots to rely on. He couldn’t even rely on the words or behaviors of his parents because words and rules stated one day lost their meaning the next. He had no sense of a “holding” environment at home, no one to lean on or protect him from himself. He became more and more confused about right, wrong, but his attempts to communicate with his walled-off parents about his confusions ended up in arguments or blame. His father would pound “right thinking” into Gabriel’s head — while driving drunk. His mother would try to hold the household together but end up shaking, yelling and screaming, throwing dad out and then taking him back.

When his parents finally divorced, Gabriel got lost in the drama and shuffle. His mother, so overwhelmed by her stress and limited emotional resources, she was oblivious to the fact that her son was falling apart right under her nose. Gabriel, left to his own devices, desperate to satisfy his unmet need for love, connection, admiration, and attention, stumbled upon a coping strategy that initially seemed to work for him: *Facebook*. This social media platform provided him with a validating audience and plenty of attention when he threatened to commit suicide and videotaped his own pseudo-seizures. Things ended tragically, however. Gabriel’s pain led him to suicide, and it was carried on his *Facebook* page!

Accessing Self-Agency

Clearly, Gabriel needed a lot more than *Facebook* “therapy” to soothe his tortured soul, lower his anxiety, get the parental approval he craved, and stop his self-destructive behaviors. He needed *constructive* projects (art perhaps)

that would build-up his fragile sense of self. He also needed a secure “holding” environment to access *self-agency* so he could rely on himself instead of his walled-off parents to begin to make healthy life choices.

Left without coping strategies, people like Gabriel’s parents extinguish the richness, the inborn potential of their developing child. Instead, families with a rigid, all-or- nothing, win/lose mind-set, transfer this dysfunctional dynamic out into the world into their workplaces, their communities, even their governments, creating the kind of misery Gabriel suffered, only on a larger scale.

Treatment for this kind of dynamic is complex but doable. Blame doesn’t lie just with the dysfunctional parent, partner, boss, or political leader. Responsibility also lies with the submissive “victim” for not acquiring tools to advocate for the self. — “*the buck needs to stop here!*” The lesson is that a *different consciousness* can occur (if the therapeutic work is done) so others won’t have to suffer Gabriel’s fate.

Gabriel’s chaotic, critical, and enmeshed family put up walls which prevented engagement, communication, and empathy — instead of developing healthy personal boundaries to protect our sense of self, our personal space, and give us the emotional space to make competent, well-thought-out decisions/choices instead of giving in to pressure from others or from one’s own inner critic. When intact boundaries are clear and flexible, they give the child a “holding” environment, enable him/her to separate, and offer a sense of well-being. Thus, a sense of self-agency is developed within relational contexts. Such a “holding” environment would have helped Gabriel develop a solid sense of self and protected him from unbearable pain that resulted in his suicide. Gabriel's parents learned from his death and, in fact, it forced them to face their pain, and they began working together.

Schedule an appointment to work on your own struggles in individual, couples, or group therapy. Please call:
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Thank you for your support!
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