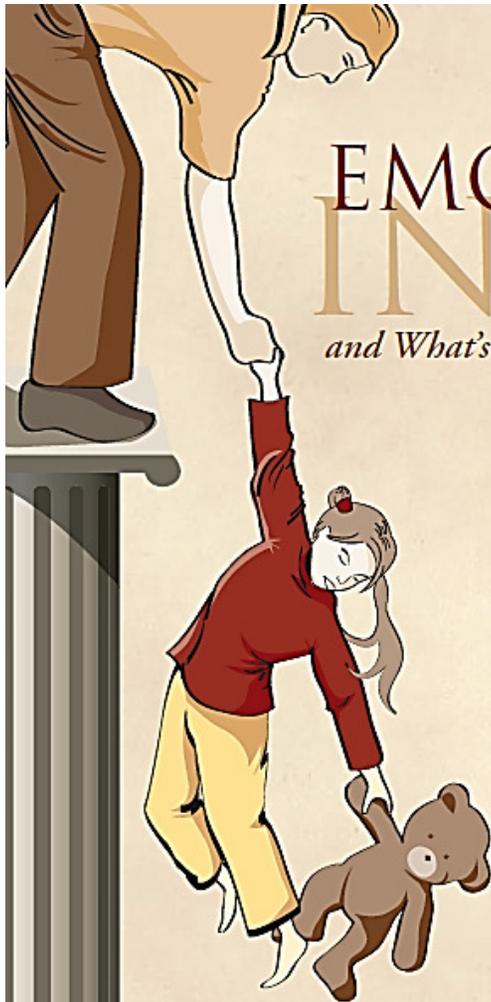


# EMOTIONAL INCEST:

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The Elephant in the Therapeutic Room



# EMOTIONAL INCEST

*and What's Wrong about Being Special*

**A**lysa was 32 years old and struggling with commitment when she decided to seek counseling. It was in one of our early sessions that I asked about her family and in particular, about her parent's marriage.

"My parents had a good marriage—not great, but...you know—good. I know there were times that my dad wasn't happy, but you don't stay together if you're not happy!"

"Really? What makes you so sure?" I asked.

"Look—I saw my parent's marriage. I know that it wasn't perfect. What marriage or relationship is? My mother didn't always appreciate him, but I understood what he was really all about. There were times that he probably wanted to leave. We would talk about it because I'm the one who saw how exasperating his marriage could be. I gave him a perspective on things that no one else did. At times, he was so lonely. But, he felt so much better after we spoke. We had that special bond between us. My older brother and younger sister didn't get him, but I did. They were too busy being kids."

How Alysa viewed her father and his adulation was cloaked in a seductive fantasy of his love and adoration; a fantasy that would be a therapeutic challenge to explore and delicately reframe.

Alysa was already experiencing long standing consequences of privilege. She just wasn't yet aware. Alysa doubted her many partners' attributes despite verbalizing her love for them. She often stated that she felt suffocated by showered affection, but nonetheless chose to become engaged on two occasions, only to then suddenly break off the engagements.

In working with Alysa and other clients like her, I know that the seduction of being "the special one" is a hard, delusional nut to crack. The challenge lays in breaking through the denial and illusion that the parent's love and attention is destructive and emotionally demanding of the child.

By Debra L. Kaplan,  
MA, LAC, LISAC, EMDR-II

In an otherwise healthy parent child relationship, the child is not required to meet the needs of the parent. Nor is there an inappropriate outlet of sexually charged emotion toward a child. It is a long held belief that without direct sexual contact no harm is done.

Overt sexual abuse speaks to the direct sexual contact and exploitation of a dependent person/victim by caregivers or authority figures. A child, in these circumstances often feels trapped and used. Depending on the nature of the abuse and by whom the abuse was perpetrated, a child often feels shame and fear, perhaps having been directly solicited for the interaction or singled out and "groomed".

By contrast, covert sexual abuse or emotional incest involves the indirect yet sexualized, emotional abuse of a child or dependent. While no physical boundaries have been crossed and no direct sexual contact has been perpetrated, the parent or parents willingly enlist the emotional support of the child in healing his/her own unmet adult needs. In turn, the child becomes the confidant or emotional spouse of a same-sex or opposite sex parent.

Even within a seemingly functional family where there is not the obvious presence of addictions this otherwise inverted parent-child dynamic evolves. In a stressed marriage or a single family dynamic, the parent begins to burden the child by emotionally soliciting the child for his or her relational needs. In this way an inappropriate discussion of adult concerns are shared with a child.

As the marriage and/or family dynamic continues to unravel, the dependency upon the child increases. This already breached psychological boundary between child and parental caregiver, nurturer, and protector is crossed and the child becomes the defacto caregiver, nurturer and protector of the parent.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DEBRA L. KAPLAN,  
MA, LAC, LISAC, EMDR-II

Debra L. Kaplan is a practicing licensed therapist in Tucson, Arizona. She integrates her training with Pia Melody into her work with PTSD and co-occurring addictions.

“Covert sexual abuse is devastating largely in part due to the indirect and insidious nature of the abuse.”

What ensues is the adult's engagement of the child in a role that the child is not capable of fulfilling yet might feel special or privileged in so doing. Clearly in this dynamic the child is covertly, emotionally abandoned by the parent(s) and being robbed of her or his childhood. Therein lays the inherent difference between overt and covert sexual abuse.

The privilege or exclusivity in being overtly, sexually abused carries an instinctive sense of danger, fear and shame that is not present with covert sexual abuse or emotional incest. In Alysa's case, at the age of 32, she was not aware of or outwardly burdened by being her father's intimate other. This imbued family role of confidant still held self perceived prestige and power.

Covert sexual abuse is devastating largely in part due to the indirect and insidious nature of the abuse. Caving to emotional demands that are too burdensome, the abused may experience some or all of the following symptoms as a result:

- Codependent behavior (inappropriate boundaries or no boundaries at all)
- Guilt about practicing self care especially when the offending parent is concerned (an unrealistic sense of obligation to that parent)
- Difficulties related to sexual identity or gender
- Feelings of inadequacy
- Love/hate relationship with offending parent
- Difficulty in maintaining relationships due to abused individual's idealization and devaluation of others and an inappropriate expectations placed on partners
- Compulsivity that can include sex, substances, alcohol, work, food
- Patterns of triangulation (indirect communication) in work, family or romantic relationships
- Issues related to sex addiction/avoidance or love addiction/avoidance

*Continued on Page 14*

# Emotional Incest:

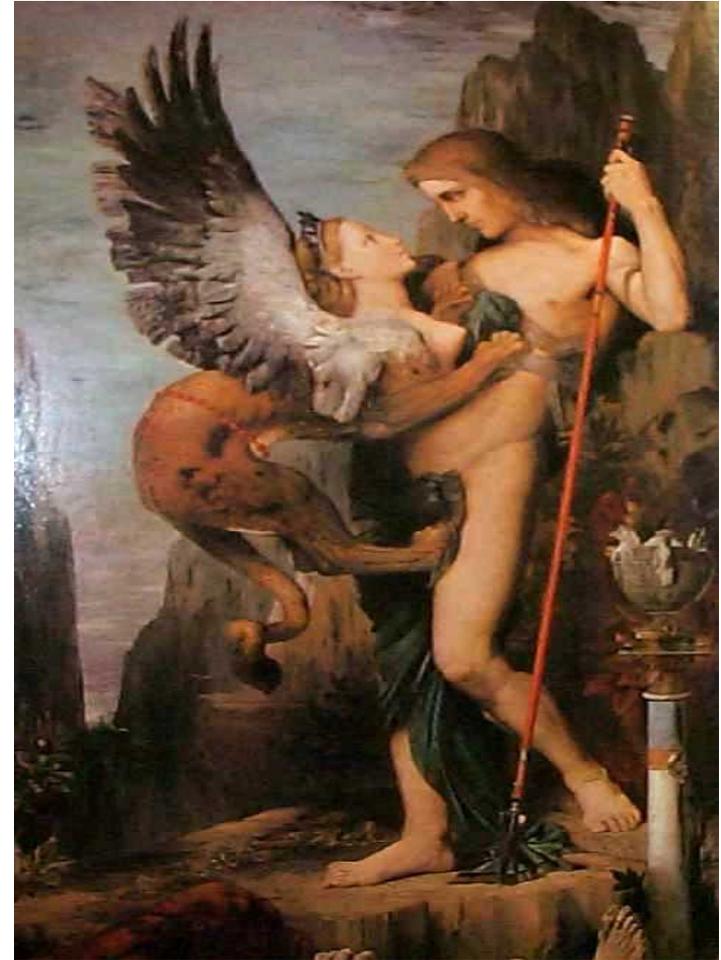
- Define emotional incest (EI) and covert sexual abuse (CSA)
- Explore parent-child subsystems and alliances
- Identify and explore at risk family dynamics
- Examine behavioral, addictive and relational sequelae thru the lifespan
- Healthy Relating and Beyond



*"Quit parentalizing me!"*

# Oedipus Complex

According to Freudian theory, the complex appears during these so-called 'oedipal phase' of libidinal and ego development; (Ages 3 -5).  
“The [male] childhood desire to sleep with the mother and to kill the father.”



# Electra Complex



A female's psychosexual development involving her sexual attachment to father (analogous to a boy's attachment to his mother) that forms the basis of the Oedipus complex. - **Carl Jung** (1913)

# Incest in Victorian Literature

“What is consistent between life and literature, however, is that the most common incestuous relationship occurs between fathers and daughters. Precipitating causes for these relationships in real life mirror those represented in literature—an absent mother, a nubile daughter, and/or a radical polarization in the family.”



“The taboo of incest in the physical, emotional, and moral senses was a familiar and persistent theme in literature during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, and consequently has been a popular focus of modern critical discussion.”

# Incest:

**“Sexual activity between two people who are considered, for moral or genetic reasons, too closely related to have such a relationship.”**

*(Encarta Dictionary, 2009)*

## What is Emotional Incest?

- An **emotionally engaged relationship** between a parent and a child that does not involve direct sexual contact.
- This parent-child relationship serves the emotional needs and feelings of the parent.

## What is Covert Sexual Abuse?

- A form of **sexual abuse** when a child is the sexualized object of a parent's attention, affection and/or preoccupation.
- S/he serves the role of a surrogate husband or wife to needy parent.
- Role imposes a **sexualized relationship on the parent/child dynamic**.

# Differences between EI and CSA

## Emotional Incest

The parent child bond is defined by the child's excessive feelings of responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of the parent. There may exist a parental demand for loyalty to that lonely or needy parent.

Fear, obligation and guilt become the principle emotions in the child's development.

## Covert Sexual Abuse

The child's developing sexuality is impaired as the demand for loyalty to the parent and the needs of the developing child self, clash.

If the covert sexual abuse is not resolved, attempts at adult intimate contact reinforce the incestuous template of entrapment and disloyalty.

# Family Systems



# Family System Theorists

## **Salvadore Minuchin** (b1921 -)

Minuchin developed *Structural Family Therapy*. Model emphasizes organization of the family unit. Minuchin identified two patterns common to unhealthy families:

- **Enmeshed:** Chaotic and tightly interconnected
- **Disengaged:** Isolated and seemingly unrelated

# Family System Theorists

**Murray Bowen** (b1913 -1990)

The Bowenian model emphasizes:

- **Differentiation of self** –the ability to remain oneself in the face of group influences, especially the intense influence of family life.
- **Considers the thoughts and feelings of each family member**—as well as “the larger contextual network of family relationships that shapes the lie of the family.”

Milky Way  
as  
Family System

Differentiation of self

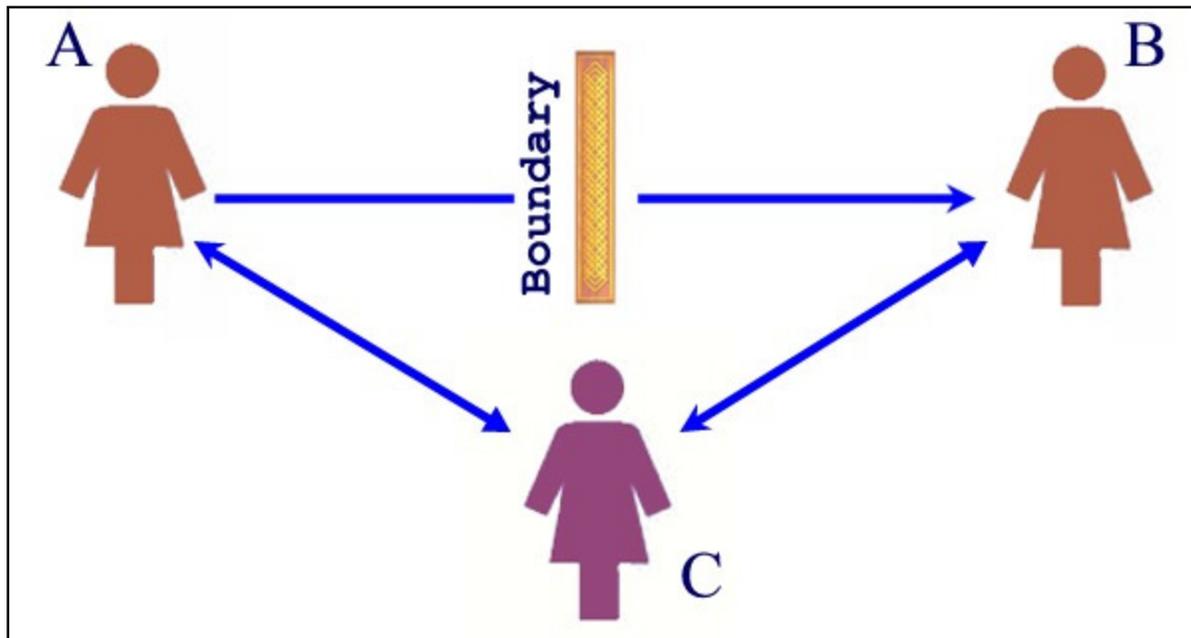


# Family System Theorists

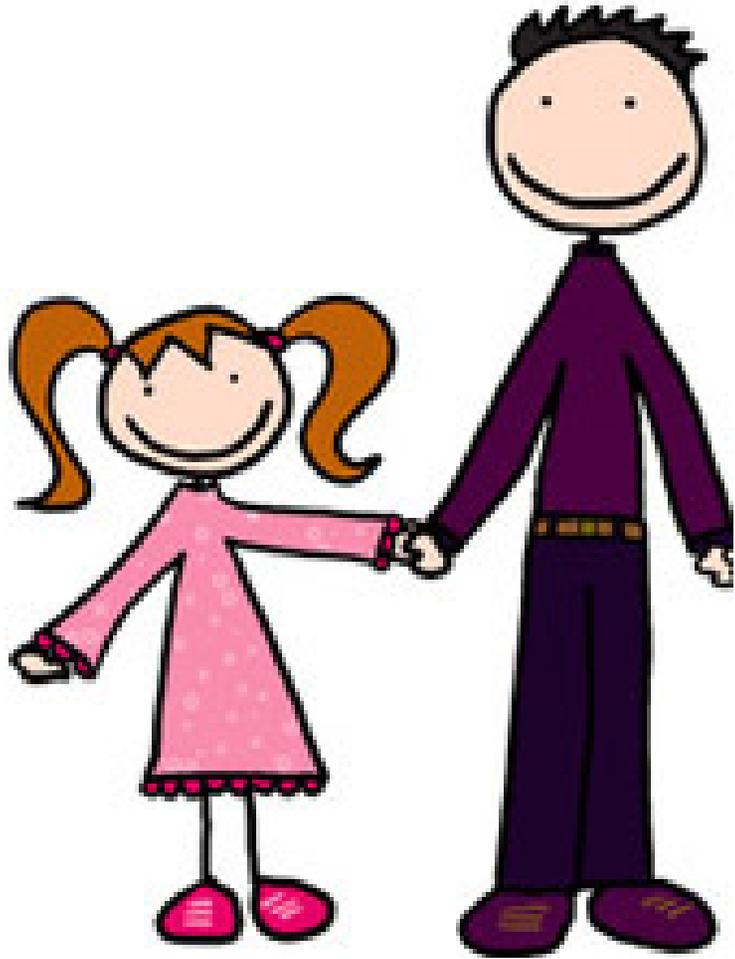
## Murray Bowen cont'd.

- A twosome may “reach out” and **pull in the other person to discharge tension.**
- **This triangle dilutes the anxiety** and has a higher tolerance for dealing with stress.
- When anxiety in the triangle subsides, the emotional configuration returns to the peaceful twosome plus the outsider.

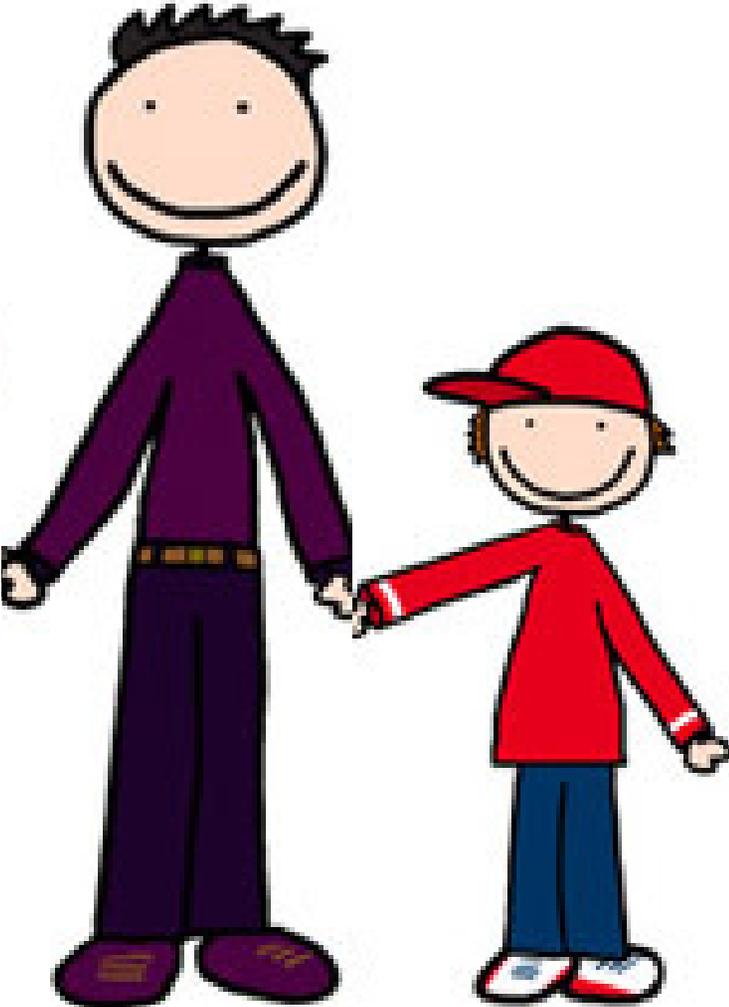
# Triangulation

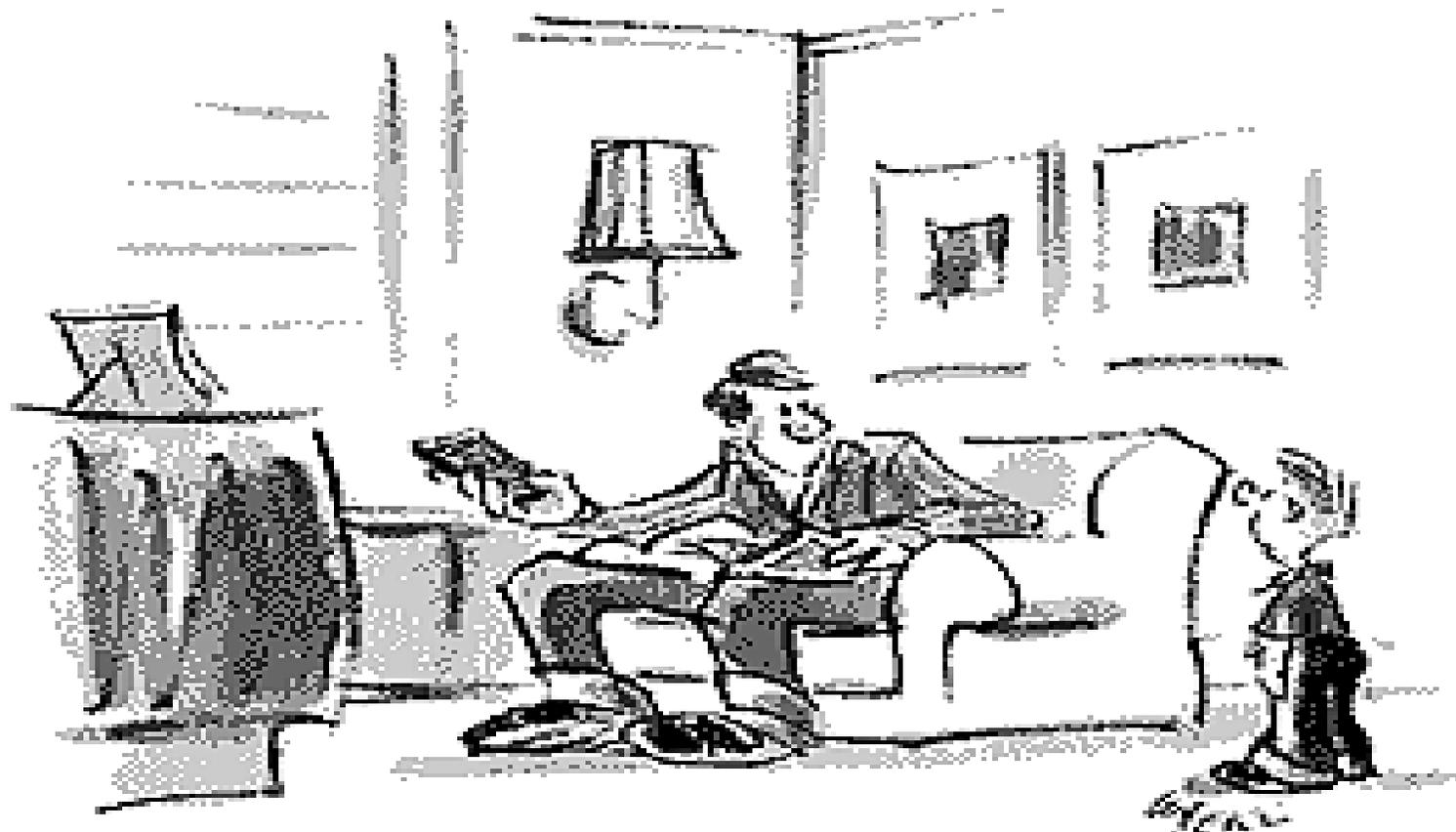












*"During the next stage of my development, Dad, I'll be drawing closer to my mother—I'll get back to you in my teens."<sup>13</sup>*



# **Families At Risk**

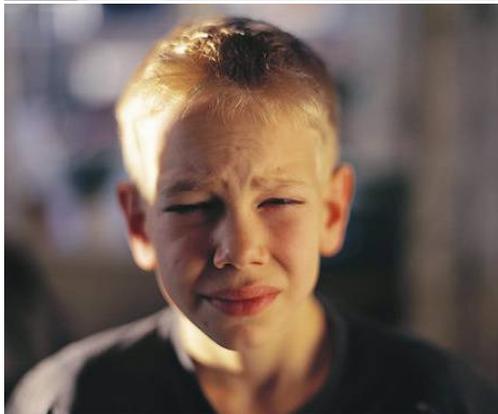
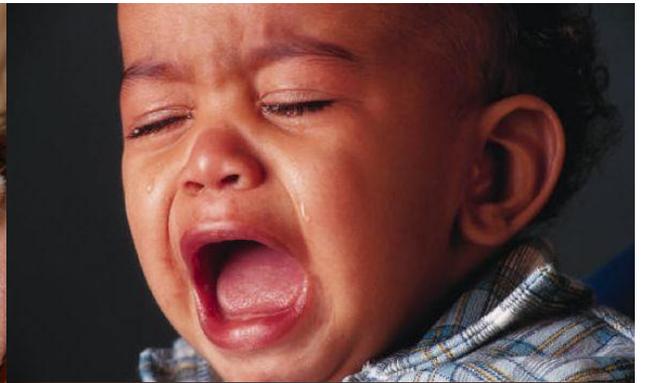
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*“My mom has a new boyfriend, my dad has a new girlfriend, and all I got was a new therapist.”*

## **Families at Risk**

- Single Parent Family Dynamic
- Presence of Mental Illness
- Imprisoned Parent
- Presence of Chemical or Process Addictions
- Physical, Emotional, Sexual, Psychological abuse between parents



The  
ACE  
Study



## The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study (95-'97)

- Recurrent physical abuse
- Recurrent emotional abuse
- Contact sexual abuse
- An alcohol and/or drug abuser in the household
- An incarcerated household member
- Someone who is chronically depressed, mentally ill, institutionalized, or suicidal
- Mother is treated violently
- One or no parents
- Emotional or physical neglect

## Families At Risk

In ACOA families where one or both of the parents abuse substances and/or alcohol, healthy family roles can become blurred...

- There is an increased chance of surrogate spouse/adult.
- A child is robbed of his/her own childhood.
- As the emotional burden mounts, depression, low self-esteem and other compensatory behaviors may develop.

# Parenting

- Neglectful Parent
- Enmeshed Parent: Opposite/Same Sex
- Critical and/or Abusive Parent
- Sexualizing Parent

# Neglectful Parent

- Insufficient maternal/infant mirroring and stimulation
- Deprivation of touch
- Inattentive parent due to presence of mental illness and/or addictions
- Parental absence for extended periods of time
- Loose boundaries or boundary less parenting style
- Disorganized and/or chaotic family units
- Crisis driven parenting style



*"Your mother and I are feeling overwhelmed, so you'll have to bring yourselves up."*

## Enmeshed Parent: Opposite/Same Sex Parent

- Over involvement by parent in child's personal life
- Parent befriending child/adolescent
- Potential boy/girlfriends not being good enough
- Special privileges given by parent to one child
- Comfort and/or advice giving to parent by child
- Idolization of a parent by child
- Shared confidences and withheld information from other parent



## Critical and/or Abusive Parent

- Needs of child ignored, invalidated, and/or dismissed
- Potential boy/girlfriends “not good enough”
- Parent’s addictions take preferential value
- Sexual name calling by parent
- Shaming overt/covert messages by parent
- Unrealistic expectations of a child
- Valued and devalued presence of a child

# Sexualizing Parent

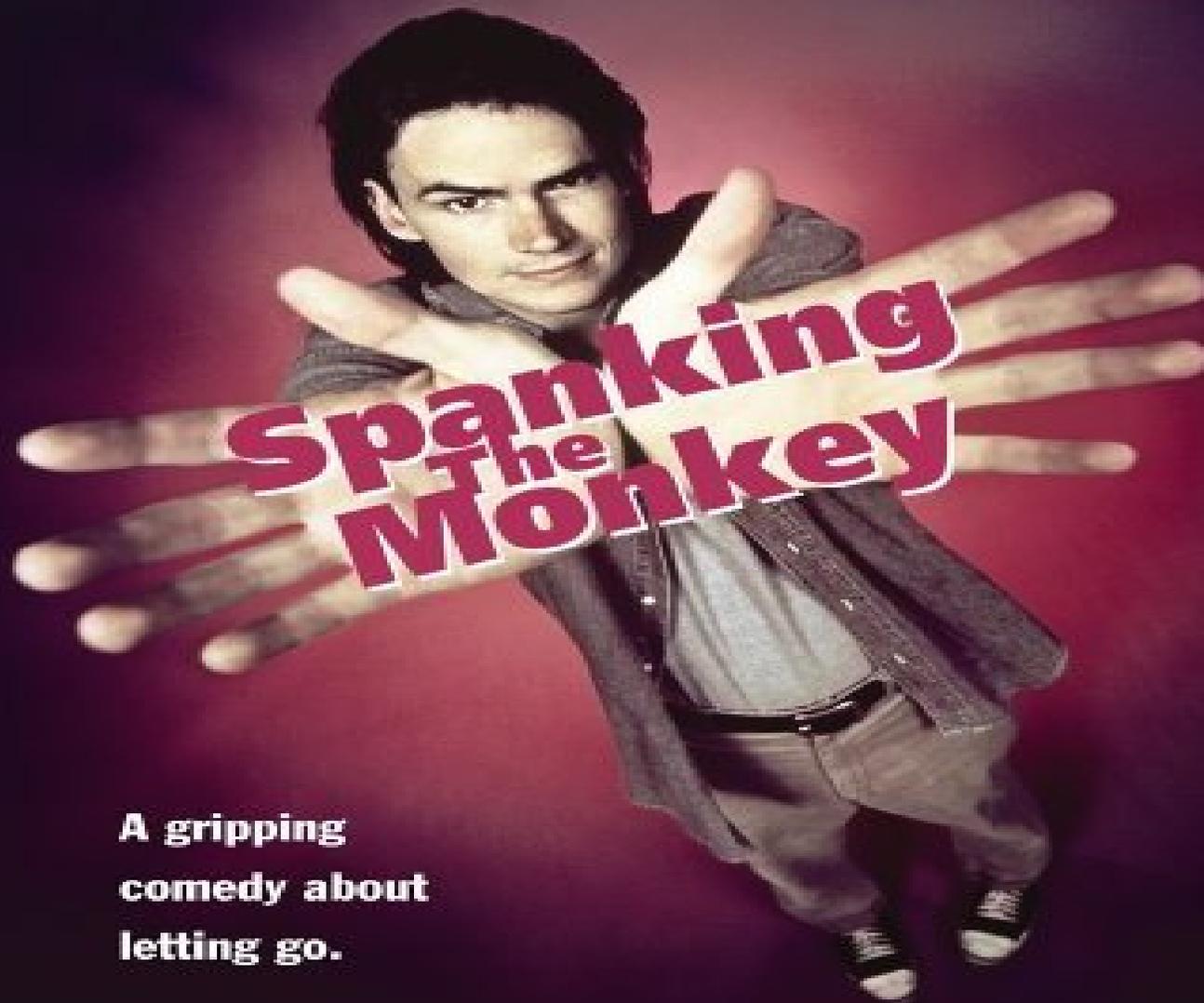
## **Covert and/or overt sexualized behaviors:**

- 'Accidental' touching
- Exposing a child to parental nudity or sexuality
- Exposing a child to pornographic material
- Sexually intrusive hygiene
- Ridiculing the physical changes that accompany puberty
- Sexual hugs or touching inappropriate
- Voyeurism, sexualized or objectifying comments

From the director of **THREE KINGS** and **FLIRTING WITH DISASTER**

**"Shockingly Funny."**

—Peter Travers, **ROLLING STONE**



A gripping  
comedy about  
letting go.

**DVD**  
VIDEO

# The SQUID and the WHALE



# Outcomes Across the Lifespan

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# Adverse Outcomes of EI/CSA

## Behaviors/Addictions:

- Codependency
- ETOH/Substance
- Eating Disorders
- Suicidality
  - Adolescent fe/male suicide risk
- Sexual Compulsivity and Addiction
  - Behavioral Sex Types
- Love/Relationship Addiction and Avoidance



# Core Symptoms of Codependency



- Difficulty experiencing appropriate levels of self-esteem
- Difficulty setting functional boundaries with other people
- Difficulty owning one's own reality appropriately
- Difficulty addressing interdependently one's adult needs and wants
- Difficulty experiencing and expressing one's reality in moderation



“Despite the connection between chemical dependency and intimacy dysfunction, the intimacy concerns are rarely recognized in the diagnosis, treatment, and aftercare of the chemically dependent person and his or family.”

***“Chemical Dependency and Intimacy Dysfunction (Journal of Chemical Dependency Treatment) (Journal of Chemical Dependency Treatment)”***  
Publisher: Routledge, Edmond J Coleman 1987

# Food Preoccupation for Control



# FAQs on Suicide

- Women attempt suicide three times as much as men.
- The higher rate of attempted suicide in women is attributed to the elevated rate of mood disorders among females, such as major depression, dysthymia and seasonal affective disorder.
- Although women attempt suicide more often, men complete suicide at a rate four times that of women.
- Firearms are now the leading method of suicide in women, as well as men.
- Suicide is more common among women who are single, recently separated, divorced, or widowed.
- The precipitating life events for women who attempt suicide tend to be interpersonal losses or crises in significant social or family relationships.
- The rate of suicide in men 65+ is **seven times** that of females who are 65+.
- The suicide rates for women peak between the ages of 45-54 years old, and again after age 75

## Secondary Symptoms...

- Negative control
- Resentment
- Impaired spirituality
- Addictions
- Mental or physical illness
- Difficulty with intimacy

## Gender Differential:

### **Male Addictions/Behaviors:**

- ETOH
- Substance Abuse
- Sibling Incest
- Seeks sexual control
- Anger/Rage
- Suicide risk

**Six times more male adolescents ages 15-19 commit suicide than females**

### **Female Addictions/Behaviors:**

- ETOH
- Substance Abuse
- Sibling Incest
- Promiscuity and connection seeking sexual behavior
- Surrogate mother
- Depression/anxiety
- Suicide risk

**Suicide attempts are far more common in adolescent females than in adolescent males.**



Relational

Consequences

- 
- Guilt about practicing self care (an unrealistic sense of obligation to that parent)
  - Difficulties related to sexual identity or gender
  - Love/hate relationship with offending parent
  - Difficulty in maintaining relationships (idealization and devaluation of others )
  - Patterns of triangulation (indirect communication)
  - Love addiction/avoidance
  - Issues related to sex addiction/avoidance

# Dismissing Style

Consider Sex Addict – Love Avoidant



## Going on for Her

- Emotionally Avoidant
- Holds the Power
- Unable/Unwilling to share intimacy
- Walls not boundaries
- Withholds emotion
- Love Avoidant

# Preoccupied or Anxious Style

Consider Trauma Bonding or COSA

## Going on for Her



- Emotionally Vulnerable
- Fears  
Rejection/Abandonment
- Gives away her Power
- Boundary-less
- Shares too much emotion
- Love Addict

# Preoccupied Style

Consider Trauma Bonding or COSA

## Going on for Him



- Emotionally Vulnerable
- Fears Rejection/Abandonment
- Gives away his Power
- Boundary-less
- Shares too much emotion
- Love Addict

# Avoidant Style

Consider Sex Addict – Love Avoidant



## Going on for Him

- Emotionally Avoidant
- Holds the Power
- Unable/Unwilling to share intimacy
- Walls not boundaries
- Withholds emotion
- Love Avoidant

## Abandonment And Neglect



## Sets Up Love Addiction



# Enmeshment

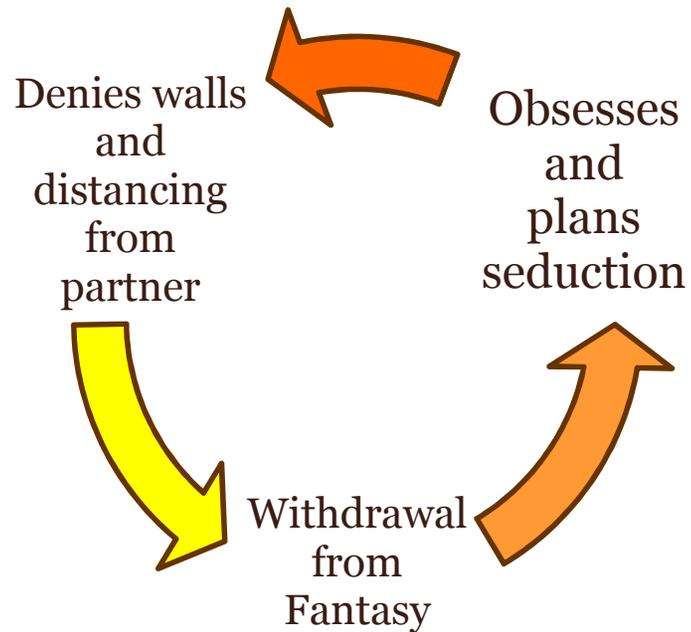
**Sets Up  
Love Avoidance**



# Love Addiction/Avoidance

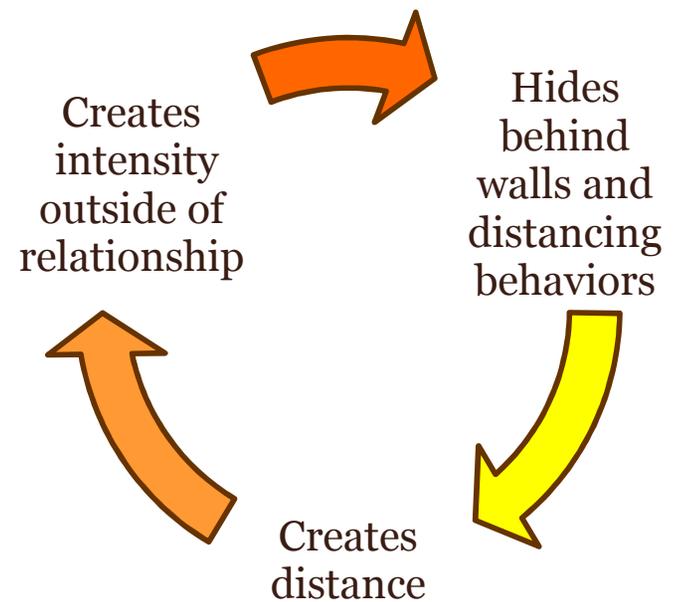
## Abandonment/Neglect

### SETS UP LOVE ADDICTION



## Enmeshment

### SETS UP LOVE AVOIDANCE





# **Sexual Compulsivity and Addiction**

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## **Sexual Types:**

- Fantasy Sex (common among CSA survivors)
- Seductive Role Sex
- Trading Sex
- Intrusive Sex
- Exploitive Sex
- Pornography
- Prostitution and Escorts



## Barriers to Change

Family allegiance

Cultural loyalty

Insecure/anxious attachment to single parent

Collusion between parent/child

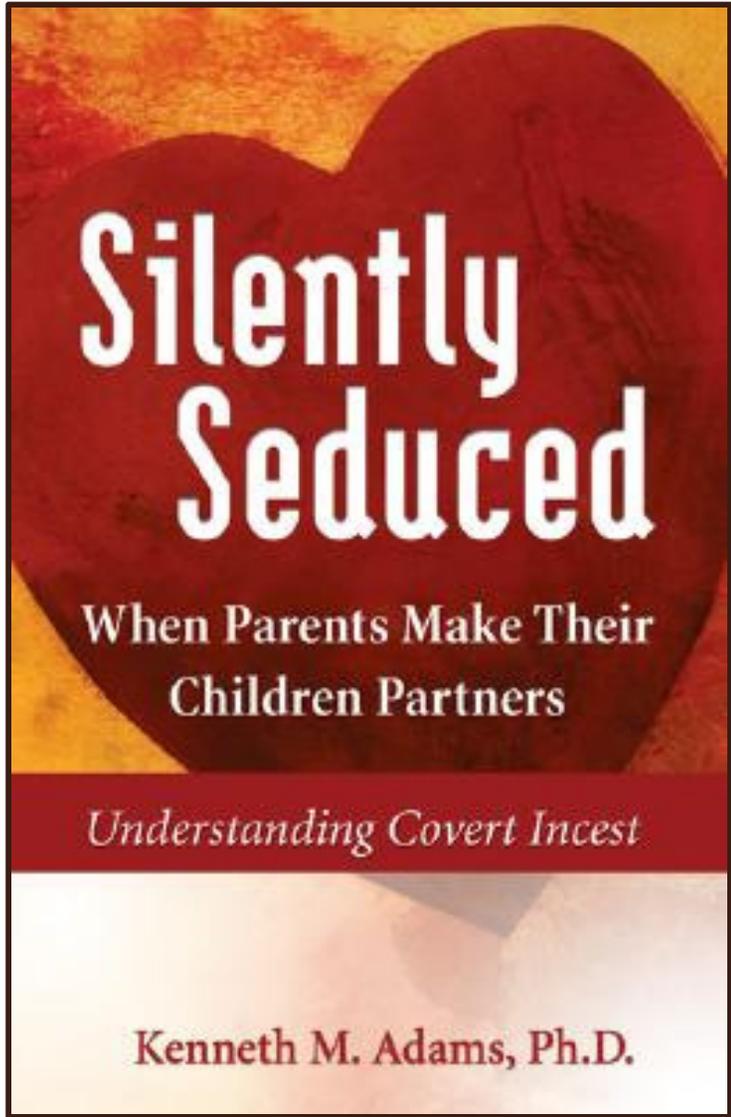
Shame and Guilt

# Boundaries and Beyond...



## Look Inward...

- The family-of-origin parent/child dynamic; rules and roles
- Know your FOO fantasy vs. reality
- Explore your core beliefs and blocking cognitive distortions
- Identify benefits of self defeating behaviors and/or secondary gain
- Identify compulsive behaviors (addictions)



**Ken Adams, Ph.D.**

**Kenneth M. Adams, Ph.D.**

When He's  
Married to  
MOM

*How to Help Mother-Enmeshed  
Men Open Their Hearts to  
TRUE LOVE and COMMITMENT*

KENNETH M. ADAMS, Ph.D.,  
*with* ALEXANDER P. MORGAN

**Ken Adams, Ph.D.**

# The Emotional Incest Syndrome

"A landmark study of a very important phenomenon that offers brilliant, positive, achievable paths to a resolution... Should be required reading."  
—Harville Hendrix, author of *Getting the Love You Want*

# What to Do When a Parent's Love Rules Your Life

Dr. Patricia Love  
with Jo Robinson

Pat Love, Ed.D.

# Goals in Therapy

## **Guilt and Shame:**

Reframe fantasy/family reality

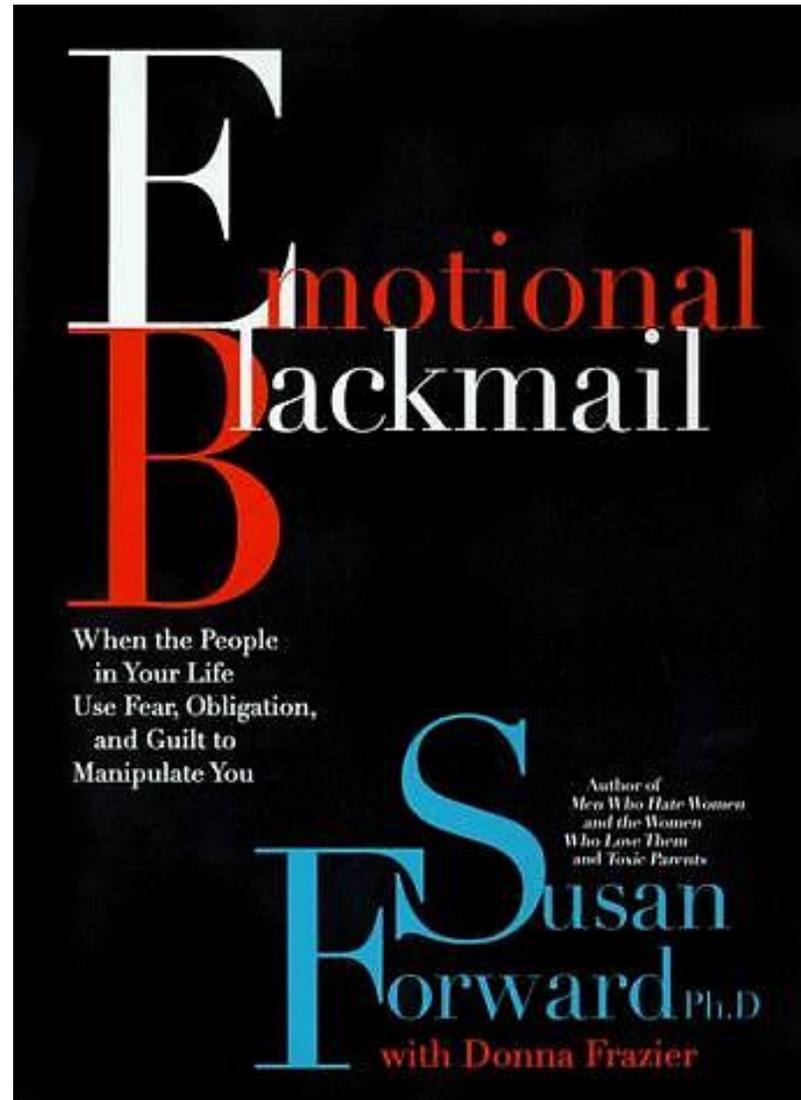
Are you willing to hold self/parent accountable?

Know your mood

Identify any concepts of powerlessness

FOG (fear, obligation, guilt)

Acceptance and forgiveness of self and/or another



Susan Forward, Ph.D.

## In Therapy Identify and Explore...

- **“Wounded child,” “Adaptive child,” and “Functional adult”**.
- **Addictive behaviors**
- **Your family role:**
  - **Hero**
  - **Victim**
  - **Lost Child**
- **Intergenerational behaviors**
- **EMDR**
- **12-Step**

# Summary

- Define emotional incest (EI) and covert sexual abuse (CSA)
- Explore parent-child subsystems and alliances
- Identify and explore at risk family dynamics
- Examine behavioral, addictive and relational consequences thru the lifespan
- Healthy Relating and Beyond



# The Meadows Lecture Series

For more information

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