

Exercise: Assessing Your Parent's Emotional Immaturity

Human emotional immaturity has been studied for a long time. However, over the years it has lost ground to an increasing focus on symptoms and clinical diagnosis, using a medical disease model to quantify behaviors as illnesses suitable for insurance reimbursement. But in terms of a deep understanding of people, assessing emotional immaturity is often far more useful, as you're likely to discover by completing this exercise.

Read through the following statements and check any that describe your parent.

- My parent often overreacted to relatively minor things.
- My parent didn't express much empathy or emotional awareness.
- When it came to emotional closeness and feelings, my parent seemed uncomfortable and didn't go there.
- My parent was often irritated by individual differences or different points of view.
- When I was growing up, my parent used me as a confidant but wasn't a confidant for me.
- My parent often said and did things without thinking about people's feelings.
- I didn't get much attention or sympathy from my parent, except maybe when I was really sick.
- My parent was inconsistent—sometimes wise, sometimes unreasonable.
- If I became upset, my parent either said something superficial and unhelpful or got angry and sarcastic.
- Conversations mostly centered on my parent's interests.
- Even polite disagreement could make my parent very defensive.
- It was deflating to tell my parent about my successes because it didn't seem to matter.
- Facts and logic were no match for my parent's opinions.
- My parent wasn't self-reflective and rarely looked at his or her role in a problem.
- My parent tended to be a black-and-white thinker, and unreceptive to new ideas.

How many of these statements describe your parent? Since all these items are potential signs of emotional immaturity, checking more than one suggests you very well may have been dealing with an emotionally immature parent.

Exercise: Assessing Your Childhood Difficulties with an Emotionally Immature Parent

Emotional immaturity shows itself most clearly in relationships, and its impacts are especially profound when the relationship is between a parent and child. Read through the following statements, which outline some of the most painful difficulties emotionally immature parents cause for their children, and check off all that reflect your childhood experience.

- _____ I didn't feel listened to; I rarely received my parent's full attention.
- _____ My parent's moods affected the whole household.
- _____ My parent wasn't sensitive to my feelings.
- _____ I felt like I should have known what my parent wanted without being told.
- _____ I felt like I could never do enough to make my parent happy.
- _____ I was trying harder to understand my parent than my parent was trying to understand me.
- _____ Open, honest communication with my parent was difficult or impossible.
- _____ My parent thought people should play their roles and not deviate from them.
- _____ My parent was often intrusive or disrespectful of my privacy.
- _____ I always felt that my parent thought I was too sensitive and emotional.
- _____ My parent played favorites in terms of who got the most attention.
- _____ My parent stopped listening when he or she didn't like what was being said.
- _____ I often felt guilty, stupid, bad, or ashamed around my parent.
- _____ My parent rarely apologized or tried to improve the situation when there was a problem between us.
- _____ I often felt pent-up anger toward my parent that I couldn't express.

Each of these statements is linked to characteristics described in chapter 3 of *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents*. Your parent may not have all the characteristics I describe, but checking off more than one of the items suggests some level of emotional immaturity.

Exercise: Determining Your Parent's Type

To assess which of these four types might fit your parent, read through the following lists and check off the characteristics you associate with your parent, bearing in mind that parents of any type can exhibit traits of the other types when very stressed. Characteristics of emotional immaturity common to all types include self-preoccupation, low empathy, disregard for boundaries, resisting emotional intimacy, poor communication, an absence of self-reflection, refusal to repair relationship problems, emotional reactivity, impulsiveness, and problems sustaining emotional closeness. (At the end of the exercise, you'll find a table that conveniently summarizes these traits.)

Emotional Parent

- Is preoccupied with his or her own needs
- Has low empathy
- Is enmeshed and not respectful of boundaries
- Is defensively nonintimate
- Doesn't engage in reciprocal communication; just talks about himself or herself
- Isn't self-reflective
- Has poor relationship repair skills
- Is reactive, not thoughtful
- Is either too close or too distant
- Blows up or cuts others off
- Has frightening or intimidating emotional intensity
- Expects his or her child to provide soothing and doesn't think about the child's needs
- Likes to pretend he or she doesn't run the show
- Sees himself or herself as a victim

Driven Parent

- Is preoccupied with his or her own needs
- Has low empathy
- Is enmeshed and not respectful of boundaries

- _____ Is defensively nonintimate
- _____ Doesn't engage in reciprocal communication; just talks about himself or herself
- _____ Isn't self-reflective
- _____ Has poor relationship repair skills
- _____ Is reactive, not thoughtful
- _____ Is either too close or too distant
- _____ Has rigid values and perfectionistic expectations
- _____ Is goal-obsessed and busy, with machinelike tunnel vision
- _____ Sees his or her child as a reflection, without considering what the child wants
- _____ Likes to run the show
- _____ Sees himself or herself as a fixer

Passive Parent

- _____ Is preoccupied with his or her own needs
- _____ Has limited empathy
- _____ Is enmeshed and not respectful of boundaries
- _____ Can be sporadically emotionally intimate
- _____ Engages only minimally in reciprocal communication; mostly talks about himself or herself
- _____ Isn't self-reflective
- _____ Has limited relationship repair skills
- _____ Can be thoughtful on occasion
- _____ Is either too close or too distant

- _____ Can be kindly and fun but not protective
- _____ Has a laissez-faire attitude that all is well
- _____ Is affectionate toward the child but doesn't stand up for him or her
- _____ Likes someone else to run the show or be the bad guy
- _____ Sees himself or herself as mellow and good-natured

Rejecting Parent

- _____ Is preoccupied with his or her own needs
- _____ Shows no empathy
- _____ Has impenetrable boundaries
- _____ Seems disconnected and hostile
- _____ Seldom engages in communication
- _____ Isn't self-reflective
- _____ Has no relationship repair skills
- _____ Is reactive, attacking, and demeaning
- _____ Is too distant
- _____ Ignores his or her child or can be rageful toward the child
- _____ Is often rejecting and angry
- _____ Sees his or her child as a bother and doesn't want to get near the child
- _____ Likes to mock and dismiss
- _____ Sees himself or herself as independent from others

Emotional	Driven	Passive	Rejecting
Preoccupied with his or her own needs	Preoccupied with his or her own needs	Preoccupied with his or her own needs	Preoccupied with his or her own needs
Low empathy	Low empathy	Limited empathy	No empathy
Enmeshed, not respectful of boundaries	Enmeshed, not respectful of boundaries	Enmeshed, not respectful of boundaries	Impenetrable boundaries
Defensive nonintimacy	Defensive nonintimacy	Sporadic emotional intimacy	Disconnected, hostile
Nonreciprocal communication	Nonreciprocal communication	Minimal reciprocal communication	Rarely communicates
Not self-reflective	Not self-reflective	Not self-reflective	Not self-reflective
Poor relationship repair	Poor relationship repair	Poor relationship repair	No relationship repair
Reactive not thoughtful	Reactive not thoughtful	Thoughtful on occasion	Reactive, attacking, demeaning
Too close or too distant	Too close or too distant	Too close or too distant	Too distant
Blowing up or cutting you off	Rigid values, perfectionistic	Kindly and fun but not protective	Ignoring or rageful
Frightening, intimidating emotional intensity	Goal-obsessed and busy, with machinelike tunnel vision	Laissez-faire; "All is well."	Rejecting, angry
"You are my soother." ("Don't ask me to think about your needs.")	"You are my reflection." ("Don't ask me to consider what you want.")	"You are my sweetie." ("Don't ask me to stand up for you.")	"You are a bother." ("Don't get near me.")
Likes to pretend he or she doesn't run the show	Likes to run the show	Likes someone else to run the show and be the bad guy	Likes to mock and dismiss
Sees himself or herself as victim	Sees himself or herself as fixer	Sees himself or herself as mellow	Sees himself or herself as independent

Exercise: Identifying Your Coping Style

This exercise will help you identify whether you tend to be more of an internalizer or externalizer. You can also use the checklists to assess other people and see which coping style seems to characterize them. Finally, you'll also find a table summarizing these traits. You might want to print that table out and keep it at hand so you can use it to quickly peg others' coping styles.

Note that the attributes listed below lie at the extreme ends of the spectrum, accentuating the basic differences in how these two types approach life's challenges. As a reminder, in real life people are likely to exist somewhere along a continuum for these traits. Still, most people will resemble one type more than the other.

Externalizer Traits

Approach to Life

- Living in the present moment and not considering future consequences
- Thinking solutions come from the outside
- Looking to others to improve things: "What should someone else do to make things better?"
- Taking immediate action and thinking later
- Underestimating difficulties

Response to Problems

- Reacting to whatever is going on
- Viewing problems as someone else's fault
- Blaming circumstances
- Getting others involved in their problems
- Denying or escaping reality to feel better

Psychological Style

- Being impulsive and self-focused
- Believing emotions have a life of their own
- Getting mad easily
- Having no interest in the inner psychological world

Relationship Style

- _____ Expecting others to provide help
- _____ Thinking others should change to improve the situation
- _____ Expecting others to listen and tending to engage in monologue
- _____ Demanding that others stop “nagging”

Internalizer Traits**Approach to Life**

- _____ Worrying about the future
- _____ Thinking solutions start on the inside
- _____ Being thoughtful and empathic: “What can I do to make things better?”
- _____ Thinking about what could happen
- _____ Overestimating difficulties

Response to Problems

- _____ Trying to figure out what’s going on
- _____ Looking for their role in causing a problem: “What’s my part in this?”
- _____ Engaging in self-reflection and taking responsibility
- _____ Figuring out problems independently and working on them
- _____ Dealing with reality as it is and being willing to change

Psychological Style

- _____ Thinking before acting
- _____ Believing emotions can be managed
- _____ Feeling guilty easily
- _____ Finding the inner psychological world fascinating

Relationship Style

- _____ Thinking about what others need first
- _____ Considering changing self to improve the situation
- _____ Requesting dialogue about a problem
- _____ Wanting to help others understand why there's a problem

If your results indicate that you're primarily an internalizer, you may feel exhausted from trying to do too much of the emotional work in your relationships. If, on the other hand, your results indicate that you're primarily an externalizer, you might want to ask others for feedback on how you're coming across. You may be wearing out your support systems.

Externalizer	Internalizer
Approach to Life	
Lives for the moment.	Thinks about the future.
Thinks solutions come from the outside.	Thinks solutions start on the inside.
“Someone should do something.”	“How can I make things better?”
Takes action now and thinks later.	Thinks about what could happen.
Underestimates difficulty.	Overestimates difficulty.
Response to Problems	
Reacts to what’s going on.	Figures out what’s going on.
“It’s someone else’s fault.”	“What’s my part in this problem?”
Blames circumstances.	Self-reflects and takes responsibility.
Gets someone else involved.	Figures it out and works on it.
Denies or escapes reality to feel better.	Comes to grips with painful realities.
Psychological Style	
“Follow your impulses.”	“Think before you act.”
Believes emotions have a life of their own.	Believes emotions can be managed.
Gets mad easily.	Feels guilty easily.
Has no interest in the inner psychological world.	Finds the inner world fascinating.
Relationship Style	
“Someone needs to help me.”	“Think about what others need first.”
“You should change to make me happy.”	“Maybe I need to change.”
“Listen to me.”	“Let’s talk about it.”
“Stop nagging me.”	“I want you to understand.”

Exercise: Assessing Others' Emotional Maturity

The following checklist summarizes all the characteristics of emotionally mature people discussed in chapter 10 of *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents*. You can use it to determine whether a person will be able to give you the kind of relationship you want.

Realistic and Reliable

- _____ They work with reality rather than fighting it.
- _____ They can feel and think at the same time.
- _____ Their consistency makes them reliable.
- _____ They don't take everything personally.

Respectful and Reciprocal

- _____ They respect your boundaries.
- _____ They give back.
- _____ They are flexible and compromise well.
- _____ They're even-tempered
- _____ They're willing to be influenced.
- _____ They're truthful.
- _____ They apologize and make amends.

Responsive

- _____ Their empathy makes you feel safe.
- _____ They make you feel seen and understood.
- _____ They like to comfort and be comforted.
- _____ They reflect on their actions and try to change.
- _____ They can laugh and be playful.
- _____ They're enjoyable to be around.

The more of these qualities a person has, the more likely it is that the two of you can forge a satisfying and genuine connection.