

Relationships with Emotionally Immature People

Lindsay Gibson: [00:00:00] because we haven't had a, a, popular term for this phenomenon, people have grown up feeling this emotional loneliness and this, um, confusion about what's going on. And am I a good person? Am I a bad person? Because I, I have so much trouble in this, crucial relationship in my life.

And when somebody can explain to you what they're dealing with and it, and it just write down the list, you know, Goes into what they have been experiencing. It is such a relief to people. That was Lindsay Gibson on psychologists off the clock.

Yael Schonbrun: We are three clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:01:00] I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high, Denver, Colorado, and coauthor of ACT Daily Journal.

Yael Schonbrun: I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston based clinical psychologist, assistant professor at Brown University, and author of the upcoming book Work, Parent, Thrive.

Jill Stoddard: And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of be mighty and the big book of act metaphors.

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Debbie and I are here to introduce a fascinating episode about how to be in relationships with emotionally immature people. I had the chance to talk with author Lindsay Gibson, who who's written a couple of books, and we [00:03:00] focused on her book, adult children of emotionally immature parents.

And this book is one that I've started to use a lot as bibliotherapy in my private practice. And consistently whenever I assign it to somebody who, who it might be relevant to, there's just like this experience that they, the client has of saying, like this book captured my childhood experience.

I now understand why I feel this way. And there's this kind of sense of like, they've finally been seen. By this author. And so it was, it was a really interesting and, and really kind of eye opening conversation for me to, to be in. And Debbie, I was curious what you thought about it.

Debbie Sorensen: Oh, I have so many thoughts. I'm gonna have to reign myself in here because I. This, this episode, there's just a lot to, to think about in here and her work. Again, it, as you said, it's geared toward adults with emotionally immature parents, but you also expanded out a bit, which I think is helpful because it won't always be the parent who has [00:04:00] these kinds of relationship behaviors, but there is something really important about parent child relationship, regardless of how old you are.

I mean, you could be. 50 60 older and it still just, we have this longing to know that our parents care about us and that never really goes away. I think the parents' job is to care for us and yet, you know, parents have their own issues and hangups, and sometimes aren't able to convey that caring very effectively for whatever reason, you know, they have, and I.

It's funny, cuz people sometimes joke about, oh, if you go to therapy, they're just gonna talk about your mother and blame her for everything. And that's totally a myth. And by the way, I just can't stand that mother blaming, you know, that it's, everything's always the mom's fault. Um, And yet as a therapist, I have had so many clients where a big part of our work is about processing their relationship with our parents, like past and present.

And to me, I [00:05:00] think there's like two sides to this, right. That I'm kind of thinking about as a therapist. On the one hand, we need to be aware of their limitations and see them as humans who are flawed and who are struggling and have their own history. So that, and instead of taking it personally or assuming that there's something.

Wrong with us or something unlovable about us or taking on that emotional burden. We can realize that this is really about them and that we didn't deserve that. It's like I was a kid, you know, I'm their child, even however old I am. And so we kind of wanna have our eyes wide open in understanding that like, what's really going on here.

I think that can be very freeing for people. The other side of it though is also. You know, being able to accept that about them in order to have a meaningful connection, right? Like this is your parent, there's a bond there. And sometimes it's a very difficult one. I think, you know, people are all over the map in terms of what type of relationship they can have or want.

And, [00:06:00] you know, Sometimes your parents may have died or, you know, they're going to die if they haven't already. So it's like, what can you do to make the best of the relationship you have in the time that you have? And it's a hard thing, I think, to balance these two point of views that are both happening simultaneously.

So I love that she offers the idea of integrating seemingly conflicting emotions and thoughts as a sign of maturity. She talks about that in the episode, because I think that's actually what we're trying to help our clients do. And that's what people who will listen or who will read her book will be grappling with.

And so it's really helpful to me to hear her thoughts about how to do that. And I think it's just gonna really help people come to this place of like, just having a better sense of what's going on, which can be so healing.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. I mean that insight into, understanding like, you know, why you struggle in the way that you do in, in certain relationships, either in relationship with your parent or [00:07:00] your partner, or even with yourself can be healing. And, you know, we, we sometimes joke and we've had guests say this like insight is the booby prize of therapy.

And I think that's only true if insight doesn't get you anywhere, but if the insight sort of helps you to understand. What's happened in your past, understand yourself better. It can really open you up to figure out how you'd like to move forward. And that's a very powerful thing that you can access through through reading these kinds of books or, or seeing a therapist.

One thing that I wanna say too, that I. That comes up for me. You know, when I'm reading books about unhealthy parent child relationships, you know, I often think about myself. And after I got off the, the recording with Lindsay, I was joking with her that, you know, my, my greatest fear is that my own children are gonna think I'm an emotionally immature parent

And she said, she said, she's actually doing some writing, that I think will go into her next book on the same topic. And what she said is, you know, there's sort of three, three steps that she thinks. [00:08:00] That can help to alleviate that fear that many people have, maybe when they're reading the book or, or listening to this podcast episode that I thought was really helpful.

And the steps are, first, just to get more self aware, you know, how does it feel when your child or your partner has big emotions? Like, what are your natural responses? Can, does it feel intolerable? What do you behaviorally do in response? The next step is to sort of figure out what would be the more emotionally mature way to handle it.

If you worry that it is a less than emotionally mature kind of response either, you know, when that you're having internally or, or one that you're sort of manifesting through behavior. And the third thing she says is that she's encountered research that suggests that, you know, being emotionally. 30% of the time is sort of good enough parenting.

And I just thought that I loved that, um, statistic and I don't know where it comes from, so I can't verify it, but it kind of fits in with what, relationship

researchers like John Gottman and, and parenting researchers have found that, our [00:09:00] kids, we don't have to be perfect parents all the time.

In fact, there's no such thing. And so if you respond in immature ways, some of the time that's fine, you know, it, it, it's totally fine. And part of good parenting is learning how to be aware and then repair, you know, what's gone wrong to kind of own like, Hey, that wasn't the best way to respond.

I'd like to do better and to kind of own that. So, um, you know, if, as you're listening, you start to get concerned as I sometimes do those, , ideas and steps that you can take, uh, can also be helpful.

Debbie Sorensen: I love that she takes the time to point that out because sure. You know, you do wanna be aware, but also to recognize we all have our lists and mature moments we don't have to be. Too hard on ourselves about this, but at the same time to have some awareness of this is it can actually give us some helpful guidance as.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Yeah. So I hope that people don't get hard on themselves as they're listening, but instead listen with great curiosity to learn more about complicated relationships, stay tuned through the end because she gives some [00:10:00] surprising ideas about how to think about things like how much compassion should we have for somebody who's emotionally immature and how can we learn

to set healthy boundaries in these kinds of complicated relationships.

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Yael Schonbrun: I'm here with Lindsay Gibson today. Who's a clinical psychologist in private practice and she specializes in individual psychotherapy with adult children of emotionally immature parents. She's the author of who you were meant to be writes a monthly column on wellbeing for Tidewater women magazine.

And she's here to data. Talk with me about her books, particularly on adult children of emotionally immature parents, how to heal from distant rejecting or self-involved parents. Welcome Lindsay.

Lindsay Gibson: Oh, thank you for having me today.

Yael Schonbrun: It's such a treat to talk to you because this is one of these books that I was telling you before we got started has really had an impact on my private practice work. Um, . And so far as I do a lot of Bilio therapy with people, and this is a book where I've given it to a couple of [00:11:00] people and it's just been so transformative.

So I actually wanted to start. With just a question of what got you into, you know, this deep reflection in writing and treating adult children of emotionally immature parents.

Lindsay Gibson: oh, great question. Um, well, I, I think it began when I started to notice that a lot. I mean, a lot of the people that I was seeing in psychotherapy were telling me about their relationships with, uh, their parents, but, you know, could also be a spouse or could be an adult child, but the people in their relationships were really, , acting in very immature ways.

And I come from training that really emphasized developmental psychology, like. What are kids like it too? What are kids like it for? So when I used to do psychological testing, I would always orient myself in the report to where this person was [00:12:00] functioning at a developmental level. So maybe it's a 40 year old man who is really emotionally more like a 12 year old or like a three year old.

Okay. So I'm attuned to that and I'm noticing that people are coming in and describing their parents say, and I would think, wow, he sounds like a three year old. And so I began to reflect that to the client. And, , I mean, I know you're not supposed to diagnose people in absentia, but I mean, when it's staring you in the face and you think it's gonna help the person, you gotta go for it.

Right. So I explained to them that what they were explaining was emotional immaturity. and I explained, you know how this is like a three or a four year old, and then that kind of informed, , how they might be able to handle it or work with that person or decide to not work with that person. And it was [00:13:00] very, very helpful to them.

And, I was struggling at the time with what to call it because it, it didn't really work to say that they were immature because say, if this is their father who is a university professor or owns his own business, or, you know, is a very successful person, maybe it's a mother who's like, you know, super social and, you know, very well educated to call them immature, , was something that just didn't click with them because they would come back with those arguments about how high functioning they were.

So then I would have to explain. You know, it's not that they're immature people together. It's that they're emotional immaturity. It hasn't caught up with the rest of their development. So you can be intellectually, highly developed. You can, uh, you know, be an ACE at [00:14:00] running a business. You can be super intelligent and, and being a, um, university professor.

But when it comes to managing your emotions and being able to, uh, get along with other people and sustain long term relationships, these people are really acting like, you know, anywhere from an 18 month old to a four year old. And that was super helpful to them to be able to pull out that strand of immaturity, which was the emotional immaturity.

And that turned out to be a very helpful concept. So. From there. I began to notice that I wasn't reading about emotional immaturity. I was reading about clinical diagnoses, like the narcissistic parent, the borderline parent, and so forth, but nobody was using kind of more layman's language to, uh, explain in the name [00:15:00] what was really going on.

So that began to be how I would explain it to other, to the, um, patient that I was working with. And then from there, that became how I started thinking about it in the idea for the book. And when I pitched that to the publisher, they were like, Hmm, emotional maturity. We haven't heard about that before. of course, you know, we've all heard about it before, but maybe not in that exact language.

Yael Schonbrun: Right. Not, not as like the term that's describing what has gone wrong in a close relationship. Right. We tend to like diagnose these mental health diagnoses, like narcissism, borderline personality disorder, codependence. So emotionally immaturity seems like a broader umbrella, but it does capture the specific facet of what seems to be going awry in these parent child relationships or other intimate relationships.

And I I'd love to talk a little bit about that too, before we get into talking about what exactly emotional [00:16:00] immaturity is. And isn't, I wanted to ask this question that you sort of pointed to when you said, you know, it's, it's a little dangerous to diagnose somebody in absentia, right? And in general, this is something I remember from my graduate training.

Like we were discouraged from diagnosing our family members. It's like a slippery slope. And yet in essence, that's a little bit wet. This book and, and many others like it try to do. And I think that there's an important function, but I also think there's like a danger point and, and you address this in your writing, but I wanted to make this a part of our conversation.

You know, what, what is the value of under understanding that your parent is emotionally immature and sort of applying that label? What's the value, what's the function, but also what should we be cautious about when doing this kind of labeling.

Lindsay Gibson: well, um, the, the caution that we have to be, keeping in mind is that I've, you [00:17:00] know, for instance, I've never seen that person's parent, I'm getting one side of the story. , the material is adding up. To me, but it's not something that I can say that I ever, uh, you know, examined the person ever talked to the person I used to for a while, worked in a, a juvenile court system.

And so all you have to do is be on the stand a few times before you learn that when they say, you know, and have you spoken to the person, uh, it doesn't look good when you know, you haven't and you're, and you're doing a diagnosis from, um, you know, kind of pretty far up field.

Yael Schonbrun: Second reports and also like biased reports, right? Like.

Lindsay Gibson: Absolutely.

Yeah. But you know, the other part is that, um, it is so valuable to people to have a conceptualization of something that is happening to them because we don't come into this world with, you [00:18:00] know, this terminology that helps us make sense of things. I mean, we have to be taught, that's a table, that's a chair.

Uh, you know, we, and then as you get older, you're taught concepts like, you know, the economy and those things in history. So psychologically, I don't see anything wrong with introducing concepts to explain some of the personal experiences that we have, because then that increases our predictability or their predictability.

It, it implies what you need to do about it or what you can do about it. and it reassures us that we're not crazy reassures us, that what we have been experiencing can be understood. And that, that part right there, that's what I've gotten the most feedback on from the book is that people will say, it's like, you know me, it's like, you're in my head.

It's like, were you in my living room when I was growing up? because [00:19:00] it, because we haven't had a, a, a, a popular term for this phenomenon, people have grown up feeling this emotional loneliness and this,

um, confusion about what's going on. And am I a good person? Am I a bad person? Because I, I have so much trouble in this, crucial relationship in my life.

And when somebody can explain to you what they're dealing with and it, and it just write down the list, you know, Goes into what they have been experiencing. It is such a relief to people. I mean, it's, it's like,, having something scientific explained to you that you always just assumed was completely mysterious.

And then someone explains what it is and how it happens and what you can do the next time it happens and what you can do about it, because it, it [00:20:00] obeys the rules of, uh, nature. You were empowered. And, and that's what I wanted to do in this book was to give people the, information and the language that I was already using as a therapist to understand this kind of person.

Yael Schonbrun: I love what you're saying. Cause I do think it is empowering to, and you know, there's so many examples, as you're saying from science, from psychology, where these phenomena that we experience, that we don't have words for when we're able to sort of more deeply understand it, have those insights have sort of a narrative that helps us disentangle these complicated experiences that we're having.

It does help us not only understand ourselves better, but also be able to be more prepared for a complicated situation that is likely to arise in the future. So there is a lot of power there. And I would say the thing that I sometimes get concerned about as a clinician is that labeling can sometimes result in some rigidity.

, so for example, if you label [00:21:00] your parent as, you know, mentally unhealthy in some form or another, then it sort of, it, it can lead you into this place of. Failing to see the opportunities for growth. And, and I think in some ways that's useful, cuz you can come to a place of acceptance, but also it can sty me, you and your parent, perhaps if you really sort of shut off PO open possibilities that do exist.

And so that's one thing that I actually liked about your book in, in a quote that I wrote down that you wrote, that it's important to see the difference between emotional immaturity and temporary emotional regression that we all have. These moments of immaturity. Some people have them more than others.

Some people have them most of the time. And, and these are probably the parents that, you know, we would label as emotionally immature, but most

people have moments, you know, that fall in this category and moments that don't. And so just to be able to see some of the nuance there can be helpful, but I actually like the term emotional immaturity, you know, more than some of the other diagnostic labels that we have.

Cause I think it does [00:22:00] give more flexibility.

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah. And I'm, I'm glad you brought that up. Because, uh, I think that's one reason why the book has been, um, accepted by people, uh, has made it more accessible to people because, you know, no matter how much trouble they're having with their loved one, nobody likes to call their parents names. Okay. , I I've had a couple of people come to me who said, you know, I stopped with my last therapist because they told me my mother was narcissistic and I just don't think that's true.

It's like, okay. I don't know if it's true or not, but I get your point. Um, which is that it it's a step too far, you know, it's the, when you have a diagnosis put on your parent, , it feels like you're saying something pejorative about them. And I, and I think in a way you are, because what diagnoses do, this is the reason I, I really don't like [00:23:00] them is that they do, they shut down possibility.

And, and when you label a person with a DSM diagnosis, there is this sort of implication that, that they're this way, and they're gonna stay this way forever. when you label somebody emotionally immature, I think it does hold out some hope of what the solution could be not would be because a lot of times there is no solution as you just pointed out.

But sometimes it points the, the, , way to, if you can react in a different way, their immaturity might develop. Into more mature behavior with you. Okay. That's pretty narrow, pretty narrow diagnosis. We're not saying that they grow up emotionally. What we're saying is that through your setting boundaries, you being less reactive and [00:24:00] more, , mature, with them, their behavior may be able to rise to a level that makes it a lot easier for you to get along with, , because you're showing them how to act and you're encouraging them to use their self control.

It's the same thing we do with the three year old. You know, , I mean, we don't despair and say, oh my God, this is gonna be this way. You know, forever. We say, oh, this is gonna be a very, very long process of boundary setting and instruction about how I want them to treat me and how I want them to handle, , life events.

Yeah. But we don't, we don't despair. We try. And I, you know, what I tell people is that the best avenue to getting something different with your parent is to grow yourself, to grow yourself into someone who becomes less reactive to them [00:25:00] who is more accepting of their own subjective experience so that they don't allow themselves to be erased.

By the egocentricity of the emotionally immature person and that they're willing to speak up and overcome this induced passivity that emotionally immature people put other people into. Okay. And when you start rearranging some of those responses that you have to the emotionally immature, what I call them, AI person, there is a potential for change because you're, you're affecting the system in one part of the system.

And the other part of the system has to do something different. , so there is, there can be hope there sometimes. No, because the emotionally mature person is so rigid, but I agree with you. I think you have to think about what we could do to change the [00:26:00] system through our own behavior in order to have better relationships with these people.

If we wanna keep our relationships with them chips without.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And that's a question that I wanna get to a little bit later about sort of that line of keeping the relationship versus cutting it off. But before we get there, what I realized is we haven't actually talked about what are the hallmark qualities of emotional. Immaturity.

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah, well, there are, there are many , um, because I, I have just been looking for them and, and, you know, sort of organizing them for such a long time. There, there are a bunch of them, but the hallmark, there, there are a few homework qualities that, for me are the dividing line between emotionally immature people and adequately mature people.

And the, and one of those is egocentricity. self-centeredness, it's all about them. It's easiest. If you just think of a three year old or a two year. It's [00:27:00] all about me. , the attention has to stay on me all the time. , the world is about me. The world is especially about my emotions. The world should respond to my emotions and to what I need instantly.

Cuz I have no stress tolerance and I can't wait. And if you are a good mommy, you will give me what I want right away. This, this is the . This is the type of self-centeredness in a way it's almost innocent. Because it's so feral I

Yael Schonbrun: Well, it, it feels immature and when I was reading the book, I was thinking that, you know, I, I can think of some people in my own life who seem to have some of these hallmark traits and it's not that they can't talk at some level about their internal experience um, There's like a level of superficiality to it that it [00:28:00] can't go really deep and it ends up being, and you write this in your book more self-referential than more than deeply self-reflective.

Um, but there are intense emotions and experiences that emotionally immature people like a young person, a very young person, the toddler are able to communicate, but there's some kind of superficiality or immaturity to it.

Lindsay Gibson: yeah. Yes. Oh yeah. Good point. , because emotional maturity means that you have essentially complexified yourself. You have gone from. Rigid, um, black and white, good and bad thinking into complex, mental activity. They can hold more than one thought in mind. At the same time, they can see the gray areas, uh, that can, deal with emotion at the same time.

Continue to think so I can be upset and I can still think that's an, [00:29:00] that's an indicator of maturity. My whole system doesn't crash because I got upset. , however, for the emotionally immature person, they are so simplified in their emotional life. Now they may be very complex, very capable, uh, at the abstract thinking ability, um, or, you know, pragmatic in their business dealings and so forth.

, You know, they may be, uh, a physics instructor. I mean, there's, again, they can handle very complex things as long as there's not emotion involved. Okay. But when you are, emotionally immature and you have that kind of rigidity, you, you, you just can't take things into account in the same way that a more mature person does.

And because life is [00:30:00] complex and life is full of stuff that contradicts itself that, you know, , doesn't seem to be all good or all bad. You are poorly equipped, , as an emotionally immature person to deal well, especially with emotional realities.

Yael Schonbrun: And especially in relationships, which are always complex, cuz you have two people that are full of contradictions and complexities that are bouncing off each other. And so it really requires a lot of ability to kind of hold. Lots of things at the same time.

Lindsay Gibson: Yes. And that's, you know, we, we call that, um, integration, , that the, uh, emotionally mature person is able to keep, uh, to form and keep bonds between ideas and concepts within themselves. It's called integration. , that's what allows me to think and feel at the same time, because I'm hooked up inside all these little parts of me talk to each other.

Okay. [00:31:00] But for the emotionally immature person, these, these things are like, sort of like marbles in a box. , these different states, oh, you know, we used to call them ego states, but these different little self states, these different little, , moments of being roll around without connection to each other.

So when I'm in, in my blue marble state, um, everything is good. If I'm in my, you know, red marble state, everything is bad. And you don't say, but wait a minute. Um, well this a moment ago you said this, but now you're, you're over here. Don't you see that there's a contradiction here and they won't know what you're talking about.

because they don't have that feeling of, , discordance or dissonance between these opposing states. So they can do one thing one minute, turn around and do the opposite the next, and never have that bother them. And [00:32:00] that's one of the things that makes them so confusing to people who are trying to get them to see what they're doing. I might mention here too, Y that, it doesn't do any good to try to get someone to see those internal contradictions, if they're emotionally immature, because they're too threatened and too defensive to have that get through to them because emotionally immature people are incredibly. Defensive, they have to be, um, because they are so vulnerable to emotion and to, to kind of, , crumbling, in terms of their self control and in terms of their self organization, when they get upset that they really can't afford to go there.

So as you're pressing on them to get them to realize something they've done, you know, that hurts [00:33:00] someone or confuse someone. They're not gonna go there with you. It's it's just too disorganizing to them.

Yael Schonbrun: And so that's one of the challenges of being in a close relationship. And I'm gonna sort of try to use close relationship instead of child. Cause I, I actually think this applies a often to other kinds of intimate relationships, including partner relationships, where if you right. A part of. Growing inside of a relationship is letting somebody know, Hey, that hurt.

Can we, can we, can you learn from my experience and can we try to do better in this close relationship, but you're saying, and I think that this is, you know, really, I I've seen this so much in my practice and in some of my personal

relationships where there's just no opportunity for repairing growth in that way with somebody who's extremely emotionally immature.

And yet, if you are in relationship with, you know, sort of by virtue of your lineage or by choice of marriage, or what have you, if you're sort of connected and [00:34:00] committed in that relationship, it can feel like, you know, you need to try to make things better. And yet that's the part of why it's so painful.

And I just, I wanna sort of point to like the very first chapter in your book is called how emotionally immature parents affect their adult children's lives. And I think this points to the fact that. On the one hand, it seems like it shouldn't matter so much. If you were raised in an environment or, or still have a parent who's emotionally mature.

If you are now an adult, you should be able to move on. But what your book points to is that we learn things when we're children about how to relate to people. And we have certain experiences that teach us about our own sense of self and the value of our emotions and those lessons kind of carry through life.

And that's a part of why you and I, and all the therapists out there see so many children of adult, of so many adult children of emotionally immature parents in our offices, because they're sort of still struggling with like, how do I carry myself in intimate relationships? [00:35:00] Because the early lessons that I had really led me astray.

And I wanna sort of point it. Like you, you talk about some of this, uh, attachment research, you know, some of which was done back in the 1950s and sixties, but what do we know from attachment research about these early childhood relationships and how they help individuals form ideas about how to relate to people throughout their lives?

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah, well, the, um, that's a great question. the attachment research is really focusing on, very young children. I mean, , children that are, essentially babies, you know, uh that's that's where they were focusing on it

later on, , from the ages of, about 18 months until about three years old, people are little people are going through the transition from being a baby, where, you know, that kind of fundamental attachment stuff [00:36:00] is so important to individuating, , differentiating and individuating psychologically from the parents.

So they're, I look at it like, they're like, they're two stages of. Attachment issues. One is the baby one, which is, are you going to have a, a parent who is sensitive enough, empathic enough, to be able to meet your needs and to guess at what you are needing, and that creates a secure, predictable, safe attachment.

or are you going to, have a parent who is insensitive, whose timing is off, who, can't imagine what the baby's going through or feeling doesn't, doesn't realize that that's an uncomfortable position. Doesn't see that the baby's hungry cuz they don't have any empathy. Okay. They just, they just can't put themselves in the baby's shoes, so to speak.

Yael Schonbrun: And I just wanna encourage people to check out YouTube, the still [00:37:00] face experiment, because even as an adult, when you watch these experiments that people do, where they actually have a mother hold her face stone faced and you can see how distressed the child is, it's so uncomfortable to watch even as an adult.

And so you can imagine, you know, one of the ways that we learn to connect with people from the earliest moments is like, through these very subtle facial, empathy cues, of like, I'm happier, I'm sad. And, and we make eye contact with our caregiver and expect them to respond to us. And just how painful it is to see when that can't happen.

And as you're noting in your, in your book and in this conversation, an emotionally immature parent has a really hard time receiving those cues and being responsive. And, and that is a really painful, early experience.

Lindsay Gibson: I'm so glad you brought that up. Um, on, on YouTube, it's under, still, still face baby experiment. something like that. And it, Stron is the, [00:38:00] is the researcher who did those, it, it, it will break your heart. I mean, it's the best, two minute, feeling based synopsis of what attach. Is all about at an emotional level.

I mean, you can read all the other stuff about how many times the mother picked the baby up, how many times eye contact, how many times she COOs at the, you know, but you watch that experiment and you see absolutely. You, you feel in your heart, the distress of that baby when they can't get the mother to respond to them, it's, it's an incredible, experiment and gets, yeah, it'll, it'll just orient you to the whole attachment issue and, and the role of sensitivity and responsiveness of, of the parent to the, to the baby.

But in addition to that, that's babyhood that critical period, of separation and individuation up to about three years old from about a year [00:39:00] and a half to three years old, that period is incredibly important. For a person's eventual emotional maturity because that's when they begin to find themselves as a separate person, but feel safe about it.

Feel like I can go explore and then I can come back to my parent and be welcomed back, that it, the world is safe to be in and I have a home base and I can go back to being a little baby when I need to. And then I can be a brave Explorer when I want to be. And that period, as you can imagine, when the child is swinging between, you know, practically acting like an infant and then acting like they don't need anybody.

Because they get kind of grandiose at that age, those swings are really taxing to a parent. I mean, your empathy has to be spot on [00:40:00] to know that this is the state that they're in and the same child who pushed you away because you know, don't bother me. I'm playing is the one who's now begging and crying to be held in your lap.

And that, I think that period is where a lot of, there's a lot of room for error in terms of, parenting, because it is so confusing. I mean, you kind of know that you're supposed to be nice to babies, right? But people tend to misinterpret toddler behavior as willfulness, or they don't like me anymore, or they're just too full of themselves now.

they just wanna do everything for themselves and, you know, the immature parent can have their feelings hurt and then start cooling off toward the child just when they ought to be welcoming them back for more love. So I think a lot of emotionally immature people have [00:41:00] had difficulties with their parent during that, that time.

And it then shows up, in adulthood where that person is, kind of alter grandiose and dependent, in terms of how they treat their partner. But I, I just wanted to go back for a second to, some of the things that, that make up emotional and maturity, cuz we're talking about them right now. Another big one, besides the self-centeredness is the lack of empathy. The, the difficulty with, um, imagining the interstate, the subjective experience of another person, that's huge. And because as we talked about, they're so separated and split up and, not very cohesive inside. Their ability to self reflect is really poor.

That would be like the third big one, the third differentiating thing. Because if [00:42:00] you can self reflect, you can change yourself. You can change

yourself, you can reflect on your behavior, have feelings about it, and then resolve to change that. But if you're emotionally immature and you don't have your parts, your emotional parts connected inside.

You do a behavior, you get blow back about it. And you're like, I don't understand. That was then this is now I told you, I'm never gonna do that again. What's the problem. Okay. No empathy, but no, self-reflection no interest in learning because everything is like, that was then this is now. So, , those are just some more characteristics of emotional immaturity and I would add a final one, , to it.

And that is, , difficulty with emotionally intimate relationships. Emotional intimacy is when you allow yourself to be [00:43:00] known by another person at a deep, emotional level where you kind of show how you're feeling to the other person. And if the other person can receive that with empathy. You feel held, you feel, like you're in a safe place.

It's, it's a, it's a extremely secure feeling. Okay. But when the other person can't do that, you feel cut off, you know, it's like, you're drifting an outer space. Like here I am with all these feelings and there's nobody there to receive them. And that creates this terrible emotional loneliness. So because emotionally immature people have a lot of trouble with, relating at an emotionally intimate level.

They're scared to death of it. I mean, just try to get them on that subject of talking about how we're feeling and they will be out of there in one way or [00:44:00] another. So that's another huge issue, , that characterizes, , emotionally immature people versus. People who have the capacity for that kind of closeness with other people.

Yael Schonbrun: One challenge that comes up in my, in my own mind and, and comes up all the time in the therapy room that I think about a lot is what you're describing in being an emotionally immature parent or person is, sounds very painful, right? If you are somebody who has a hard time connecting to people and, owning when things go wrong so that you can make it better.

And you are, if you have these kinds of features, you're likely to feel like the world is a unsafe, lonely, scary, place that's gonna harm you. So it's very uncomfortable to be an emotionally immature parent or adult. And I think one of the things that happens for children or partners of emotionally immature people is that they see the pain and they're, they're [00:45:00] sort of put into this caregiver role, of helping the other person manage what feels like overwhelming, you know, emotions and, and difficult.

Life experiences and, and that's kind of an unfair burden to place on somebody who's in relationship with somebody who's emotionally immature. And yet there is sort of some value in having compassion. But I'm curious like where, where you think the line is, right? Because it's complicated with children.

If you sort of are parentified by your parent, because they are unable to do these things that are required in, in intimate relationships, that's not healthy. And yet it can be helpful to have some compassion for a parent who is suffering in this way.

Lindsay Gibson: Okay. That's a boy. Is that a big issue? because I know a lot of therapists try to help their clients through looking at it through the lens of compassion, like, you know, the parent or the spouse or whatever. It's like, yes, they have, you know, this, um, disorder. They have this emotional [00:46:00] immaturity and, that's, , it's very hard for them too, and they're frightened and they're suffering.

And what I personally don't subscribe to that approach because I think that a lot of adult children of these kinds of parents have spent their whole lives being expected to be empathic to the parent. So when they get to me to be in therapy with me about issues regarding these parents, I don't go for the compassion thing.

okay. I mean, if it,

Yael Schonbrun: I kind of love that. I think it's refreshing actually, but, but say a little bit more about, so what then, right. So if, if you hold back compassion, why, and, and then what should you do?

Lindsay Gibson: okay. So I'm always looking at the fact that adult children of emotionally immature parents have been recruited into taking care of their parents. Emotional needs. They've [00:47:00] almost been recruited into the role of parent. Okay. Because that's where these people left off developmentally. They needed someone to help contain them and help them.

, modulate their emotions, keep them stabilized and keep their self esteem high. Okay. You know, tell them they're good people. That's what people, little people need from other people because they, young children cannot modulate their own emotions. Okay. They can't handle their emotions and they can't, you know, handle their own self-esteem okay.

They need the parent to supply that. So these emotionally immature parents are leaning on their kids. Psychologically speaking. Now they may take care of them, you know, financially and health wise and all that stuff. But when it comes to psychologically, that parent typically leans on [00:48:00] the child to provide those.

Psychological, , the holding environment is what Winnecot called it. That that sense of help me to stay stabilized and help me to keep feeling good about myself. So when, when a person has been saddled with that through their childhood, while they're suffering their own emotional loneliness for not getting emotional connection with that parent and they come to therapy, okay.

I, I'm not gonna lead with let's feel sorry for your parents. Uh, they've done a lifetime of that. They're tied up in knots about that. What I wanna do is I wanna find out what's going on with you. So if you were coming to me, you know, I would, my emphasis would be, what is it that you feel? What did you feel when they did this?

What were you thinking when they did this? What was that like inside you. [00:49:00] Because I guarantee you they've not had enough of that in their life. Someone has not been interested in their internal experience. Um, so is there a place for compassion? sometimes I think there is like when a person is really, they've really been wounded by the , emotionally immature person and they are like, so confused about how could this person have done this?

What made them do that? You know, they're asking those kinds of questions because, , they're so upset by this. Somewhere in there, we might get to understanding their immaturity. You know, somewhere in there that might be an appropriate place for that to happen, just because they're so confused, [00:50:00] but here's the other piece that's very important to remember about emphasizing compassion.

, and really what I just described is more like an explanation

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, you can kind of accept that this is sort of the nature of the parent, , and that you are not responsible, but, but it, it, it sort of is what it is.

Lindsay Gibson: Yes. Thank you. That's that's exactly what I was trying to get at. You just put your finger on it. It it's it's to help them with acceptance of a fact, you know, that this person, um, you know, probably, uh, couldn't do anything else, but what they did. However, if you're going for compassion, I lots of times I think that is, um, not the thing to do because I don't think it's accurate.

I mean, compassion means that you are suffering and I am feeling empathy for you. And I do see your [00:51:00] situation and I, I feel for it, but the thing is emotionally immature people have such instantaneous. Blanket defenses against feeling anything the least bit stressful that they're not suffering in the way that we imagine that they are, they're not sitting around reflecting and you know, having the, um, you know, that grief over what they've done, or they're not even having the, uh, the grief over what has, what is happening to them because their defenses come in so fast.

So instantaneous, they've had a lifetime of cultivating these defenses that keep reality at bay. They're not processing information at an emotional level. They're bouncing to the next thing, or they're getting furious about it and getting all reactive that way, or they're acting out or they're making it your [00:52:00] fault.

Their defenses work perfectly. And they're not, and it's all in the service of not suffering like that. So when the, you know, when the person comes along and they try to have compassion for the handle, the other person's misbehavior through compassion, thinking that my empathy will help them to, calm down and, you know, we'll, we'll get along better.

That approach doesn't work. I mean, because you're not relating to, , the other person's suffering. That's, I mean, that's so buried. We, we never get to that. They're not gonna let you get to that. , but you might need to set boundaries or you might need to take care of yourself. You might need to think of what you need.

, that is a better approach than we sensitive people, kind of sitting back and imagining what the emotionally mature person might be suffer. I [00:53:00] really don't push that at all because I think that they're probably not suffering in the way we imagine they.

Yael Schonbrun: I mean, you just articulated some, I had an aha moment cuz some, a therapist, friend of mine was describing to me, her relationship with her emotionally immature parent and how she tries hard to communicate compassion and it feels like it's almost there and then it just kind of all falls apart. And I think it, it is really like it's not effective and, and the reasoning that you just gave makes so much sense.

And so it can't, it can't sort of move forward. Right? In therapy. We often like offer compassion, provide, which provides like a connection, a little bit of a sense of healing and because we're being seen and understood, and then you can

sort of think about what can we do differently going forward. But if you can't connect in that way, then you can't get to the going forward part, which is where we often get stuck in our intimate relationships with emotionally [00:54:00] immature people.

And I think This is a nice segue into talking about you know, what are strategies when you've been raised by an emotionally immature parent to really cultivate relationships in your adult life, that don't resemble that when you have found yourself in these, in these kind of repeated experiences of, you know, feeling like your experiences are invalidated or ignored or dismissed in favor of somebody else, who's also having big experiences.

Lindsay Gibson: Before we get into the strategies part. I just wanted to make another, mention of, why compassion toward an emotionally immature person tends not to heal everything or make everything better. And that is because when you show compassion for an emotionally immature person, to a certain extent, you know, empathy calms everybody down, [00:55:00] mature, immature, you know, some empathy calms everybody down.

, it's just the human neurological part of us. That's responding to that. Okay. But

Yael Schonbrun: an important clarification. Yes. Go

Lindsay Gibson: yeah, it does. I mean, you know, think about hostage, uh, negotiators. It's like empathy, empathy, empathy. What do you need? What can we get you? You know, this must be hard on you. Um, , you know, I mean, um, they're dealing with a very entrenched frame of mind and they're still using empathy.

So empathy is needed, but if it goes too far, the emotionally immature person begins to feel extremely uncomfortable because it will feel like you're uncovering their defenses. Okay. And you are threatening to create an emotionally intimate link with them, which they can't handle. it's disorganizing to them.

It's disorganizing to them. Seems like it would be helpful. Right. But emotionally immature [00:56:00] people have a very limited receptive capacity to take in the good to integrate it with, you know, the rest of them and to grow from that, or to feel, uh, healed by that in the moment. So it, the closer you try to get to them through more empathy or, or more compassion, the more uncomfortable they might get and the more they might back up, , and try to get some distance from you because you're coming in too close.

So we have to remember that, uh, a little bit of empathy calms 'em down. A lot of empathy, a lot of compassion makes them. Get, uncomfortable and they back up. So I just, I just wanted to add that in there about why it doesn't work. Um, , you know, when you try to forge a deeper relationship with them through talking, you know, with them in a compassionate way, but in terms of strategies, like in your adult relationships, how can [00:57:00] you go forward and have better relationships?

I, I really, have to return to basics, which is if you have not dealt with your emotional, issues and you haven't worked on your own emotional self-awareness, then it's very hard to, , go forward with adult relationships in ways that are rewarding. Because you'll be reactive too. You might not be emotionally immature in the same way that, you know, an AI person is, but there will be a lot of things you won't understand about yourself going in.

So two people going into a relationship who don't know themselves very well and are not aware of their internal, emotional states and, and can imagine where they come from and all that, that is when you're asking for misunderstandings and trouble. Okay. But let's say [00:58:00] that , it reminds me of, Hines cohort.

Um, the, , expert on narcissism was once asked his definition of a good marriage. And he said a good marriage is a relationship in which both people don't go crazy at the same time.

Yael Schonbrun: that. it's okay. If you take turns that can still be a good marriage.

Lindsay Gibson: Right. He's like, I can, I can handle that. As long as we get to keep going crazy. Um, but what he means is that when, when two people regress at the same time, you know, that's where you get these, you know, terrible fights and, you know, people, blow up and move away from each other. But what he was talking about was one person has to have an observing ego in order to see what's going on and to take steps.

So maybe that'll be your spouse, maybe it won't okay. Maybe that's your girlfriend, maybe it isn't. But [00:59:00] if you work on that in your self, you can still use your words to explain. To your partner, that that's not what I'm looking for.

. I need you to be totally focused on what I'm telling you about what I'm feeling. We can talk about your weekend later, but what I needed from you was to have you totally on my side. Okay. And then the guy says, oh, oh yeah.

Okay. I made a mistake.

Yael Schonbrun: My bad. Yeah. And sometimes it's, I mean, I do a lot of marital therapy, and it's often not so neat and tidy, right. Sometimes you have to go through, an uncomfortable conflict and a misunderstanding before, but, but sort of the, the healthier couples will sort of work through it and reach that in level of insight.

And just to sort of say again, I mean, we all have moments where our observing self is not available, where we're emotionally immature. And I, this is, you know, very clear in your book and hopefully it's clear in our conversation. I just wanna make that point abundantly clear [01:00:00] because we all have short fuses sometimes where we don't have empathy, we don't have the insight. That does not define emotional maturity. It sort of, as long as it's not rigid, right? If you can sort of have that moment, take a breath or take a couple days, if that's, you know, what you need to kind of get back to that longer fuse and that ability to kind of work it through, um, you know, that's, that's fine.

That's workable.

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah. And when you talk about strategies, you know, what I've, what I've just said is that is the, , need to continue working on your self-awareness and, and self-reflecting, and getting to know yourself and your reactions, because the better you get at empathy for yourself, the better you are at understanding other people's emotional states.

It's a one-to-one correlation. Okay. You can't get better at this and not get better at that. . So you're improving your ability to function well in a relationship and have a good relationship. And sometimes to be the emotional leader [01:01:00] in the relationship, you know, the temporarily more mature person. Okay.

So, that's, that's very important to, , to remember. Mm-hmm

Yael Schonbrun: have so many questions and we're running out of time. But, okay. One question that I have is when you've worked with people in private practice, who are the children or partners of emotionally immature parents or adults, a. And they sort of are, are effective in developing some of that self knowledge and developing some of these tools that you talk about in your book.

And I'll, I'll just I'll name a couple of them. People should definitely pick up the book and read cuz cuz it's a really, um, both the books and I heard that you're coming out with a workbook too. Is that right? That's awesome.

Lindsay Gibson: yeah, that'll be adding in July, 2023. It's called, um, disentangling from emotionally

Yael Schonbrun: yeah, I can't wait to see it cuz I think that there are a lot of things that you can do. So in practice when you've worked with patients and have helped them develop some of these skills that they didn't come in [01:02:00] with to manage relationships, intimate relationships with emotionally immature people.

Have you seen the relationships themselves grow in, in ways that you know, not like black and white. What are the possibilities? How often do you see growth? Where, where things were really stuck before.

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah, that, that's why I used the term emotional leader. Um, because I have worked with people who were in very challenging relationships. Um, you know, whether it was with their parent or a spouse or an adult child, , boyfriend, girlfriend, whatever. And again, at what I've witnessed is that as they became more emotionally, self-aware the way that they related to the other person changed.

Um, they became, More aware of their impact on, on the partner or on the parent. I don't mean that they were the, you know, necessarily the [01:03:00] instigator or the aggressor or anything like that, but they just understood the whole picture and then they could respond in ways that would get them more of the results that they wanted.

Okay. So if the, if the, you know, say the, the husband is upset, he takes it out on the wife, the wife strikes back, the husband gets mad. They, you know, , that kinda thing

Yael Schonbrun: yeah. Yeah.

Lindsay Gibson: instead of that. If, if the wife is aware of her feelings, she's aware of his feelings, she knows what a, what a dicey situation this is.

And she. Ops to respond in a way that doesn't inflame the situation, you know, is that not a superpower? I mean, it truly is because her response taking his state into mind will transform the dynamic in that moment and create the possibility of it not blowing up. So she, in a way [01:04:00] becomes, and it, this could also be the man with the woman or, you know, whatever the, um, relationship is to guys, to girls.

I mean, doesn't matter, people or people. Um, so if she, , is able to do that, then she becomes kind of the relationship leader in that she knows more about what's going on and then she's able to react in ways that are less threatening. To her partner. And then the partner is more open to her guidance or his guidance towards something better, you know, toward, , maybe, , more communication instead of fighting, or maybe it's time to take a break, you know, it's time for us just, let's not let's table this until tomorrow.

We're both tired. That kind of reasonable, uh, suggestion. So, um, yeah, the one partner [01:05:00] when they grow, they can bring along the relationship with them. If that other person is invested enough, that they want to, , keep the relationship going and you know, and that's a very individual thing.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And I've even seen it happen with adult parents that when the adult child of emotionally immature parents sets better boundaries, that it, it's not like it transforms a relationship into this, you know, wonderful, mutually rewarding, very flexible relationship. It, it's not quite like.

There can be a healthy connection that is boundaried, that feels safer and, and still connected. And that can feel really, really good. Um, you know, using some of these strategies that you talk about, I said, I was gonna mention them, and then I forgot, but like detached observation expressing, and then letting go.

Some of these really boundary approaches to relationships can actually lead [01:06:00] to having an ongoing relationship, which leads me to my next question, because if you grow and, you know, develop some of these skills and the relationship still feels extremely toxic, you know how I, I guess the question is how often do you encourage people to cut off a relationship that really doesn't seem to be working and instead only seems to be harming

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah. Um, extremely rare for me to do that.

And I probably, I probably, I was just trying to think, have I ever had a situation where I, you know, really, advocated for leaving the relationship and it's hard to remember a time because it it's not my life. I don't pretend to know what's best for people.

, I never forget I had a, I had a woman and this was back. Oh gosh. This must have been in. Maybe [01:07:00] the eighties. , and she came to me and her previous therapist had, , you know, sort of said, you know, your husband's a dirty dog. You need to leave him as a very feminist approach, you know? And so she didn't, she was miserable.

I mean, I was cleaning up the aftermath of her leaving her husband, losing her financial security, being lonely. , and I, I just remember thinking, wow, that was the wrong move, for this person because she got this false empowerment of, oh, I've, I've been treated badly. I deserve better. And her life wasn't better.

I mean, I was, I was looking at it. , and so I never had the hubris that I know what's the best solution for somebody in terms of estrangement or divorce or anything like that. What I do is I may vehemently. Point out what the, what the circumstances are doing to them. And then, , [01:08:00] I might say, , what can you do to get some relief?

Yael Schonbrun: Hm.

Lindsay Gibson: And I might suggest, you know, uh, ideas at that point. Um, like who could you go to stay with, or, , what about taking a break or what about you getting, getting a hotel room for the weekend or, you know, I, , might vehemently talk about the results of staying with that person. , if it was a case where, you know, they were physically endangered, I would certainly tell them that I had the feeling that's where this was going and that they needed to protect themselves.

But to tell them actually what to do in terms of leaving the relationship or not. I figured that my job is to point out what I think is happening and is likely to happen. And then they will decide how they want to handle that.

Yael Schonbrun: And do you often have people that make the choice that estrangement say from an emotionally immature parent who it [01:09:00] doesn't really feel like any amount of skills that they've been able to build lead to a happier, healthier kind of connection? Do you have people who make that choice?

Lindsay Gibson: I've had a few, I've had a few and what I've observed is that, oh, and by the way, there's a fantastic book, uh, called fault lines by Carl pier who did research on estrangement. I really recommend it to anybody who's doing family work or, interested in the subject of estrangement. It's very. Yeah, very readable, very good book.

Um, and yeah, he found there was like 27% of the United States population, uh, through a representative sample, uh, had some estrangement from a family member. okay. But yeah, but, uh, the, with the people that I've worked with estrangement has been a very small percentage. , what I've noticed is that there's a sense of, , something hanging, something, you [01:10:00] know, that

unfinished feeling or they're repeating the relationship in some other relationship.

They haven't really worked it through. Um, so, , if the person is. Not responding to your boundaries and if they are, you know, physically dangerous, physically abusive, , mentally cruel, that's another one. Then in situations like that, the person may decide to take a break from them. And I suggested in terms of taking a break, because that's probably more accurate about what people are going to do, cuz people, you know, have periods of estrangement and then they come back together or, you know, that's kind of what tends to happen, but estrangement doesn't solve the problem.

It's it solves the physical proximity problems like abuse, mental, cruelty, boundaries, that kind of thing. It does solve that. And sometimes that's enough to [01:11:00] do it. You know, it's, it's justified, but lots of times that person carries that relationship around inside them. It's like Murray Bowen talked about the emotional cutoff where people attempt to solve the problem of being emotionally fused with their families, by pulling up and moving, or, you know, cutting off contact.

And yet they're still at an emotional level. Still fused with that family. They're still running the scenarios. They're still having the imaginary conversations. They're still angry about it. They haven't really individuated from the family they've just left. So I don't wanna see that happen. , and when estrangement occurs, , I will also continue to bring in their feelings about that parent, , because that relationship is not over at an emotional level, just because they're not [01:12:00] talking to them anymore.

It's still a presence. That needs to be dealt with. And, and one other thing I wanna say Yale before, , we move off this topic is that, you know, because I haven't found a situation where I was, you know, dead set against that person, staying in that relationship doesn't mean that there wouldn't be a time when I might feel that way or feel it was my moral duty to tell the person they needed to get out.

I, I wanna stress that because I'm not working with a population where people's lives are on the line all the time. And I know a lot of people are. And so I wanna take into account that there may be times when that is an appropriate therapeutic response to tell the person that they need to get out.

It's just, you had asked about my experience and I've told you what I do, but I do wanna recognize that because I know sometimes people might have to do.[01:13:00]

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, no, I think that that's a, a, an important qualification, but I will say I, I think many people wanna stay in touch with their parents because it's their parents.

Even if that relationship is problematic in many ways. And so figuring out how to heal it for yourself, how to find a workable solution for yourself. And sometimes that may be estrangement. I just don't think it needs to be. And I think your book offers lots of tools that help you to find ways to stay connected that are safer and healthier for you.

And they're probably imperfect because you're in relationship with somebody who has some psychological deficits, for lack of a better word. but it can sort of be more value consistent, like, I want to be in touch with people that raised me and people who are important to me.

Lindsay Gibson: Yeah. As, as a client of mine said one time. So poignantly, she said, he's my dad.

Yael Schonbrun: Right?

Lindsay Gibson: like, it's like, I [01:14:00] know, I know he's your dad. And then nothing changes that. I mean, it, that, , that bond is so primal. It, it really is.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. Well, we, I thank you so much for, , your time and, and your wisdom. I could talk to you forever. I think this is such an important topic and your book really speaks to the experience of so many people in this way that really makes them feel seen. So I strongly encourage, , listeners to pick up the book and, um, I'll definitely be picking up your workbook.

I can't wait to see that hopefully new harbinger will reach out to me when that comes out. Um, but thank you so much for joining me today.

Lindsay Gibson: Oh, it's been my pleasure, Al I'm so happy to have the opportunity to, uh, talk to another psychologist about this. It's it's really been a fun conversation. Thank you for having me.

Yael Schonbrun: hey psychologist off the clock listeners. I'm going to guess that if you are listening to this episode, that you love to geek [01:15:00] out about books in psychology.

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