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# If You Had Controlling Parents

**Dan Neuharth, Ph.D.**



# **IF YOU HAD CONTROLLING PARENTS**

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**How to Make Peace with Your Past and Take Your Place in the World**

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 HarperCollins e-books



*To the children, past, present, and future,  
who lack a voice in their upbringing.*

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*May they find their voices  
through the stories and insights shared here*

*and*

*To Marly, with love and gratitude  
for her artistry, brilliance, beauty, and soul*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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My profound thanks and appreciation to:

Patti Breitman, superagent, for believing in this book so much and working so brilliantly to sell it.

The incredible staff at Cliff Street/HarperCollins and particularly: Diane Reverand, publisher, for her vision, wisdom, and enthusiasm; Julia Serebrinsky, editor, for her grace and attention to detail; and Pamela Pfeifer, public-relations genius.

The courageous pioneers who volunteered to be interviewed for this book and, in so doing, made new meaning of their own difficult childhoods by helping countless others.

My psychotherapy clients, who teach me more each day.

My steadfast men's group: Scott Cameron, Ph.D.; David Frankel, Ph.D.; Scott Lines, Ph.D.; Miles Shuell, Ph.D.; Alan Vitolo, Ph.D.; and Robert Wynne, Ph.D.

My original family: with love to mother Loretta, father Al, and sister Jan.

My brother-in-law Joseph Keusch, niece Danielle, and nephew Alec, all of whom bring smiles to the world.

Sandy the wonderdog, for offering unconditional love and unlimited play.

My mentors and teachers: Walter Anderson; Robin Acker, M.A., MFCC; Adria Blum, Ph.D.; Bernie Carter, M.A., MFCC; Janece Dagen, M.A., MFCC; Sandy Graber, M.D.; Roberto Gurza, M.A.; Jerry Schwartz, Ph.D.; and Lucy Scott, Ph.D.

Shannon Tullius and the staff, presenters, and volunteers of the Maui Writer's Conference.

Manuscript readers and supporters: Joan Cox, Lori Hurwitz; and especially Brooke Passano, M.A., MFCC.

And, finally, my partner, Marly Perkins, Ph.D., for her unwavering support, countless hours of reading drafts, and always on-target suggestions. Marly, this book would not exist had you not contributed all your gifts.

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*Some readers may find that coming to grips with a difficult childhood can spark upsetting feelings. Far from being uncommon, this frequently happens in psychotherapy, which is designed to explore troubling feelings in a safe setting. This book is not intended to be a substitute for formal psychotherapy, though many readers may find it a useful adjunct to treatment. I urge any reader who experiences abnormal depression or anxiety to consult a licensed psychotherapist.*



# TO THE READER

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**W**hen I use the word “parents” in this book, I’m talking about the adults who exerted the most significant control over your childhood—birth parents, guardians, grandparents, stepparents, aunts or uncles. I tend to use “parents,” plural, for grammatical simplicity even though only one parent or adult figure in your family may have been the controller.

This book includes case studies drawn from comprehensive interviews with a diverse group of forty women and men, ages twenty-three to fifty-eight, who grew up controlled. Collectively, these forty adults have more than six million hours’ experience growing up in controlling environments. (Detailed information about the participants and interviews can be found in Notes on Research on pp 239—240.) Although each person’s story was unique, similarities in how they were controlled transcended age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, and family history—and strongly mirrored the patterns I’ve encountered with private clients from controlling families.

I promised confidentiality to all participants so they could talk openly and honestly. Therefore, all names are pseudonyms. I have also slightly altered age, profession, or other details that might identify those interviewed. In some cases, to honor confidentiality I have combined details of more than one person’s experience into a composite character. Where needed, I have altered quotes for grammar or clarity. Other than these alterations, every story, incident, and observation you will read was as told to me. None of it is fiction, even though at times the enormity of control may seem unbelievable. I hope the stories and insights will touch you, teach you, and help you to heal, as they have me.

I’ve learned a great deal about control and healing from my clients and those I interviewed, but there is much I have still to master. I have yet to work out all the mixed feelings and control-related problems between myself and my own parents. You, not I, are the expert on your life, needs, and upbringing. I urge you to take this book at your own pace and on your own terms. I want *you* to feel in control as you read. You don’t have to agree with the entire book to find some parts pertinent. And keep in mind that while controlling parents often view the world in all-or-nothing terms, few situations in life are absolute. My goal in writing this book is to remind you that you are not alone, that you can make sense of your childhood, and that you can heal yourself.

This is a book of discovery and resolution. I invite you to discover what may lie underneath some of your most stubborn and troubling habits, patterns, or problems. I urge you to join me on a path toward resolving anything unfinished with your parents, whether they are living or dead. I ask you to fashion a more clear and full view of your upbringing so that you can make peace with your past.

## [DID YOU GROW UP WITH UNHEALTHY CONTROL?](#)

*Animals kill their young if they don't want to care for them, but they don't torture them for years.*

—ALICE MILLER

If your parents controlled you in unhealthy ways, they may have unwittingly planted land mines in your psyche. As a result, you may tiptoe through life expecting buried danger, not treasure, in your path. You may wait...and wait...for permission to love, succeed, and feel content. Permission you're not sure how to get. Permission you may have difficulty granting yourself.

Well, you are not alone. An estimated one in thirteen adults in the United States has grown up with unhealthy control. That's more than 15 million people. (See Notes on Research on pp. 239—240)

Unhealthy control has lasting costs. Such an upbringing can put you at risk for depression, anxiety, poor self-image, addictions, self-defeating behaviors, and stress-related health problems. Lacking a protective sense of self, you may live with too little freedom, too little meaning, and, most of all, far too little self-love. Growing up controlled means inheriting habits and beliefs that complicate relationships, decision making, spirituality, and emotional development. As one thirty-seven-year-old teacher raised in a white-knuckle household said, "I feel like I'm missing a couple of big chunks on how to be a person."

An unexamined upbringing may lead us unwittingly to replay old patterns with our mates so that our mates come to remind us of our parents. We may misread friends, neighbors, or coworkers who remind us of our parents. We may inadvertently use our children as vehicles to work out unfinished business with our parents. We may unintentionally inflict suffering on ourselves and those around us as we act out old, controlling ways.

After we're grown, our controlling parents may still treat us as children. More frustratingly, we may feel as helpless as children when we're around our parents. We may struggle to get closer to—or find greater distance from—a controlling parent. We may even come to understand their motivation for controlling us, yet be at a loss about reconciling that knowledge with our lingering hurt, disappointment, or anger.

If you have problems or habits that stubbornly resist change, these may be, in fact, symptoms of unresolved issues with your parents or upbringing. For example, we may grow bored with our jobs or relationships when what we may really need is to cut the apron strings with a parent; we may push ourselves mercilessly to do more when what we really need is to slow down and heal old wounds; or we may overeat when what we may really need is to attend to frustrations inherited from childhood.

By looking deeper, we can solve these problems at the source so that they don't merely crop up a few months later in a different form.

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This book can help you or someone you love to recognize and disarm the emotional land mines that linger from unhealthy family control. I'm here to tell you that many adults who grew up controlled have worked successfully to create happier adulthoods. You'll meet some of them shortly and may find them not all that different from you.

Look at your personality like a puzzle. This book can help you figure out how much of the puzzle was assembled for you by your parents and how many pieces were forced together, whether they fit or not.

## **How Do You Know?**

How do you know if you grew up controlled? Many adults raised with unhealthy control have only a vague sense of it. Others remember excess control but can't explain how it worked. Without something tangible to point to, many who grow up in controlling families come to believe unhealthy control to be normal.

Said a forty-six-year-old designer, "I don't know how to explain it, but my mother had this powerful presence and control. To this day I don't understand how she held so much influence over me or how I took on so many of her values despite my best efforts not to."

Overcontrol takes many forms. The most obvious is authoritarianism, but unhealthy control also occurs in a wide variety of families that are anything but strict. The common factor is this:

*Controlling families are organized to please, protect, and serve one or both parents, not to foster optimal growth or self-expression among family members.*

This book is for you if you or someone you care about came from a family that could be described as one or more of the following:

- Perfectionistic
- Overprotective
- Dictatorial
- Confusing
- Strict
- Belittling
- Authoritarian
- Manipulative
- Harsh
- Smothering



- Reserved
  - Overbearing
  - Unyielding
  - Tense
  - Irritable
  - Stifling
  - Unemotional
  - Pushy
- 

Overcontrol can just as easily exist in a “model” family as in a family having a climate of deception and chaos. Too much control thrives when family members cling to a myth that everything is perfect when it’s not. Excessive control can exist when a parent demands too much adulation or insists on iron-clad dos and don’ts. The parent who is too aloof exerts control through deprivation. The parent who is an emotional loose cannon dominates through unpredictability. Overcontrol is fostered by parents who emotionally smother other family members, bully with verbal abuse or physical or sexual violence, or who are too self-absorbed to see their children’s needs.

This test will help you measure the prevalence of control in your childhood and identify whether you may be facing adult-life problems because of it. Check all that apply:

***GROWING UP, did you often feel...***

- Forbidden to question or disagree with a parent?
- Pressured by excessive expectations or unattainable standards?
- Tense when one or both of your parents were around?
- Confused by parental mixed messages or unclear rules?
- Criticized more than you were encouraged or praised?
- Afraid to express anger, fear, or sadness around a parent?
- Intimidated or belittled by a parent?
- Manipulated into doing things you didn’t want to?
- Sad, anxious, hurt, deprived, or angry?
- That physical and emotional affection were scarce in your family?
- That pleasing your parents was rewarded more than being yourself?

\_\_ of 11 checked

***In RETROSPECT, did either or both of your parents often...***

- Try to dictate your thoughts, speech, or morals?
- Overscrutinize your eating, sleep, dress, or personal grooming habits?
- Interfere with your choices of school, career, friends, or lovers?
- Violate your privacy?

- Threaten to disown you for opposing their wishes?
- ~~Withdraw love or affection when you displeased them?~~
- Use words like “lazy,” “stupid,” “ugly,” “selfish,” or “crazy” to describe you?
- Physically or sexually abuse you and/or allow others to do so?
- Need to be the center of attention or try to dominate most situations?
- View the world in right-or-wrong, black-and-white terms?
- Treat emotions as things to be changed, avoided, or ignored?
- Seem perfectionistic, stoic, or driven?
- Seem unwilling to admit they were wrong?
- Seem obsessed with cleanliness, order, details, rules, or schedules?
- Seem hypersensitive to criticism?
- Seem unaware of the pain they caused you and others?

\_\_ of 16 checked

***Did either of your parents...***

- Experience major trauma in their childhood?
- Have a family history of physical or sexual abuse, mental illness, or substance abuse?
- Feel overcontrolled by their parents?

\_\_ of 3 checked

***As an ADULT, have you often felt...***

- Perfectionistic, driven, or rarely satisfied?
- Like you are under scrutiny even when no one else is around?
- Intimidated or easily angered around controlling people?
- Terrified of being overly dependent in relationships?
- Strong reservations about having children because of how you were raised?
- Melancholy, empty, or deprived?
- Like few people know the real you?
- Afraid of strong feelings or losing control?
- That you missed out on large parts of normal childhood experiences?
- Extrasensitive to criticism?
- Confused about what your feelings are or should be?
- Overly judgmental of others?

\_\_ of 12 checked

***In your ADULT LIFE, have you often...***

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- Worried or ruminated over confrontations with others?
- Found it hard to make decisions?
- Lost yourself in relationships by putting another's needs first?
- Had trouble finding a spiritual belief that feels right?
- Found it difficult to relax, laugh, or be spontaneous?
- Had difficulty with sex, touch, or intimacy?
- Had trouble accepting compliments?
- Had an eating disorder or addictive behavior?
- Suffered from stress-related illnesses, "burnout," or chronic pain?
- Undermined yourself in work or relationships?
- Assumed others have the confidence you lack?
- Tested the love of those close to you?
- Been abusive, controlling, or disrespectful to friends or a mate?
- Expected that others will try to hurt or take advantage of you?

\_\_ of 14 checked

***As an ADULT, do you often feel...***

- That it has taken a long time to emotionally separate from one or both of your parents?
- That you visit or talk to a parent more out of obligation than choice?
- That one or both of your parents don't know you as you really are?
- That one or both of your parents romanticize your childhood to downplay problems?
- That you cannot fully please your parents?
- That your parents just don't get it about their impact on you?
- Tense when you think about a parent coming to visit?
- Horrified when you notice yourself acting like one of your parents?
- A desire to temporarily reduce or sever contact with a parent?

\_\_ of 9 checked

Total Questions: 65

Total Number Checked: \_\_

If you answered positively to twenty-two or more questions (more than one third the total), you most likely came from a controlling family. Even people from relatively healthy families are going t

have some yeses. The difference is that in controlling families, the above tendencies are present more often, to a greater degree, and with greater emotional costs.

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However, if you did answer yes to many of the questions, it doesn't mean that you're "damaged goods." It simply means that you faced—and survived—a difficult set of early circumstances that may still affect you. Recognizing this, of course, is the first big step toward healing.

## Placing Responsibility

Controlled children rarely have the option of acknowledging, "Something is wrong here. I don't like the way this feels." Because they're trained not to recognize their feelings, controlled children may have only a vague sense of constriction or emotional numbness.

If your parents exerted unhealthy control, something *was* wrong in your family. Healing from such an upbringing often requires that you peek behind the curtain of familial loyalty to examine family rules and beliefs.

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller has written that healing from a painful childhood begins with allowing yourself to express all the feelings and opinions that arose from years of abuse and control; in effect, speaking out after so many years of not being able to.

In so doing, it's important to place responsibility where it truly belongs by acknowledging that:

1. You aren't responsible for what your parents did to you, they are.
2. You are responsible for what you do with your life now, your parents aren't.

Exploring a pattern of control that was handed down for generations in your family isn't passing the buck; it's the first step in stopping the buck. By seeing unhealthy family patterns, you can avoid passing them on—a choice your parents may have been unable or unwilling to make.

This exploration is not designed to blame or bash parents. Being a parent is tough. There is no harder or more important job. Parenting is immensely demanding physically, emotionally, financially, and mentally. No parent gets training in being a parent until she or he becomes one. There are no perfect parents. All parents make mistakes, sometimes big mistakes, and still many children grow up relatively happy, well-adjusted, and able to meet life's challenges.

I do not advocate excessively "permissive" parenting. Appropriate control and limit setting are crucial to child raising. Children test parental control with petulance, sarcasm, deception, and a host of other techniques, some conscious, most instinctive. The lack of adequate limits in permissive households can cause problems no less troubling than the harsh limits in authoritarian families. Yet this book isn't about appropriate control and limit setting, it is about households with *unhealthy control*—too much or the wrong kinds of control for too long.

For most of history, governments have been organized on a patriarchal, authoritarian model.

Only recently has democracy, functioning on the consent of the governed, offered an alternative to patriarchal authoritarianism. The first year in which a majority of nations had democratic governments was 1992.

Similarly, most families historically have been based on patriarchal authoritarianism. Of course a family is not a democracy; children are not yet adults and cannot govern. But I believe both children and parents thrive in “democratic families”—in which both children and adults have the right to speak, think, feel, and trust, free from unhealthy control. As democratic governments become the norm worldwide, how can we expect our children to grow up and live in democracies when they have known only unhealthy control, not democratic ideals?

Control and trust are diametrically opposed and inextricably linked. We control to the extent that we mistrust the world. When we trust the world, we can feel safe enough to let go of much of our need to control. Controlling parents, by and large, do not trust. Parental overcontrol is nearly always a generations-old cycle, in place well before you came along. Most controlling parents, in fact, were themselves tremendously misused as children or were traumatized by family deaths, crises, or abuse. If they never got help for their hurts, they may feel alone in an untrustworthy world, and be desperately trying to control life rather than risk being savaged again.

I feel sad for such controlling parents’ deep hurt. Yet parents who ignore or hide their wounds may spend their lives running from the ghosts of the past. In the process, their children pay a tremendous price.

Unlike your parents, you have a choice. You can heal your wounds rather than ignore or hide from them. You can transcend the cycle of control rather than perpetuate it.

## **The Human Face of Unhealthy Control**

As part of researching this book I conducted comprehensive interviews with forty adults ages twenty-three to fifty-eight who grew up controlled. Their experiences illustrate many of the points in this book, weaving a rich tapestry of sadness and hurt, wisdom and hope. You may discover that you have commonalities with many of these people’s early experiences as well as with the problems they inherited from unhealthy parental control. Participants ranged from:

- An Arkansas preacher’s daughter to the California daughter of a Holocaust survivor
- The daughter of second-generation working-class Italian immigrants to the adopted son of wealthy New England socialites
- The son of Middle Americans whose ancestors fought in the American Revolution to the daughter of Chinese immigrants who barely escaped with their lives in the 1949 Communist revolution
- The oldest daughter of seven children from an Irish-Catholic family to the only daughter of an African-American single mother
- The gay son of a military officer father and fundamentalist Christian mother to the son of a Latin American father and a sadistic, abusive mother
- The daughter whose mother barely survived her childhood in a World War II

Japanese concentration camp to the daughter of a schizophrenic mother who could barely negotiate daily life.

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Despite their different backgrounds, these people showed striking similarities in how they were controlled and how it affected them. You may discover emotional kinships with some of these people—and you may find that reading about their efforts to heal their difficult childhoods will validate the work you are doing to heal.

## **There Is Much You Can Do**

If your parents were controlling, you saw control modeled as a strategy for living—but it's not the only one. The more aware you are of how your parents controlled and of the fallout of their early control in your present life, the more informed the choices you're likely to make about controlling your children, your mate, and yourself.

Despite an uptight upbringing, you can reclaim the most vital parts of your life, emotions, and dreams that may have withered in childhood.

Despite a childhood in which you had little say, you can discover a new richness to your voice in the world.

Despite growing up with unhealthy family ties, you can fashion more nourishing relationships with those close to you.

Despite your own painful childhood, you can significantly increase the chances that your children will not suffer the pains you suffered.

Despite a troubled past with your parents, you can develop a more realistic and satisfying relationship with them as they near the end of their lives, and with their memories after they are gone.

It is possible to be yourself even if you had to be always “on” for your parents. It's possible to use your feelings for your betterment, not against it. No matter what your age or how restrictive your upbringing, it's possible to fulfill your personal promise and find the contentment that was derailed by parents who may not have known better or couldn't have done things any differently.

All these things are possible by achieving greater *individuation* from a controlling upbringing—and it begins with emotionally separating from the hurtful and problematic habits of your parents and family system. Individuation also includes setting right what was knocked out of balance by overcontrol and redefining yourself and your life in your own terms.

By individuating you can better know the hero or heroine in you: the biggest and strongest parts of you that helped you survive when you were smallest and weakest. Precisely because your parents were so controlling, you had to develop many strengths to survive—resourcefulness, intuition, perseverance, and sensitivity, for example. Luckily, the skills you taught yourself in navigating a difficult childhood are yours to keep and can be quite useful in adulthood. You deserve to feel

independent and whole, to have healthy boundaries, to have free speech and open emotional expression. You deserve to heal.

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## How This Book Is Organized

This book is organized in three parts:

Part One, “Naming the Problem,” will help you **see** the full extent of parental control by describing in detail eight styles of controlling parents. You’ll be able to determine which of these types—or combination of types—fits one or both of your parents. When you know your parents’ styles, you can better recognize the continuing effects of their early control on you.

Part Two, “Understanding the Problem,” will help you **reckon** with control’s lingering costs. You’ll begin to understand the complex, powerful process of overcontrol and find answers to major quandaries such as, “How did my parents do it?” and “Why do I feel the way I do?” You’ll gain clarity on your feelings as a child and discover connections between those feelings and your present-day problems. By exploring the aspects of yourself you had to disown or distort in childhood, you’ll pave the way for reclaiming your total self. And, you’ll get a clear sense of why your parents acted as they did, which will hasten your healing.

Part Three, “Solving the Problem,” helps you **let go** of a painful childhood and the lasting effects of unhealthy control so that you can *emotionally leave home*. We’ll explore a broad array of paths to healing, along with exercises you may find helpful. This section will help you design your own healing process, at your own speed, in a way that suits you best.





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