

I suspect that everyone over the age of 18 is, to some extent, an adult child. Adult children are everywhere.

Consider this: if, from a very early age, you felt an unconscious obligation to be a grown up in your family or found yourself, for any of a very large number of reasons, in situations where you didn't feel that you could rely on your parents or primary caregiver consistently and reliably to meet your emotional needs, you are probably an adult child.

To be fair, it is almost impossible for parents to create a perfect childhood for their children, no matter how hard they try. There is a child to adult continuum, and all of us fit somewhere 2 along that line between child and adult, depending on how successfully we have managed to navigate – or had navigated for us – key events in our childhood and adolescence. We also shift along this continuum according to how we feel and how we respond to certain elements in our lives. So, for example, you may be very adult and 'in charge' when you are at your children's parent-teacher meetings, but you may feel very childlike when you walk into a meeting with your boss.

It doesn't really matter what was going on in your family, or why you felt you needed to be the grown up. What matters is that you did.

I work with a wide range of clients in my profession as a life coach, and most of them display, to varying degrees, some or all of the characteristics, limiting beliefs and patterns of behaviour ascribed to the adult child. My clients come from a variety of backgrounds and their childhood dramas and disappointments are of wide-ranging severity; the information I have studied and absorbed on adult children applies differently to each individual client, just as it will to you.

I sometimes use the term 'reluctant hero' in relation to adult children, because they are so brave. As children our choices are limited. We pretty much have to do as we are told and put up with what life gives us. But these children often complete tasks and take emotional responsibility for things that only adults should be expected to do. In my mind they are heroes, although they may not feel like heroes. For them, doing what they need to do may feel like nothing out of the ordinary. They do not ask to be brave but they frequently commit acts of extreme bravery, holding things together for themselves, their siblings, and often for their parents. They do it because they do not have a choice. They are reluctant heroes.

One such reluctant hero is Sam. He is a man in his thirties, soft spoken, and with a slight hesitation in his speech. I like him immediately.

'I must have been about 10 the first time my siblings and I started referring to our parents as "the children", ' Sam remembers. 'I was sitting alone at the dining room table trying to make sense of my maths homework, and my older brother walked past and asked, "Where are the children?" We thought it was hilarious and were delighted with how funny we were. But the truth is that we did feel like the parents a lot of the time, especially my older brothers, who used to look out for me above and beyond the call of regular brotherly duty.'

Sam has come to consult me because he struggles with feeling competent at work and, although he is very conscientious and does well in his job, he never feels as though he is doing quite well enough. As I get to know him, I discover that he is clever, quick and insightful, but that he never really

believes the positive feedback he receives from colleagues and supervisors. His story comes out slowly and across a few sessions.

Sam and his brothers grew up in a family that had some challenges. Despite their best efforts, his parents were unable to provide the kind of safe, loving, consistent and predictable home environment that children require to thrive and grow up to be healthy and robust adults. Although they loved their children, they were not always able to notice and appreciate them through their own pain and anxiety. Sam and his brothers were often left to look after their own and each other's needs. In many respects, Sam did not have a happy and carefree childhood; from an early age he learned to be serious, to be responsible and reliable, and to be self-sufficient.

I learn to know a man who is understated, anxious (but tries hard to hide it), sensitive, intuitive, still reliable, more responsible and fiercely independent. As we work carefully together I also learn that his intimate relationships have always been a source of discomfort for him; he always seems to choose the wrong partner and stays in unhealthy relationships far longer than many others would. He is a living embodiment of the limiting belief I call 'If I were better, it would be better.'

Sam is a fairly typical example of the many adult child clients I work with, so much so that he is among many who refer to their parents as their 'children'.

There are many, many children who grow up in an environment that is unstable and feels unsafe and unpredictable. As adults these people generally share a range of behaviours, beliefs and concerns that characterise reluctant heroes, and that make their journey through life less than carefree at best, a downright struggle at worst.

As adults, these adult children tend to carry with them the fears and insecurities they experienced as children and, when feeling vulnerable or insecure, they will often, despite being grown up and mature, 'regress' to behaviours and beliefs that were developed when they were growing up in an unreliable environment.

Often, too, it seems that the syndrome gets passed down through the generations. Some of my clients can't quite put their finger on what the unhappiness in their family might have been that has resulted in their adult child tendencies. This is confusing to them because they remember their parents as happy, consistent and functional. After some time, though, they may realise that their grandparents – the parents of a parent or even both parents – had some habit or behaviour that created unpredictability or fear in the home (substance abuse, a vicious temper, depression, even post traumatic stress from being involved in a war). And so, even though my clients' childhoods seem to have been healthy and happy, they begin to realise that their parent/s were themselves adult children.

Understanding that the experience of having been very responsible and reliable in childhood, coupled with the inclination to revert to often fear-based childlike responses in adulthood, is important for grown-up men and women to make sense of how and why they relate to the world, themselves and others the way they do. Children who take on adult responsibilities usually take life very seriously and often struggle to have fun and enjoy themselves. And adults who revert to childlike behaviours find it hard to navigate conflicts, work, romantic relationships, authority and

many other aspects of adulthood. So, being an adult child is often a double whammy that affects those of us who grew up in less than perfect circumstances.

Neither childhood nor adulthood were or are comfortable places to be.

It is far from all bad, however. There are many gifts and advantages that come with being an adult child. Adult children are often very insightful, very dependable, intuitive, empathic, sensitive, kind, generous and creative. Many of the characteristics that drive adult children to be the best they can be result in incredible talents and abilities.

Through deepening the understanding of what makes an adult child and how they operate in the world, and identifying areas for changing behaviours and attitudes, it is possible to harness the strengths and ameliorate the weaknesses of adult children and set them free to fulfil their enormous potential. I know, because I see it happening every day in my coaching practice.

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