

# PSYCHOTHERAPY UPDATE

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Psychotherapy • Relationship Counseling • Sex Therapy • Life Coaching

*"helping people maximize their potential & achieve their goals"*

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## BECOMING THE FATHER YOU WANT TO BE

When my eldest son was about 10 years old we happened to be talking about how one goes about finding a career or job. He was always interested in things like that, probably because so many people ask the question, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" I suggested to him that he should follow what interests him, what excites him. In other words I gave him a variation of the sage advice, "follow your passion and you won't have to work a day in your life." My son looked up at me and said, "but Daddy, I have to do something that can support a wife and family." Even at this young age he had already internalized the societal imperative and gender stereotype that says because he was a male he would carry the responsibility for the major support of himself and a family.

I decided there and then that I would have to do something about that. I did not want any of my children to have to make career decisions based on gender stereotypes. I wanted them to have the opportunity to follow their passions, to live their dreams, without the constraints placed upon them by their gender. This awakening evolved into a life long interest in gender stereotypes, feminism, and the psychology of being a male and fatherhood in particular. The latter had its roots in an even earlier period of my life; it began in 1962 when I became a father. I was a graduate student at the time, living the life of a 25 year old, married student trying to earn a Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Being a student and working part-time while my wife worked full time as a schoolteacher, I spent a considerable amount of time at home during the days that I devoted to studying and being a Dad. I found the experience both trying and extremely gratifying; learning how to balance being a student and later a wage-earner, husband, and father was a real challenge. I wanted to be the best father possible. I wanted my children to have the Dad I did not have. I wanted to be a role-model for them. But what were the role models available to me?

### Role Models

When we, as men and fathers, look around us for mentors and models for being a father what do we see? For the most part, aside from our own fathers and perhaps a few fathers of our friends and possibly an uncle or grandparent, there are few such role-models, at least none that we would care to emulate. Most of the role-models come from television or movies. Despite knowing that these are pure fantasy, we

find ourselves wishing we had fathers like those on the screen (with the exception, of course, of those who were so far off the charts that we knew they did not exist). Nonetheless, these men as fathers still had their impact despite knowing that they are actors and despite some of them being caricatures of men. The portrayal of men and fathers affect our sense of self even though we know they are actors. The people who write, direct, and produce these television and movie scripts also have fathers. And the desire for a nurturing, wise, compassionate father exists within them as well.

Let's look at some of the models that we might have wanted to be our father and who we might have wanted to become as fathers:

*Danny Williams (Make Room for Daddy- 1950s)*

Danny Williams, a successful nightclub singer, encountered a variety of difficult or amusing situations in trying to balance his career with his family. Affection expressed as hostility ("I love you, you little jerk") and ironic humor characterized this show.

*Ozzie Nelson (Ozzie and Harriet Show- 1950s)*

The genial, bumbling Ozzie was the narrative linchpin of *Ozzie and Harriet*, attempting to steer his young sons into the proper paths (usually rather ineffectually) and attempting to assert his ego in a household in which he was often ill at ease. Wise homemaker Harriet held that ego, and that household, together. Harriet represented the voice of reason

on Ozzie and Harriet, rescuing Ozzie from the consequences of over-impulsive behavior.

*Jim Anderson (Father Knows Best – 1950s)*

Jim was the manager of the General Insurance Company; he was married to Margaret and they had three children. Every evening Jim would come home from the office, take off his sports jacket, put on his comfortable sweater, and deal with the everyday problems of a growing family.

*Ward Cleaver (Leave It To Beaver – 1950s)*

Leave It To Beaver strongly promoted the importance of family. The recurring themes expounded parental expectations for children, while the moral messages revealed the importance of teaching children proper behavior. Ward and June were used as role models to emulate in order to achieve a successful married relationship. Each of these messages was designed to display an effective method to prepare youngsters for the inevitability of starting a life and family of their own.

*Dr. Heathcliff 'Cliff' Huxtable (Cosby Show – 1980s)*

Cliff was a physician who practiced out of the basement office in his home. His wife, Claire, was an attorney. They were the ideal two-career professional family. Cliff always had the solution to every problem and was able to give advice in a humorous, thoughtful style. He was the perfect Dad with the perfect wife to support him and set him straight when necessary. He was always available, his practice coming second to his responsibilities as a father and husband.

Then there were those that we were probably less likely to want to emulate:

*Dagwood Bumstead (Blondie - 1940s)*

Dagwood bumbled his way through life. He slept wherever he could and ate as often as he could. He had no ambition, no spine, and no parenting skills. Blondie runs the show.

*Archie Bunker (All in the Family – 1970s)*

Archie was the quintessential bigot. He thought nothing of insulting people of all races, religions, and ethnicities, including his wife, child, and son-in-law.

*Tony Soprano (The Sopranos – 2000s)*

Tony was a wiseguy, a capo in La Cosa Nostra. While he went to church on Sunday morning, he would break someone's head with a baseball bat Sunday night. His only redeeming quality was that he struggled with his psyche once a week when he visited his shrink.

Many of us would have loved to have Cliff Huxtable or Ward Cleaver as our father; we would have loved to be a

member of their family. We may have tried to emulate them as we became fathers, but found them to have set an impossible standard. We quickly learned that we don't get ten takes of each scene to get it right. And we don't have a team of scriptwriters to help us deliver our lines. So we stop trying.

Given the paucity of models for fatherhood and no instructions on how to be a father, we are left to stumble around on our own to do the best we can with what little we have. And there was even less information available for our fathers and their fathers before them (and if it were available they would not have read it). We are left with repeating the mistakes of others from generation to generation, promising to do better than our parents only to find out we have become just like them. Usually it is our wives who tell us, "You have become just like your father!" And usually this is not intended as a compliment!

## Where to Turn?

The truth is there are lots of books and articles available about parenting and there are even a few that specifically deal with issues of fatherhood. However, men just don't read instructions. Men don't like to read the instructions on how to put together a kid's bicycle or crib; they just jump right in and begin assembling arrogantly believing that they already know how to do it. By the time they are done, they have a few extra parts or are complaining that a few are missing and it takes them twice as long to do as compared to what it would have taken had they read the manual. But that doesn't matter; the feeling of satisfaction for having done it on one's own makes it worthwhile. Men don't like to ask driving directions for the same reason. But here they are, faced with the most challenging and important task of their lives --- that of being a father --- and they operate in the same way - by the seat of their pants - assuming that fathering is a simple task that they should already know how to do.

There are two exceptions to the men-don't-read-instructions rule. They will spend hours reading the latest auto or golf magazine (or other sport or hobby magazine); they will read information on the latest advances in their work. I wonder how successful they would be in their jobs, careers, sports, or hobbies if they spent as little time learning about them as they spend learning about how to be a father (or husband, for that matter).

A physician, lawyer, businessman, broker, or electrician spends considerable time learning his craft. The more successful he is, the more time and energy he has spent in learning how to be proficient in his field. It is similar with sports. In order to be competent in a sport, he will spend hours practicing. He will go to the golf range to hit buckets of balls, he will do similarly with tennis, and he will practice bowling. But will he practice fathering? Will he spend time learning how to be a father? Practically every father will

say, “My wife and family is the most important thing in the world to me.” Yet he spends the least amount of time learning how to do that job – the job of fathering and husbanding – as proficiently as possible. Yet he expects to do it well. How arrogant to think that this most important job of being a father could be done with so little concerted effort!

Women, by contrast, begin their journey to motherhood early on in their life. They begin by playing with dolls, playing house where they pretend they are mothers and wives, tending to their younger siblings or neighborhood children, tending to a pet kitten or puppy, and babysitting. All of these activities prepare her for the task of nurturing a child and the role of mother.

Why is it that men believe that the job of parenting should be so easy that they should be able to do it without having to take lessons, read, or practice? Where did they get the notion that it should come “naturally?” In order to answer this question and to subsequently come up with a better father paradigm, we have to first understand something about male psychology.

## What Does It Mean To Be A Man?

Let’s go back to when we were children - little boys of two years of age. What toys have we accumulated? By this time we probably have several trucks, some Hotwheels, a few pull toys, a set of blocks, Lego’s, some sports equipment, a wagon, and some sort of toy to ride on. We may have a couple of stuffed animals from when we were “just a little kid.” I don’t see any dolls. After all, this is a boy we’re talking about. But without a doll or dollhouse, how are we supposed to learn how to take care of a baby or to decorate a house? So it starts early that those fun things are eliminated from our repertoire of activities. Our sisters can have them, but not us.

As little boys we started out with a full range of feelings and emotions. We danced to the music. But we soon learn that boys march, girls dance (and then we wonder why girls dance so much better than us and why we have to learn to dance by the numbers). We learn that girls cry and show their feelings, boys do not. Boys become more stoical. The worst thing that someone can say to us is that we are behaving like a girl. Boys learn that numbers and measurements are important. We learn to run fast, throw far, jump high, and do a lot of pull-ups. Everything is about numbers. We measure our penis and admire big biceps and big boobs. Having a girl with big boobs is good for our self-esteem. Having a small penis is bad for our self-esteem. Being strong is good; being gentle is not so good. Our lives are dictated by our gender.

By the time we are five we have gotten the message. Boys are performers; they are doers. They can make things happen. We watch our fathers and see them as breadwinners (earners), not bread makers (nurturers). Dads repair things

and solve problems. They don’t bathe us, buy our clothes, or feed us. They don’t comb our hair and put band-aids on our cuts. We go to Mom when we are hurt, not Dad. Dad will ask what happened, Mom would give us a hug and make it better. We learn what we are supposed to be from looking at the world around us; we see how other men are and learn that we are supposed to be like that – for better or worse.

By the time we are ten we have lost most of our gentleness, a lot of our empathy, and have learned how to solve problems rather than how to connect with people and become intimate. We have given up on wanting Dad to play with us; we don’t expect to sit on his lap; if we are lucky he will play catch with us once in a while. We end up longing for his approval and savor the time we spent with him. In his deeply moving one-man show “700 Sundays,” Billie Crystal honors his father with whom he spent only 700 Sundays because he died when Billie was 15. He wanted more.

Most of us wanted more, more time with fathers who worked six days a week and were exhausted on Sunday, their one day of rest. Many of us had fathers who were home a lot more, but still did not seem to have the time for us: time to listen, time to play, and time to simply be with us. We long for that time and cherish those moments. Yet, as much as we long for our fathers, and experience what has been referred to as “father hunger,” we are not giving our own children much more than we received. *We don’t ask ourselves the question: what will my son or daughter remember of me when they look back at their childhood? Am I building memories with them today? Or am I giving them all the things I did not have as a child instead of giving them me, my time, my attention?*

We tend to think that being a man means being financially successful. A man is rational, unemotional, tough, strong, and smart. A man can get things done. Yet what we long for in our fathers and remember the most are those times when we just were hanging out with Dad. It didn’t matter what we were doing. Even going on errands and spending time at work with him were special events for a child whose dad was not around much. We learned early on that the way to get to Dad was through our achievements or asking him to fix something or solve a problem. Often we might have asked for Dad’s help with something for which we really didn’t need his help, just to have him spend some time with us. Unfortunately, we may be doing the same thing with our own children; requiring them to have a problem for us to fix in order get our attention.

We watch the men around us and we learn what it means to be a man. The images are imprinted onto our brains and become the template of who we become as we grow up. Our heroes become our models. Often we fall short of these heroes and feel badly about ourselves. Once in a while we go beyond them. But when it comes to being a father, there are no appropriate models, paradigms, or templates that we can consciously follow. So we default into the template that

got imprinted in our brain of the first father we saw; namely, our own. Like or not, unless we consciously and with considerable effort develop and follow a different model, we will become similar to our fathers.

### **The Old Paradigm of Fatherhood**

The traditional paradigm of a father first and foremost consists of being a good provider. This model says that regardless of whether your wife works outside of the home or not, you are the breadwinner. It is your job to bring home the paycheck just as the men of ancient times were supposed to bring home the animal for dinner. Your second responsibility is to protect your wife and children from harm. Protect and provide are the hallmarks of a good husband and father according to this model. This model continued with minor modifications until roughly post-WWII. Fathers worked as hunter-gathers, farmers and tradesmen, or factory workers. They had a limited role in family life.

Beginning in the 1950s, fathers were expected to be more involved in family life. Being a problem solver involved having solutions to family problems and being a handyman around the house. Fathers-husbands were supposed to know how to fix a leaking toilet and figure out how to solve a family crisis (no one tells you where you are supposed to learn how to be expert in this arena, but it is nevertheless part of your job description).

In the 1960s and '70s fathers were supposed to be somewhat more involved in parenting; they were supposed to be their wife's assistant giving her some relief when possible and helping her with some things when she asked you for help. If they occasionally took the kids for a Saturday so she could run some errands or do something personal for herself, they are heroes and expect to be appreciated. After all, they went above and beyond the call of duty. The wife's job is to be head of the domestic aspects of family life and you are the money earner. She knows all about child rearing, discipline, dietary issues, home decorating, medical and dental issues, education, and everything else that goes with raising children and running a household. Fathers' job was simply to provide, protect, and give her a hand as needed.

In this model a man's life is not significantly different as a husband and father than it was when he was living at home with his parents. His job was to go to school, get decent grades, do some chores such as taking out the trash, and don't get into trouble. Now his job is to bring home a decent paycheck, do some chores, and don't get into trouble. As a kid Mom did everything else; with this model his wife does everything else.

And then he wonders why his children have a stronger bond with their mother than with him! He wonders why he is merely the designated driver on weekends. He wonders why his wife knows more about the lives of their children than he does.

### **A New Paradigm**

This new paradigm begins with several basic premises:

- A father is as important to the healthy development of a child as is a mother.
- Children need father-love as much as they need mother-love. No matter how much love children receive from their mother, it will not take the place of the love of a father.
- Fathering is as much a state of mind as mothering. One has to think like a father, just as one thinks like a mother. And then act as a father.
- Fathering is a full-time job even if you are only spending a few hours a week engaged in paternal activity. It pervades one's entire consciousness.
- A father is not merely a mother's assistant. Being a father is an equal position to being a mother and with that position comes equal responsibilities. A father should be able to do everything a mother can do when it comes to parenting. The only difference is that he does it like a father.
- Your children want more of you and your time than they want the things you can buy for them; they will accept the latter as a substitute only because that is what they learn from you. It is always easier to buy your children something than to spend time with them. Fathers, similar to bosses who give quick solutions to subordinates, only encourage children to come to them with problems or requests. Children want your time and attention; and they will do almost anything to get it.
- Fathers are made, not born. One has to invest considerable effort and time in learning how to be an effective father. It demands practice, patience, and perseverance: the three Ps. The more time and effort you put into your role as a father, the better you will become. Spend as much time reading about parenting and male and female development as you spend reading the sports and/or financial pages of the newspaper or your favorite magazine.
- If being a father is as important as you say it is, and if your wife and children are as important as you say they are, act it every day with no excuses.
- Show your children that you love their mother. How you relate to your wife will demonstrate to them how a man should relate to a woman. Your relationship to your child's mother becomes the model for the husband and wife they will become and for the man your daughter chooses to be her husband. It is not so much the specific behavior as it is the quality of the relationship that you want to model.

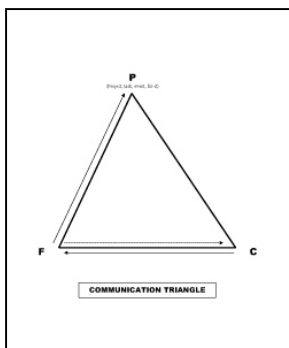
## Learning to Listen

In this paradigm learning to listen to your child is the most important skill you must develop. Your interactions with your children should focus on the connection between the two of you and not with solving some problem they might present. Problems often are your child's ticket of admission to spending some time with you. You must teach them that you are there to listen, to understand, to clarify, and to share. And only when they are unable to solve their own problems will you make suggestions. Your role is to connect with them and through the connection teach them to solve their own problems. It is expedient to solve a problem; but it is also dismissive.

In the figure below you will notice at the left side bottom of the triangle the letter "F." This represents Father (it could be husband, employer or generic male). The arrow is directed toward the apex of the triangle "P" representing the project, task, activity, or problem. Men have been trained to focus their attention toward fixing or solving problems.

Hence, they become habituated and comfortable with that mode of communication. Two men talking with one another

will spend about some project (fish-etc.). They to each other personal contrast, if right hand triangle "C" your child be wife, generic



hours talking activity or ing, golf, cars, seldom relate directly on a level. By you look at the side of the representing (which could employee or female), the

arrow goes directly toward the "M" indicating a desire for direct person-to-person connection. More often than not when a child comes to Daddy with a problem he or she actually wants to connect with Daddy. Often s/he will bring Daddy a problem as a means for that connection. As a father, you must learn to connect directly to the child such that the arrows at the base of the triangle are going back and forth. The child will often solve its own problem if given the opportunity.

I have often noticed that when a child comes running into the house crying or angry going to a parent, what he or she really wants is comfort. Once comforted, the child will usually return to its previous activity often with the same playmate that just angered or hurt him or her.

Re-orienting yourself to this new model will take time. So remember the three Ps.

The following are a few suggestions that can be put into practice immediately:

- On your way home from work begin to focus on your other full time job, that of being a Dad and

Husband. Visualize what to expect when you get there. Prepare yourself to engage. Remember when you were dating your wife and how excited you were to see her after work? Remember when your child was born and you couldn't wait to get home play with your new baby? Capture that image and feeling. Your child will grow up and be out of the house before you know it.

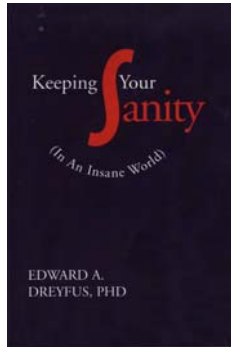
- When you arrive home, sit in your car for a few minutes to fully relax. Meditate by focussing on your breathing. You are entering into a new zone, away from work, and you don't know exactly what is on the otherside of the door to greet you. When you go inside remember this time is about them, not about you.
- Greet your wife with warmth, a hug, a squeeze, a kiss. Model loving behavior for your children. It will make them smile and feel secure.
- Your first major job on arriving home is to be fully available for your children. No email, snail mail, messages, etc., just focus on your family. Have them help you change your clothes so that you are ready for 20-30 minutes of playtime. They have been waiting all day for you to come home. They need your time and attention.
- Give full participation in their evening rituals. Helping with homework, reading to them, chatting, bathing them, feeding them, and getting them ready for bed. *No matter how old your child is, he or she wants to be tucked in at night.* The tucking in process may vary as the child gets older, but it always ends with a kiss and a "sweet dreams."
- Nurture your spouse. She needs your time as well. Make it a habit to take a walk after dinner or have a cup of tea or other ritual. This is a time for debriefing. It is a time for you to listen to her and vice versa.
- Plan a weekly date night with your wife. Romance is important for the marriage, for each of you, and as a model for your children. The date night is a time for connecting.
- Have a date night with your children. If you have more than one child, alternate weeks with them. Do something with them that they like doing. Take them out to dinner, bowling, arcade, mall, or whatever appeals to them. Get to know your children directly rather than through your wife's recitation of their lives.
- Visit your child(ren)'s school regularly. Read to their class, be a monthly teacher's assistant, drop by for lunch. Be creative and surprise your kid(s). It will create memories for them.
- Make breakfast for your children. Or prepare their lunch with a note inside their lunch box from you.

These are just a few suggestions to jump start you on your way toward becoming the father you would have liked to have had, the father you want to be.

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## ***Keeping Your Sanity:***

**In an Insane World**

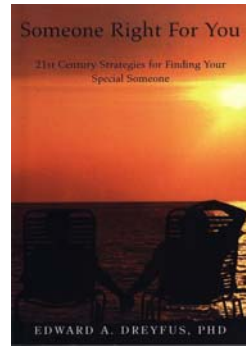


A series of essays designed to give you an opportunity to explore yourself as you come to terms with the various trials and tribulations of everyday life. We live in a complex, uncertain, sometimes crazy world where things just don't seem to make sense. Stuff happens. We often feel out of control. We all face these concerns almost daily. Most of us, however, do not recognize that we have a lot more control over how the issues

we face affect us. We have a lot more power than we give ourselves credit for. Life in the twenty-first century is complex. Relationship issues, social issues, addictions, environmental crises, personal tragedies, illness, depression, spiritual issues, sexuality, all have an impact on how we feel about ourselves and how we cope with life.

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