



Just Like You, Your Parent is Only Human

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One of the hallmarks of becoming an adult – not just hitting the age of majority – is learning to see your parents as human. It means giving up the fantasies of who you wanted your parents to be and accepting your parents for who they were and who they are now. It also means taking responsibility for who you are as a person. To do all this, it is extremely helpful to understand how your childhood experiences have affected who you have become as an adult.

As a child, your survival was in your parents' hands. Having your parents in an all-powerful position, you had an innate need to receive their approval. Even when parents fail their children in significant ways, those children generally continue to try to please their parents. Rather than seeing their parents in a negative light, they often view *themselves* as flawed. If only they were smarter, more talented, or more capable, their parent would love them. This is all preferable to seeing their parents as flawed, which would make them more vulnerable in a dangerous world. It might even leave them in charge of their own survival that, as a child, is a task that they are not up to.

Sometimes a parent's problems are undeniable even to their children. This is especially true in extreme circumstances, such as when a parent is paralyzed with depression or explodes in rages. Yet, even in these situations, children often believe many of the messages that they receive from their parent. Although they might reject their parent or be all too aware of their parent's issues, they might still struggle with a sense that they are unworthy or unlovable.

Whatever childhood struggles you may have had with your parent, it can be difficult to let go of them and develop a healthy, adult relationship. However, you can do this through two basic approaches:

Remind yourself that your parents are only human and that you no longer need to rely on them for emotional or physical survival. You might practice imagining them at the age they were when you were a child, trying to imagine what life was like for them at that time. You might even know some information about their life to help you understand them better. By looking at them from this perspective, you can begin to understand your parents as you would understand other people.

Remember that their struggles do not need to be your struggles. You are free to disentangle yourself from them, to whatever degree you think is necessary, if continued interactions are toxic for you. But given that you no longer need to rely on them, you can use this distance to help you feel compassion for them. With compassion, or at least greater understanding, you might even find the path to enjoying a mutually caring relationship.

Recognize the pain you carry and face your inner demons. This is by no means easy. Without realizing it, many people avoid their inner struggles and negative self-perceptions because of the feelings they elicit. With a commitment to look at yourself, you can begin to challenge those demons, making room for positive perceptions and experiences of yourself.

You may also find it helpful to develop other healthy relationships. Befriend people who treat you well. Rather than just reflexively denying compliments, allow in the good things others have to say about you. Choose to see that these friends are being honest in their praise and that there might be something to it. Then practice using this positive perspective in viewing yourself.

By following the above advice, you can come to see yourself in a different way than how you did as a child. This growth might help you to see yourself *and* your parents as being worthy of love, as well being worthy of compassion for human limitations and failings.