

Disentangling From Emotionally Immature People

Guest: Dr Lindsay Gibson

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, Co-Host of the Trauma Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Lindsay Gibson. A licensed clinical psychologist and author who specializes in understanding and treating adult children of emotionally immature parents.

Her Amazon bestselling book has five star status, gathering more than 13,000 reviews, one of them is mine, and has been translated into 22 languages around the world.

She engages in therapist training and writing books in this subject series, and her latest book, *Disentangling From Emotionally Immature People*, is out now.

Dr Lindsay Gibson, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Oh, it's my pleasure, Meagen. It's great to be back.

Meagen Gibson

So I want to get to what an emotionally immature person is in a moment, but I kind of want to back into things here because I don't think most people know that the way that they feel is being heavily influenced by an emotionally immature person.

So in your new book, which I've got right here, which it might have been better if you just colored the pages yellow from all the highlighting that I did, but you go through all of these situations and explain them through each type of emotionally immature person.

And, for example, you say the question of, like, my siblings and I grew up with the same parents. Why am I so different? Or, why are we so different? Or, I had the responsibility of being the adult when I was growing up, and I feel like an imposter. Or, why can't the emotionally immature person in my life give me any positive feedback?

[00:01:44]

And so it really brings it into these concrete questions I think a lot of people come into therapy confused about. So what are some of the other things people might say or feel when they're dealing with an emotionally immature person?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, those are great examples that you just gave but one of the ones that I see frequently is the reaction of confusion on the part of the person who is coming to see me for therapy, because they just can't understand why they can't make themselves understood by the emotionally immature person.

I mean, they're speaking English, the emotionally immature person speaking English. They're clear about what they're telling them, or they're clear about the boundary that they're setting, they're clear in their request for an apology, whatever the issue is.

And the other person often will respond in a way that just feels off. It doesn't feel like I say something, they say something, and we've communicated. It's like, I say something, they say something.

It's like, I say something, they say something. But it isn't like a response to what I have brought up. It's like a different line or it has a different feel to it than what I'm saying. And that's very confusing to a person who is used to easy communication with other people who want to understand them.

So that sense of confusion has to be understood from the standpoint of... For the emotionally immature person, they are so full of anxiety about what might happen that would upset them or distress them that they're super defensive, and they're always ready to kind of move out of the way of what they think could be a criticism or an attack.

So they don't like to go in straight and have an emotionally intimate conversation where we safely show each other how we feel and talk honestly. That does not feel safe to them. And so they do kind of skate off or avoid that close contact by saying things that are just like, a little off, they don't directly connect in a way that feels satisfying.

So that's something that people are often very confused about. They're like, I don't understand, I'm making myself clear, I'm using iMessages, and they really are doing great communication techniques.

But like I say, if somebody wants to understand you, it doesn't matter how you say it. And if someone doesn't want to understand you, it also doesn't matter how you say it. So it's not coming from your end, probably. It's probably coming from their need to keep themselves feeling safe and in control of the interaction. So that's one thing that kind of confusion.

[00:05:09]

The other one is there is kind of a tendency, I think, that we have to really be unable to process the fact that the other person may just keep doing what they're doing regardless of what we've asked them not to do.

And again, if you are a halfway sensitive, empathic person, that is hard to get through your head, that someone could just not do what you ask, maybe not even acknowledge that you asked them. That's a very foreign concept.

It's not a foreign concept, though, if you realize that from their perspective, their job is to keep out anxiety. It's to not get too close to other people in an emotionally intimate way, and it's to make sure that they remain in the right and that they have control so that they are safe.

And I may not feel safe or in control if you're telling me you don't want me to do something or you're asking me for an apology, anything that might smack with criticism or maybe I've done something wrong or maybe I didn't know everything, okay, if I'm an emotionally immature person, that is going to wound me.

But I won't feel the wound, I'll just feel irritated or I'll feel like I've got to set you straight. So it's almost like we have to try to understand a completely different brain physiology process that's going on with them. They have different priorities.

And if you're an internalizer, your priority is the communication and trying to achieve an emotional connection, that's not at all what they're after. So many times we have to stop in therapy sessions and just talk about this, it's like, how in the world? And then it's like they're different from you.

They don't have the same internal structure, they don't work the same inside, they don't have something that automatically kicks in that allows them to handle these situations in a more direct way. So yeah, those are another couple of things that often take up quite a bit of time in therapy.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm so glad that we started there because I can imagine how validating that will feel to people listening at home just being like, oh, my gosh. I'm not the only one that has these conversations with people where I'm left so confused and I've spent so much time thinking about and ruminating on how I can say things right and how I can approach this person correctly.

And as you said, if you're in an intimate, safe relationship with somebody that desires to understand you, it won't matter that much how you say it because they'll try to understand you. They'll try to garner some empathy.

It might create some discomfort for them in accountability, and oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. It might make me uncomfortable if you come to me and say, I need to set a boundary around this because you've really hurt me. That's going to make me feel uncomfortable, but I'm not going to have to counterattack and make you feel bad about my discomfort, right?

[00:08:52] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

Right, exactly. Yeah. And you just made me think of another one. That is the feeling of defeat that people often have when they leave a situation where they've had contact with their emotionally immature person.

Maybe they tried to tell them something, maybe they tried to, you know, get some recognition from the parent or maybe they they tried to set a boundary with the friend. I mean, whoever it is that's the emotionally immature person.

And maybe they even practice and they get ready for the interaction because, from experience, they know that this is not going to be an easy thing.

So they think about like you say, they think about what they're going to say. They try to make it non-threatening. They get all prepared and they go in and they try to interact like they would with a more adequately mature person, and it doesn't go well.

The same thing happens. They get a confusing response. They get no response. The person gets angry with them and they are like, gee, this is my best shot. I was totally prepared for this. And now I'm standing here and I can't even think of what I wanted to say back to them because my brain is scrambled. This whole interaction just didn't make sense to me and now I'm feeling like I failed to make my point or I failed to get them to understand.

So that's something that I work with people explicitly on, to expect to come away from interactions with a feeling of failure or let down or disappointment, especially in oneself, because you think, I need to communicate this to them and actually it's no, they would need to be willing to communicate with you.

You have no power on your end. And if they're not willing, that's kind of the end of the interaction. So if you expect it... We were talking before the podcast about predictability and knowing what to expect, if you can anticipate that this is going to happen, then you can change your goal.

And your goal changes from I'm going to talk to them, I'm going to tell them what I really feel and I'm going to come away from it feeling like, yay, I stood up to them, I communicated my needs and good for me.

That goal is going to end up with you feeling defeated. All right? And we can expect that. And again, it's not because of you, it's because of their defensiveness.

You could change it and have another goal, which is I am going to tell them what I have to tell them and I can do it in as gentle or meek, awkward, nervous way that I can possibly eke out and I'm still going to count it a win, because my goal was to tell them that we have to have this boundary or we can't be doing this anymore, or I'm going to ask you a question about the past and I'd like you to tell me something.

Whatever it is, when you set it up in such a way that that is what you're going to do, no points for nailing the landing. I mean, this does not have to be pretty, you just have to say it. That's your win. What they do with it is the emotionally immature story. That's what happens with them.

[00:12:57]

But your accomplishment is your willingness to stay connected to yourself and to speak and act out of that in as genuine a way as you can. And yeah, as a therapist, I don't care if you're nervous or you bumble stumble your way through it. I don't care if you don't do it in the way that you practice.

But the fact that you stayed yourself in your interaction with them in whatever form that was possible that particular day, yeah, that's a win from my standpoint.

Meagen Gibson

I love that. I love that framing too. And just the fact that any situation in which you're not abandoning yourself to make somebody else comfortable right. It's like that we are calling a win.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yes, exactly. I think it's because we watch so many shows or movies where people are just saying things in such effective ways and the other person is so startled and then they take it in and then something happens. Our entertainment sets us up to expect some kind of cathartic, rewarding experience as a result of confrontation or assertiveness.

If you just watch TV shows with a scorecard and how many times did the hero say or do something that was assertive or self expressive, you're going to see a lot of it because it's what we're hungry for, right?

But what you don't see is you're not going to see that other person run circles around that hero, confuse them, leave them feeling defeated. That's not a satisfying catharsis in a TV show, so we're not going to see that there.

We just have to know that that's what's likely to happen and get our reinforcement, our rewards from, like you say, not abandoning ourselves in order to make them comfortable. I love that phrasing.

Meagen Gibson

I'm sure I stole it from someone. Probably you. I definitely want to talk about how...

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Truth is truth, right?

Meagen Gibson

Right. Obviously when we're kids, if we're dealing with an emotionally immature parent, we don't clock it probably till we're adults and then we have romantic relationships or work relate... There's lots of different relationships in which you can encounter an emotionally immature person, and often they don't reveal that right away, but either a level of intimacy or a level of stress kind of reveals these types of behaviors. So why is that?

[00:15:40] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, well, those are hitting at two main characteristics of emotionally immature people. Those are two of the four or five defining characteristics. One is that they aren't great at stress tolerance.

It's just like a four year old, a six year old, they're not great at stress tolerance because those internal structures and that sense of self formation, that sense of having an interior space where I can put upsetting things and think about them or process them, little kids don't have that.

It's like information in, information out. Stimulus response. They don't have a holding space inside them that is built up with maturity over time, where you can have things happen to you and you can pause and think about it and process it. Little people can't do that.

So when stress comes along, they get very reactive, just like a young child does, because they can't stand the discomfort or they can't stand this awful feeling that if they lose or even if they just lose face for a minute and anything that they perceive as a defeat, it feels to them like that's the end of them.

Like they're going to be annihilated. Like, it's over, I'm done. They wiped me out. They obliterated me. It gets very existential, this feeling of I cease to exist if I don't get my way. But that's really at the core of our very first attempts to have a sense of self. And that's why two year olds and about a year on either side of that why they're so fragile, so friable.

I mean, they just crumble because when they are trying to assert their little selves and assert their beginning of a will and then you shut them down, the crumbling of that beginning of self structure feels like annihilation.

It's not like a grown up who feels like mildly embarrassed or feels some anxiety. It's not like that. It's like when you don't have yourself built, you don't have that container formed yet. It feels like it's like pixels on a screen that just fall and there's nothing left of me.

That's because the me is so new, it's so fragile and that's what never builds up that shape and that structure and that hardiness in an emotionally immature people. They retain that awful vulnerability for their whole lives.

The other one about the emotional intimacy is also a characteristic of emotionally immature people, and what it means is that when you try to make a connection with an emotionally immature person, and by emotional intimacy I mean I'm going to tell you honestly what's going on inside me. I'm going to be transparent with you and then I want to hear what you really feel. And at the end of this conversation, we'll really know each other better. It's just like we're just going to be seen by each other and be known.

But for an emotionally immature person that's like saying, well, we're going to take off your mask and find out that there's nobody there. Let's do that. Let's have a conversation. Let's talk about how we make each other feel.

[00:19:51]

But to the emotionally immature person it's like, okay, we are now going to expose how very vulnerable you are and how uncertain you are about how much stuff and they're not going to do it. I mean it's excruciating. They can't make themselves do it.

So those two things, the avoidance of stress and the avoidance of the emotional intimacy are just huge impediments to feeling that closeness or that sense that you can depend on them in the relationship to be a good participant, a good partner, or good parent.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And just in case anybody had the experience that I had when I was reading this and they're listening to it and they're thinking, oh no, am I the problem?

Because there were several times where I made margin notes around things that you would describe and I would be like, oh, I do that when I'm sick or I do that when I'm super overwhelmed and stressed and I haven't asked for help. Right. I'm not well resourced, right.

I was just like, okay, it's not all everybody else. I have a tendency to do that. And we all can act immaturally when under tremendous amounts of stress, we're ill or things like that.

That's not what we're talking about here though, is it? This is kind of a different operating system that never is that circumstantial?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah. It never developed enough structure internally. And by structure I mean, I'm making it sound like we build little houses inside, but that's a beautiful metaphor because it's kind of what the brain does with its laying down of connections and neural tracks and the way that different parts of the brain work together.

That does form a kind of a physical structure. It forms a field of activity in the brain. And then that gets patterned and remembered and then you can trigger it with the right stimulus. So, yeah, I mean, they haven't gotten that.

And so they sometimes... This is sort of the converse of what you were saying earlier, when they're feeling especially good, like they got a really good night's sleep or they have gotten some really good news or they're going to come into some money or whatever the good thing is, like you say, they feel well resourced, okay?

And so they can stretch upward and be much more responsive and attentive when they're well rested and they're not sick and they have the resources that they need, they can stretch upward.

But it's kind of like where do you go to as your set point? Because the person who's adequately emotionally mature has a kind of a set point. They kind of operate at this certain level and then when they get stressed or tired or sick, that goes down just because our energy is not good at those times, we're just not as strong psychologically.

[00:23:16] - Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and that brings me to another point of understanding, which is sometimes in talking cognitively about describing these kinds of people, I imagine them as being unsuccessful and not having leadership roles in their communities.

Like if they're this unable to communicate effectively with other people and they avoid intimacy or stress or accountability and apologies and things, they must not be successful people. And that's actually a lot in a lot of ways the opposite is true, right?

They can be incredibly charismatic and be church leaders and politicians and leaders in their communities and matriarchal figures, and so let's kind of describe how these character traits can come out in the people that we see.

Because it's not... Just because you're emotionally immature doesn't mean that you're not a good business person or not a good leader, right?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. This is so interesting in terms of brain science and how this kind of thing works. But one way of understanding it is that we have, of course, the two sides of our brain, the right and left side of our brain. And while the brain is involved, the whole brain is involved in everything when we do something, it's not like we turn on our left brain or we turn on our right brain.

The whole brain is active in everything that we do. But when we need certain things, we tend to use more of certain areas of our brain, okay? So this thing about left brain and right brain people, that's gotten a lot of bad press because they're saying, well, the whole brain is involved.

Well, of course the whole brain is involved. But there are certain things that the left brain is really good at, certain things that the right brain is really good at.

So for emotionally immature people, what I've noticed is that lots of times their left brain abilities can be very well developed. I mean, you can develop excellent left brain abilities through school. That's what school is all about.

Because it has to do with basic kind of rational thinking, sequential thinking, cause and effect, linear, which gets into words and reading, so you can be very verbal. You can be a great writer, you can have great conversations with people. Words, reading, that kind of thing.

But that frame of mind also has a tendency to... It's kind of like the hunter part of our brain. It likes to go after stuff. It likes to get stuff. It grabs things, it wants to possess them, and it wants to be right. It has a very particular outlook on life.

So that left brain dominance. It's accentuated by school all the way through college. In jobs, the skills you learn, lots of times are going to be left brain skills. How do I get from here to there? How do I manipulate this situation to get what I want kind of thing.

[00:26:52]

And so there can be a lot of intellectual training that goes on that gets people very skilled in left brain abilities, which is rife in our culture. I mean, I would say like in Western civilization, well, I would say worldwide actually, because everybody wants to get stuff. It's that kind of industrial technological quest for control and power. So we all have that.

But the right side of our brain is more hooked into our emotional centers, and so we use that for emotional connection. We use it for empathy, we use it for tact, we use it for emotional intelligence, where we learn how to be with other people in ways that forms relationships and that kind of thing. It's our intuition, it's our imagination. It's like a whole nother way of looking at life.

But you don't necessarily need that in our kind of culture to do very well in business or science or whatever it is, using more of the left brain skills. In fact, our science is very much built on that. We don't want to be hearing about your hunches in this experiment. We want to hear about what it proved and what you found.

So yeah, they can do extremely well in our society with the skills of the left brain. Unfortunately, it's a little heartless. It's very critical. It's very much about power and control. It has no qualms about other people's rights or worrying about what you feel. It just is going to get what it wants.

So people who are too far into that way of thinking aren't going to be able to experience their child, for instance, as someone with a real interior world or someone who is psychologically real inside.

They're just going to miss that and they're going to focus on the report card, or they're going to focus on, did you take the trash out? Or they're going to tell their kid it's going to be okay. They're not interested in what goes on inside.

So we have to keep in mind that you can have these other very valued skills and yet not be able to do the relationship component, the true creativity and originality component and the ability to look at the big picture.

Like, yes, we can make a factory that turns out 50,000 widgets a week. But what about the big picture? What about whether we need 50,000 widgets and what is this doing to maybe the surrounding area to the factory? That's not going to be thought about.

So to me, that's a fascinating thing that's going on in terms of how our brains work and how those society props up and encourages more of the kind of behavior that doesn't speak to our emotional needs.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. And I'm wondering what the role of trauma is, that we're aware of, or that you're aware of right now, what does the research bear so far on how these kind of two modalities are relating to the world are formed?

Is it purely biological, do we think, or is there a huge psychological and trauma component?

[00:30:55] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, I don't know of research that has solved this problem or answered this question, because you can't do a controlled experiment with people getting trauma and people not.

Meagen Gibson

Right. That would be frowned upon.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

That would be frowned upon, yes. But we can see that when you have trouble relating to other people, handling your feelings, taking responsibility for your mistakes and being able to repair mistakes interpersonally, we can see that when you're having trouble with that, something has probably gone wrong.

Because in the best possible development, in the most mature development, the person is going to be able to increasingly handle stress, have better relationships, solve problems without fighting. Think about the big picture, think about the long term, think about other people as well as yourself so that's kind of like if a person gets what they need emotionally, that's kind of how they develop.

But if they're not developing that way, yes, I would look for two things actually. One would be possible trauma, especially very early in life, in the first three or four years of life. Because that's when attachment, the beginnings of self, are laid down.

And it's when we start to learn how to interact with other people in this kind of unconscious, right brain sort of way that is all so unspoken, it's so wordless, so hard.

That's where the idea of the implicit memories goes back to with trauma, it's like, yes, it happened to you. Yes, you felt it. Yes, it had an effect on you. Can you remember it with declarative memory and say, I remember this happening? No, because those parts of the brain were not developed enough to let you form that kind of memory.

But your body remembers it. It's like the body keeps the score, right? Yeah. So I think trauma is probably huge and I think it's often having to do with that early security of attachment to the parent.

The second thing is that, neurologically, you may have a problem there because you can be the greatest mother in the world or the greatest mothering person in the world, and if the baby has some neurological difficulties, if they're maybe unable to perceive or unable to calm down, even if they're getting perfectly adequate mothering that would work with another kid, if they don't have that capacity, they could experience trauma through no fault of that mothering person's at all.

The other thing is they could have some kind of injury or illness that affects the way that the brain works very early in life. And I don't mean to say that everything boils down to the first three or four years of life, I'm just saying that that's where the foundation is kind of laid.

[00:34:30] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

But you can have trauma later in life that can certainly disrupt whatever you've gotten earlier and can create tremendous problems. Gosh look at combat trauma.

When things happen to us, it leaves a mark. And all of those things can contribute to having difficulty maturing and getting the benefit of good parenting.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. So I want to switch now to the idea of the healing fantasy because I really want to nudge anybody who's dealing with an emotionally immature person in the direction that will kind of set them free.

So what is the healing fantasy, and why is it so important that we remove our focus from the hope that our emotionally immature person will change on the horizon?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah. So the healing fantasy is when you imagine that one day your parent is going to see the light, or it could be your spouse, I mean, whoever, but that emotionally immature person will see the light and they will say, oh my gosh, honey, I am so sorry.

I have just realized that I wasn't able to be there for you. Or I just realized that I should have protected you. Or I don't know why I've been so harsh and hard all this time. I didn't need to be.

They're hoping that there will be a moment of rapprochement, that they're going to have a coming back together with that person, and there will be an understanding and there will be a connection. That's the hope.

And just to give an example, I had a client once who just, whenever her parents expected her to fly across the country to see them, she would do it.

And she was even making herself sick because she would go, she'd be so stressed out, she'd come back, she wouldn't be able to operate for a week and often would get sick as a result of the stress.

And I asked her, like, why are you doing... What are you hoping for? What do you think is going to happen when you go back there? And she said, well, I just always imagined that one day my dad and I are going to have a good relationship and we're going to have a good conversation about what has gone wrong in our relationship.

And she said, I can sort of imagine that when he's old like he is now, sort of approaching the last chance, and I just think that one day he's going to come to me and he's going to acknowledge all of this.

Okay, so that's the healing fantasy. Why do we have it? Because little children need hope. Little children need to, through their imagination, picture a parent who could do that for them. And that's essential for children to have that positive fantasy. It's really helpful.

[00:37:56] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

But the other thing is that emotionally immature parents are not, for the most part, monsters. I mean, they're not psychopaths, usually. There are moments where it passes between you in a glance or a little hug or maybe sometime they seem to get it. Or they drop the defensiveness and then they're right there for you.

So you can have had the experiences, little experiences, throughout that give you the tantalizing glimpse of how it could be with them. Okay, so it's like you're not crazy, you did pick up that they moved into that part of their mind that is open to that emotional closeness. That was real. But they won't stay there. They can't sustain it because it feels too vulnerable. It feels too dangerous to them.

But if you've ever tasted any of that and I think a lot of times that people do get that maybe in babyhood where there is that nonverbal communication of safety and love because emotionally immature people love their children, they just can't show it the right way.

People then have reason to believe that the parent could do it, but they have to at some point address that question, is this likely to happen? What do I do to raise the chances that it will happen?

And if I'm honest with myself, do I really think it'll happen? And like my patient, is it worth it to make these trips and go through all of this when for the past twelve visits there hasn't been any sign of this? Do I want to keep on trying? That's what it comes down to.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And how much energy is expended contorting yourself, because the only thing... If you've seen those glimpses in your life, even though you might not consciously know it, you then can spend a lot of your adult life trying to contort yourself into conformity that might have inspired those moments before.

And so the cost of trying to turn yourself into someone that's worthy of that constant kind of reinforcement and affection and intimacy is really great, as you're saying.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And it's a hard one because that hope for change, and I think, incidentally, that the hope for change is entirely warranted for ourselves because we're being self reflective. We're thinking about our behavior, we're looking at our responses. So that's a recipe for change in my mind.

But it's when you're hoping that the other person is going to change when they have all these defenses against change, or we call that growth, they have all these defenses against growth. Then at what point do you want to try to acknowledge the reality of what you're not getting so that you can maybe have a more realistic relationship with them?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. Adjust expectations, right?

[00:41:49] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, exactly. It's like... Reality. It's deciding what the reality really is.

Meagen Gibson

We've talked a lot about the actions and behaviors and motivations of emotionally immature people, but you have a great chapter in the book also about the reactions of the people in the relationship experience with emotionally immature people. And you call this The Four Horsemen of Self Defeat, so I would love it if you could describe those.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, these characteristics are really what a lot of psychotherapists can miss, because they're looking more for activity in the person that maybe needs to be changed. It's kind of like, how can we do things differently?

But the problem with a lot of adult children of emotionally immature parents is that they have been trained essentially to be passive. And sometimes that passivity moves all the way over into feeling immobilized.

Like they just can't respond. They're dead in the water, they're deer in the headlights. And then if it's really bad, if the trauma is really bad and it interrupts the flow of your sense of self, your sense of being, it can go all the way to dissociation.

And that's where you essentially unhook from yourself, and you're no longer connected to your own feelings about something or your own experience about something. You end up feeling kind of numb or not present or a little unreal.

But those three things, the passivity, the immobilization, and the dissociation, they all have to do with breaking the contact and not getting into it with the emotionally immature person. And that's all a form of the fourth one, which is learned helplessness.

If you can't get the person to interact with you in a way that supports you and fulfills your emotional needs, you will start to give up. And that's a good thing that nature does for all animals, is it says, look, if you've tried everything and you now have convinced yourself, no matter what you do, this situation is not going to change, I recommend that you stop trying. That's what nature says to us.

And so it's good reality testing. It's sort of like withdraw, give up, and live to fight again another day. That's sort of the healthy motive behind learned helplessness. It's like, don't keep wearing yourself out trying to contest what's going on or fighting for something when it's not going to get you out of this situation.

Those are the qualities which I call The Four Horsemen of Self Defeat, because when you're passive or when you allow immobilization to occur, or when you kind of adopt a learned helplessness attitude, you're not in a position to express yourself, try to get what you want, set a boundary, ask for things, render an opinion.

I mean, you are not able to be active on your own behalf, which is usually exactly where the emotionally immature person wants you because they want to be in control.

They need to have power so that they don't feel surprised or threatened by anything or anybody. And you are lots of times reinforced or rewarded for being more passive, for not speaking up, for not arguing, for not going against what the parent says.

You were then seen as a good child and you get that very strong message that somehow being that really nice person who doesn't rock the boat, that is where your best hope for a good relationship lies.

Yeah, but it's unfortunate because again, certainly in our culture, being active on your own behalf is necessary. You would have a very circumscribed life if you just waited for other people to invite you to do things or for other people to give you permission to do things. We have to have that oomph, which is feeling a healthy sense of entitlement and feeling empowered to have our own opinions and our own desires so that we can act on them.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I can imagine that it's very disorienting to be an adult in the world who is living their own life and paying their own bills and having a successful career. And then you go spend Thanksgiving or the holiday of some sort with an emotionally immature parent, and all of a sudden you don't know how to think and feel independently on your own, right? It's got to be absolute whiplash.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yes, and people get so disappointed in themselves because when you're reading a book or maybe you're in a therapy session, maybe you're just thinking about it, we can really attain a state of self realization, of self actualization where we feel very good about our ability to be ourselves.

But what people don't reckon on is that the emotionally immature person also has an agenda, which is to have you become more passive and have you sort of become the kind of person that they imagine you should be.

And they're actively working toward that. They're not necessarily being passive. Some of them are, as you know. But yeah, they have an agenda that they're operating on too and if you are just feeling good about yourself and you go in there not expecting that they're going to be trying to get you to move into this role that they have envisioned for you, then you can get caught by surprise and sort of plummet from that high of feeling competent and self actualized to like I don't know what hit me.

Meagen Gibson

Is any of that real?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, exactly, and then you end up doubting yourself and of course it was real when you felt it. Of course it was real. That was as real as anything. You just didn't figure in this other force that was

going to operate on you to bring you back down into a role that would be essentially either subservient or dominated by the wishes of the emotionally immature person.

[00:50:06] - Meagen Gibson

And I feel like you've touched on this, but I want to be explicit about it, which is that emotionally immature people aren't like, machiavelli and you said they're not sociopathic. They're not like, plotting and scheming, I call it like raccoon hands, where they're like, what will we do to her? It's not that conscious. This is all unconscious defenses working against the emotionally mature person, right?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, no raccoon hands. And it's very automatic how they function. Very automatic. They've done it before, they've thought about... Well, by definition, they haven't thought about it because they're not self reflective.

So they're unconsciously and automatically doing stuff to lower their level of anxiety. That is job number one. So that's why they can say, I didn't do that. I didn't say that. That must have been someone else.

And they're like, either lying or denying something that, you know, happened. But they can do that because job number one is I don't feel bad about myself, and I don't feel anxious.

Meagen Gibson

Powerful force, really?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah. I don't think that really happened. But the thing is, it's not like they remember it, and they feel bad about it because they did that, and then they deny it. It's not how defenses work.

Defenses are beautiful mechanisms that operate before we even know it. It's like pulling your hand back from a hot stove. You do not think about that. Your body does it. So defenses are of the body. They are of the brain.

As soon as your emotional centers activate, which is way before conscious thought ever happens, as soon as your emotional centers activate and there's some kind of memory, usually implicit, you're in the defense. Never even had a choice, and they don't have a choice. Just happens.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Well, with all of this stacked against us, how are we supposed to practice self possession, and what do boundaries have to do with that?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Okay. So if it's a rainy, windy, cold day, do I go outside in my shorts and my t-shirt and expect that I'm going to do well? No, I mean, I would put on long pants. I would get a sweater. I would get my

raincoat, then I would go out. So we have to be prepared for our environment, right, to perform our best.

[00:53:06]

And that... Just think of the emotionally immature person as creating their own microclimate. Okay. I was just out visiting my son in San Francisco, where you can cross the street and need a sweater. I mean, it's crazy...

And they call it microclimates, and they're really like certain pockets in the city where certain kinds of trees and hills, yeah, and it's because they are actually different environments within this relatively small area of space.

So if you can think about the emotionally immature person as creating their own microclimate, and so you have to know what the microclimate is, like, this person is touchy, this person's ready for a fight, this is going to turn into a conflict, this person is going to say something inane that's going to really make people mad.

You can be prepared when you go in to recognize what that is, it's a sign of the immaturity, but also to be prepared so that you don't get reactive to it.

That's the biggest thing about dealing with emotionally mature people and holding on to your own self possession, your connection to yourself. Once you get emotionally reactive, you are down in the parts of your brain that don't allow you any steering.

It's almost as if you have dropped below the seat in your car and you're pressing on the brake and the gas blindly. No ability to steer because now you are in that area, which is all force and reactivity. It's not up here where the steering wheel is, where we can look out the window and see what's happening.

So to try to not be reactive, that's what I mean about staying self possessed, you stay connected with yourself, you talk to yourself. You say, oh, now they're doing this, or now they're doing that, or my chest is starting to feel tight I'm going to go outside for a while. You monitor what's going on with you.

If you can do that, it helps you to not be reactive. If you can not be reactive, then whatever it is that they are creating with their microclimate doesn't have a chance to really set in. It doesn't have a chance to get going. Takes two to tango.

So whatever they may be trying to do, your power is always going to be to stay in your own individuality, in your own sense of self and to break it up. Like I said, walk outside, go in another room, change the subject, do whatever helps to break up that force field that is forming around their attempt to maybe take control or start an argument or tell you what to do or whatever it might be. But yeah, it's preparing for the elements that are going to be there.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And you make such a good point, too, about not beating ourselves up, because I know so many people do that they get caught in these entanglements and they're reactive and it does

cause them to then afterwards feel guilt or shame or whatever about the interaction when it's so hard not to get all tangled up in it, isn't it?

[00:56:58] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I want to point out one more thing before I let you go, which is that in the back of your book are these appendixes. And if nothing else, I want people to buy the book so they can, like it says, Personality Characteristics of Emotionally Immature People.

It's like beyond all the pages in between, which are fantastic, and you should read there's just like Comparisons of Emotional Immaturity and Maturity, Unspoken Relationship Contracts, and get to the last part where it says Bill of Rights for Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents.

Like, what an empowering set of mantras that you've written for people to reignite and reacquaint themselves with that sense of self possession.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yes. I love some of those because they're so surprising. They're like things that you sort of react to, like, I can? Or, really?

Meagen Gibson

Let me see if I can just be obvious, but don't feel obvious when you're like, oh, my gosh, I am entitled to that, right?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah. I have the right to not be your rescuer. Okay. In my life, that was a hard one realization because, hey, I'm a therapist. I like to help people. I like to be there when someone needs someone.

But the thought that that wasn't something that I had to do every time for everybody under every circumstance, that was really a wake up realization.

Now, this is one that people might think they have under their belt already, but maybe really don't. I have the right to think anything I want.

And that is really, absolutely true because, number one, you can't control what you think. You just can't. I mean, you can for a little while, but the next time you take your mind off it, there it is, right back.

So we can feel guilt and responsibility for some involuntary psychological process inside ourselves, our feelings, our thoughts, in a way that is totally not in alignment with our reality as living beings.

[00:59:48] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

And it's okay. You have the right to feel and think anything, and it doesn't mean anything because it's happening inside your head. Right? But as little children, because when a child thinks that they've said it, or if the child feels that they've done it, and then the parent comes down on them for that, well, what the child learns is that I better not think that, or I better not feel that.

Because they think that those actions and feelings and thoughts are the same thing. It's not until you get much older and you develop that left brain ability to sort of say, this is this and this is that, that you realize, no, this is all private. I can think whatever I want.

And that's very freeing because it enables you to develop insights, come to realizations about things. A lot of times in therapy, people will say, oh, I feel bad saying this, or, I wish I didn't think this, or, I can't believe I'm feeling this.

And then they'll tell me what it is, and they'll be very embarrassed or ashamed of it. And it's almost like... Your mother is, like, three states away. She can't hear you. You haven't hurt her. I know you love her. You know you love her, and now you're having this unkind thought. So what?

Better to be honest with yourself, because that information is important. Better to be honest with yourself, and then when you're with real mom, you can decide how polite to be or how much to honor her, all of that. But people still feel like other people can tell or will judge them for what they're thinking and feeling when they really can't.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And so often, those uncomfortable thoughts or feelings that we're judging aren't necessarily even true, they're signals for us to get curious about what else is going on inside, right?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Oh, well said. Yes. Well said.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Doesn't mean I hate my mom. It means I don't like the way my mom makes me feel when I'm with her, or... All of the things.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Yeah, right.

Meagen Gibson

But if we stop it down and we don't think we're free to think it or feel it, then we never get to the good stuff that's below.

[01:02:28] - Dr Lindsay Gibson

Exactly. Because the thought that reaches consciousness is going to be something like, I don't like her, or I can't stand to be around her. And then it's like, oh, I can't believe I just thought that.

Well, okay, if we break it down like you just did, it might be I don't like being around my mom when she gets contentious and wants to tell me what to think. But what reaches our consciousness is going to know that little statement that we are embarrassed about.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I could talk to you for hours. Instead, everybody's just going to have to go buy your book to spend some time with you on their own. Lindsay Gibson, how can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Well, you can go to my website, which is Lindsay with an a, [lindsaygibsonpsyd](http://lindsaygibsonpsyd.com) - that's my degree, so lindsaygibsonpsyd.com and that has links to the books that has some writings of mine, and people can look that over and see what's available.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Lindsay, as always, a deep pleasure. Thank you so much.

Dr Lindsay Gibson

Thank you so much for having me, it's been a delight.