

Transcending the Personality Disordered Parent: Psychological and Spiritual Tactics (Sansone and Wiederman)

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Parents are crucial in their influence on the lives of their children. Ideally, they protect, feed, shelter, and guide within a safe and respectful holding environment. Given these “good enough” conditions and despite whatever negative genetic contributions parents hand down to their offspring, most children develop reasonably well along a more or less predictable trajectory toward an independent and healthy adulthood. Unfortunately,

sometimes, these ideals of parental care and of childhood development are not met. Instead, parents may evidence patterns of dysfunction in their behaviors in interpersonal relationships that result in emotional and even physical neglect and abuse of their children, adversely affecting their offspring on their developmental course. Among the numerous reasons why inadequate parenting may occur, one particularly challenging one is that the parent suffers from a personality disorder.

In their book, *Transcending the Personality Disordered Parent: Psychological and Spiritual Tactics*, Drs. Randy Sansone and Michael Wiederman address the experience, meaning, and impact of growing up with one or more personality disordered parents. They present an overview of the core behavioral characteristics of the personality disordered parent, review two prototypical forms of such a parent, and then present several psychological and spiritual strategies aimed at improving adjustment and life quality for adult children of dysfunctional parenting.

The authors begin their well-organized book with a chapter that addresses the definition of, potential causes of, and possible treatments for personality disorders, using language that is accessible to mental health professionals and to nonprofessional readers alike. The next few chapters describe in detail the key features of personality disordered individuals, including deceptive social facades, factual and emotional dishonesty, self-absorption, bullying and victimhood, and excessively “black and white” thinking. In their chapters titled “The Intrusive Parent” and “The Distant-Hostile Parent,” the authors use engaging in-depth case descriptions to richly illustrate two prototypical personality disordered parenting styles. Next, the authors discuss practical psychological and spiritual strategies for a healthy adjustment to adult life. These sections are particularly helpful in assisting adult children with accepting their parents’ dysfunction and in distancing themselves from blame for it. The authors are careful to distinguish accepting from condoning, and they assist readers to reframe their experiences in such a way that may allow them to resolve deep seated anger. General spiritual tactics include the use of mindfulness to assist the individual with detaching from unhelpful rehashing of emotional wounds.

Additionally, the authors gently invite readers to reframe their difficult experiences by considering the spiritual and emotional benefits of the sufferings they endured. In both sections, readers will find practical exercises useful for dealing with the difficult emotions and cognitions that remain from parental maltreatment. Finally, the authors end with an invitation to a life path of understanding and compassion, both for oneself and for one’s parent. In all, the authors focus on the priority of individual growth and development in overcoming the past. They do so with an easy-to-read style that is engaging, using humor and irony sensitively but effectively to drive home their main points. In their approach, they amply validate the suffering caused by disordered parenting while emphasizing the survivor’s realistic responsibility for and capability of building a better life.

This book is aimed at readers whose childhoods were marked by severe parental dysfunction. As such, the text distills some very complex clinical concepts and phenomena in ways that the mental health professional may find overly simplistic. Additionally, the authors tend to present a picture of the personality disordered parent that is most consistent with the more dramatic and impulsive personality disorders, leaving out those that emphasize anxiety, avoidance, and social oddity. Nevertheless, mental health professionals will find this book very useful as a text commendable to patients who have suffered from or continue to suffer from parental dysfunction. In turn, patients may find that they are better able to articulate their own stories to their care providers through identifying common ground with others in the book. All readers will find a warm and sympathetic yet imminently reasonable and practical approach to the painful legacies of childhood.