

BOOK REVIEW

Emotional Neglect and the Adult in Therapy

Lifelong Consequences to a Lack of Early Attunement

by Kathrin A. Stauffer

W.W. Norton, 2020

Aline LaPierre

Asked why she wrote this book, Kathrin Stauffer reflects on the numerous clients she has treated over the years who, although never actively abused, were neglected in some way. Usually grouped together with the abused, adults who were emotionally neglected as children face specific challenges that are not well understood or researched. Although self-help books offer some resources, little has been written for psychotherapists about the suffering and therapeutic needs of the neglected – the *ignored*, as Stauffer prefers to call them.

Given the limited literature on this subject, Stauffer has relied heavily on her extensive clinical experience. *Emotional Neglect and the Adult in Therapy* teaches therapists to better recognize the developmental deficits of those who are unparented, uncared for, misconstrued, and whose suffering is often met with professional misattunement. This book rectifies a significant gap in the therapeutic literature by addressing the professional neglect of the neglected.

Neglect is absence. Stauffer compassionately notes that when the origin of neglect is rooted in early pre-verbal development, at a time when the cortex is not yet online, conscious recall and verbal narratives are missing – adults emotionally ignored as children lack words to express their inner experience. Often parentified too early, they are not aware of their needs, and don't understand what is wrong with them. The question arises: how can neglect be explained to clients who do not remember that anything bad happened to them?

Adults who have been ignored as children present in therapy with distinctive features: quiet, introverted, polite to a fault, and generally not connected to their feelings. For the ignored, people are not a source of comfort, and the long-term effects of neglect leave serious deficits in their capacity for social engagement. They do not trust closeness, and have no sense of how to engage collaboratively. Never having had their developing self reflected in loving, constructive ways, adults ignored as children live with an underlying terror of being unsafe, and their mistrust of caregivers and professionals who offer help makes safety hard to establish.

Belying this disconnected presentation, their internal world is crippled with shame, and surprisingly protective of their caregivers. If the therapist feeds back relational difficulties too soon, these clients will feel blamed and shamed but will not show it. Stauffer cautions therapists never to assume that what they say will land the way it is intended. As a result, rupture and repair are a large part of the therapy. Adults ignored as children are under the siege of a persistent inner critic – a perpetrator self that operates under the belief that they are at fault, that if only they tried harder, or were braver, or were not so stupid, perhaps life would not be such a struggle. This critic's job is to avoid rejection by ensuring that they are perceived as "good." Consequently, they dislike being seen, for fear of being exposed as defective.

From a body psychotherapy perspective, those ignored as children were touch-deprived. The physiology of neglect lies in the spectrum of the schizoid and oral character structures. The ignored usually look a bit starved, unloved, or unwanted. Neglectful caregivers do not touch their children, nor do they share the joy and intimacy needed to establish and strengthen a child's social engagement system. When a child reaches out, tries to engage, and no one responds, shame takes root.

This book is eminently practical and organized in an easy-to-follow sequence. An overview of primary scenarios introduces the subjective experience of the ignored. Using a range of caregiver scenarios, Stauffer illustrates how the experience of neglect shapes individuals: the absence of caregivers, or of caregivers who are depressed, preoccupied, or traumatized. An important contributing factor is the trans-

generational problem of mothers whose own needs were ignored, so they do not know how to parent their children. These developmental scenarios are grounded in the presentation of four clients whose therapeutic progression we follow through the chapters of the book.

Having discussed the experience of ignored children, Stauffer turns her attention to applying this understanding to clinical treatment based on psychotherapeutic and neuroscience-derived theoretical models. When treating adults emotionally ignored as children, therapists are often troubled by a sense of not knowing how to help. They are concerned by their clients' lack of therapeutic progress and may experience themselves as useless. Stauffer offers solutions that seasoned therapists may wish had been available when they were in training, and that new therapists can be grateful to access.

The goal of therapy with ignored individuals revolves around giving them the missing pieces they need to be successful in life. Working with developmental and social engagement deficits requires a *resource orientation*. Therapy follows a slow developmental unfolding that demands long-term patience on the part of the therapist. While traditional therapy is conflict-oriented, when it comes to neglect, absence of resource rather than presence of conflict is the issue. Neglected individuals are slow to trust, and a traditional approach that pushes for anger will make these clients feel even more unsafe. For them, the process of change includes becoming able to tolerable being looked at and seen without feeling shame.

In the last chapters, Stauffer offers detailed descriptions of specific approaches she has found useful in her practice. With developmental deficits, she cautions, you don't want to undo a client's coping skills, but rather broaden their competency. To diminish shame, she reports working as does a scientist: first trying an intervention, and then going back to observe the outcome. When an intervention doesn't work, she tries something else.

Stauffer suggests that therapists take an active role. She has found that modeling what these clients don't know about their inner experience is effective. For example, she might make a tender offering: "You look as though there might be a feeling there... could it be sadness... or frustration...?" She proposes giving clients options so that they don't feel the obligation to please their therapist. For some clients, offering words for their feelings, or learning that there are gaps in their capacity to relate to people may be shaming, but for others, it is a relief. A simple invitation such as: "Here is an idea I have... let's try this" can resource a client in a number of important ways. Generally, if a therapist can take a loving parental position, they can become the much-needed guides that were missing in their client's early lives.

It is said that narcissism is the problem of our times. Consequently, the number of adults ignored as children is more prevalent than we realize. Stauffer teaches us to look through the lens of neglect so that this suffering does not go unrecognized, adding yet more layers of internal despair to individuals who have internalized ever-present invisibility.

I have already recommended this book to colleagues and clients and all have expressed a sense of relief at having the issues of neglect named in such a thorough, compassionate, and insightful way. The feeling that someone understands is a key piece of attachment repair, and in the words of one client, "I liked this book. She wasn't just throwing techniques that don't work at us. There was a lot of heart." This is a book written for professionals that is also most appropriate for the layperson. It has definitely become a staple of my library.



Aline LaPierre, PsyD, MFT, SEP, is a somatic psychotherapist, creator of NeuroAffective Touch® and director of the NeuroAffective Touch Institute teaching the integration of psychotherapy and the therapeutic use of touch. She is the co-author of *Healing Developmental Trauma*, Vice President of the United States Association for Body Psychotherapy (USABP), and maintains a private practice in Los Angeles, California.

Email: aline@neuroaffectivetouch.com

Website: www.neuroaffectivetouch.com