

The Cause of

# Anxiety Disorders



How They Start As a Child

Terry Dixon

# **The Cause of Anxiety Disorders How They Start As a Child**

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It is strongly recommended that anyone who is thinking, feeling or behaving in a way that they don't understand, any way that is causing pain or unhappiness, should consult a medical professional and that a medical doctor should always be consulted for any persistent physical or bodily function problem, in the first instance, to rule out possible physical causes before psychological reasons are explored. And that, importantly, under no circumstances, should anybody stop taking prescribed medication without fully qualified medical supervision.

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## Introduction

ANXIETY is a part of being human; we all have it. And to get anxious in certain situations is normal, everyone does. Most people even experience increased anxiety frequently since things like tests, interviews, public speaking, first dates and competitive sports can make anyone pretty anxious.

But for some of us things change, our anxiety grows stronger. It comes on more and more and seems to happen for no apparent reason. Suddenly we are more anxious and feel apprehensive and 'on-edge' frequently. Upsetting physical symptoms start to appear.

Over time, if not resolved, this increased anxiety can lead to more complicated problems involving such things as uncontrollable worrying, anxiety attacks or panic attacks that come 'out of the blue', irrational fears and phobias (particularly social phobia), obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours even severe depression. And there has been no real answer for this, nothing that truly explains why this happens and how to stop it.

Current beliefs about mental illness, genetics, chemical imbalances, or physical brain problems as being the cause of anxiety disorders are failing millions of people looking for a cure for they miss the real cause of the problem and never deal with it at all. They're based on the medical model of illness which views anxiety disorders as something just going wrong (in the brain) and the answer lies in 'fixing' the thing that has gone wrong – usually with medication. Unfortunately, this doesn't reflect what actually happens to us.

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As you know, we don't simply wake up one day with these problems. They start off slowly and get stronger and stronger over time. Few of us, if any, had an anxiety disorder as a small child. It's usually just the opposite. Yet something happens that turns the confidence we had as children into anxiety. Something happens to us that takes away our confidence and fills us with insecurity, so much insecurity that anxiety (our self-protection system) kicks in. And it isn't a defective gene, or an imbalance of chemicals in the brain (the neurotransmitters Serotonin and Dopamine are usually the ones blamed) or that our brains are somehow different from other people – it's a whole series of stressful, emotionally painful life experiences, issues and events and the resultant feelings, thoughts, behaviours and learning that set the ball rolling towards insecurity, fear and anxiety

Research shows that over 50% of anxiety problems start before the age of fourteen and many people with long-term anxiety disorders, when asked what they remember most about the start of their problem, reply "Being really nervous for a long time". The way we feel about our self in childhood and adolescence can stay with us a lifetime and those who are frequently made to feel insecure and vulnerable when growing up (or later in life for some) are surely more susceptible to develop anxiety-related problems down the line.

If we go through a period in life where we are constantly 'put down', 'picked on' or made to feel threatened in any way it's not surprising that anxiety (our inner self-protection instinct) will ramp up and we'll become more nervous, constantly wary and alert, always on the look out for danger in order to protect our self. However, threatening situations not only scare us, they also make us feel bad (upset, hurt, insecure, weak, afraid, small, inadequate, sad, angry, confused... a whole myriad of negative feelings). And if we feel bad often enough, for long enough, we can start to believe that we feel this way because there is something inherently 'bad' or 'wrong' or 'not good enough' about us. Over time, self-confidence crumbles.

This highlights a critical first step in the development of anxiety disorders that hasn't really been considered until now: how we start to feel bad about our self deep inside (inadequate, not good enough etc.) and how this becomes inextricably linked to being scared.

For the majority of us the foundations for this are laid in childhood and adolescence.

## As a Child

OUR PARENTS ARE GOD to us. We worship the ground they walk on. They gave us life and keep us alive. A father shows his son what it is to be a man. A mother shows, to her daughter, a woman. And yet this same parent, the one we worship, can come to make us feel as though we are inadequate, stupid, weak and worthless. Significant others can do the same to some extent, but with our parents it's different. Their genes are a part of us; their behaviour towards us strikes at our very existence, our inner-self, our being and we cannot feel any way towards them without feeling the same about part of our self.

Throughout recent history there have been changes in thinking about the influence of parents on a person's emotional health. Parents have gone from being fully responsible or having no responsibility at all to a middle ground, where other things such as peers, school, society, and media play a major part. And these do play a part, but nothing influences us quite like our parents. Their genes are our genes and from the day we are born we are shaped by their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, we are moulded by their hopes and fears and many people, well into their middle age, are still trying to please their parents and gain their love.

In her excellent self-help book about depression, Alexandra Massey estimates that around 80% of people that she has spoken to about depression are entangled with their parents and stuck. And research has shown a marked improvement in the phobic behaviour of adolescents when relationships with their parents improved.

However, the purpose of this section is not to blame, judge or denigrate our parents. It is not to justify anger, resentment or hate, for in doing this – something that plays a large part in many people's problems – we only hurt and damage our self. The purpose of this section is simply to understand what happens and why.

### A Parent's Power

Human infants are the most helpless of all the mammals when newborn. Immediately after being born we cry in order to be comforted and we come equipped with a number of instinctual behaviours to form strong attachments to those who can protect and nurture us. As we grow, this attachment grows to ensure our safety.

The power of our parents is unquestionable. They are big and strong, we are small and weak. They can do things we can't: drive a car, mow the lawn, drink beer and change a light bulb. They teach us how to do things, things that empower us, like how to ride a bicycle, how to swim and what everything means. Their knowledge and power shapes our sense of competence, what we can and cannot do, and our confidence. Our parents feed and clothe us and keep us warm. They can do so many things we can't and know so much we don't that they must be right and we must be wrong.

They make us feel good and make us feel bad; almost all of the rewards and punishments that a child receives are mediated by their parents. They hurt us and they help us get better. To top it off, we cannot avoid them. Even as a small child, certainly as a teenager, if someone was nasty to us or treated us badly we would soon learn to avoid them – but we can't do this with parents.

Every child faces this situation, totally dependent on their parents who are so powerful and sometimes so rewarding, trying to deal with mixed up feelings about their parents and themselves.

What we do next is something that strengthens the parent-child bond (for good or bad) – we start to identify with our parents.

### **Identification**

The dog, a family pet – its owner will look after the animal, feed it and take care of its needs. He may become strongly attached to it, but it's unlikely that he will identify with it. However, if the dog is a show dog, a thoroughbred, winner of the best of breed in many dog shows, the owner may identify with the dog in order to gain status that he, himself, lacks. The public accolade that comes with being a winner, through the qualities of the dog, provides a feeling of self-enhancement for the owner.

The child believes that if he or she were more like the parent and shared some of the parent's qualities then they would feel more competent and powerful and feel stronger. At some stage in their lives virtually every son wants to be like his father and every daughter like their mother. As a young child, we can feel immense pride when people comment on how much we look like our father or mother, and when identification with the same sex parent is particularly strong, we may even want to look like them. Many children actually go through stages of looking remarkably like their parents. (Perhaps, as in the pet example above, there is some truth in the saying that 'the owner looks like their dog').

Identification involves the desire to possess the characteristics of the model; characteristics such as attitudes, values and qualities not actual behaviours, which involve imitation. Because it relates to such things as values and qualities, identification is associated with our self-concept and this can be seen throughout life. New recruits to the armed forces (or social groups, companies, political parties etc.) will adopt a great many attitudes held by the group because his or her self-image is so dependent upon their relation to the group. We take the values of the model into our own understanding of our self and the world. In essence, we want to be like something we value so that we can become strong like them and liked by them and thus liked by people in general. In this way our self-image becomes linked to our parents.

Identification serves an evolutionary purpose. Through it, the child learns to depend on himself. Our parents, the ones who we see living successfully in the world, no longer have to be by our side for we internalise their successful coping and start to act as our own caretaker. As we grow, we develop the ability to control our self and we learn to do this, initially, through self-talk.

## **Self-Talk**

Self-talk, the scourge of virtually all anxiety and depression related problems – but only because it is negative, in both content and tone. It's a fairly safe bet that when we use 'you' in our self-talk that it is our parents talking.

When we learn to talk we learn to self-talk, to direct our self. It follows the same development path as learning to read: first we do it out loud and then we internalise it, taking it into our heads. The first stages can be seen in children who will often talk out loud whilst performing tasks. It has a survival value; we only need to hear our parent shout, "don't touch that fire" once, with fear and alarm in their voice, in order to direct ourselves not to do it in the same manner in the future.

Through talking to our self, we come to no longer need our parent in such a way, for they are in our head. By using the words the parent uses, in the way that they use them, we can warn our self of danger and about the consequences of our acts. In this way, we learn and obey rules and behaviour patterns appropriate to our sex and to the standards of our family and society. If necessary, we can punish our self by reproving our own behaviour.

I remember well, during a university psychology lecture, a story related by the Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the time about a woman who got off the bus at the wrong stop. When asked by a friend "why?" she replied, "because my mother told me to". Her mother had been dead many years.

As adults, we talk to our self silently in our heads all the time, usually in a way that reflects the beliefs, attitudes and qualities of our parents. Unfortunately for many, and entirely due to what they have experienced, self-talk becomes focused on self-criticism and self-punishment.

But it doesn't have to stay this way. When we understand how and why we identify with our parents (and the way in which self-talk facilitates this) and when we realise that our parents weren't really so successful, that they didn't know everything and much of the time what they said about us wasn't actually the truth – we can legitimately change the way we talk to ourselves. Our self-talk can be encouraging and supportive, a friend rather than an enemy.

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Born out of the instinctual behaviour to form a strong bond with someone who can protect us, for the most part, identification isn't some 'thing' that we consciously decide to do. It is a natural progression that follows from seeing what success means and wanting to be like that and wanting to have it. It is a part of growing and developing and it's a double-edged sword.

The right amount, with a good role model can lead to a well-rounded individual, someone who is independent and confident, intelligent and well disciplined, respectful of the standards of others, the family and society. Identification can equip one to deal with life successfully. It's a good example of evolution and learning working in harmony.

With a good role model, even excessive identification may be beneficial at times and can lead to great achievement. An article in the Sunday Times in 1997 regarding some of the influences on great explorers described Robert Swan as driven by a father who was extremely strict with high expectations, and Ranulph Fiennes as spending his life trying to live up to a father that he never even knew. Importantly, we can also identify with strong images and ideals of parents that we don't even know.

However, over-strong identification with a weak role model can be devastating. It can lead to that entanglement with our parents, the 'being stuck', that continues throughout our lives. In childhood it can cause over-dependency and attachment and a desperate need for their love. As an adult we can spend a lifetime of perpetual achievement in order to please our parents.

Excessive identification results from feelings of insecurity about our relationship with our parent. The more a parent makes us feel unloved (in whatever way), the more we need to be like that parent, not only to feel more competent and successful (and less insecure) but also because we think it will make them love us.

Children will forgive their parents anything to receive their love. It has been shown that children who have suffered incredible neglect and abuse from their parents still want to be with them.

It follows that since we want to be like our parent, the identification between father and son and mother and daughter will be more intense and have a greater effect than identification between opposite-sex parent and child. A son very rarely wants to grow up to be like his mother for she cannot teach him what it is like to be a man. And this is generally the case, with father-son and mother-daughter conflicts continuing well up to middle age and sometimes beyond.

It may well be the case that same sex child-parent identification forms the base for many a neurosis, where we take things out more on our self because the connection is so strong, whereas opposite sex child-parent identification, due to its corresponding weaker connection, leads to taking problems out on others.

Identification, in itself, is not the problem for it is a natural part of development. It is when it becomes excessive, for the wrong reasons that things can start to go wrong. This usually happens due to the way our parent – the one we look up to, the one that we want to be like and to love us – treats us.

## **How Parents Affect Us**

We can see that, as a child, a large part of our self-concept starts to take shape through identification, mainly with our parents and usually one parent more than the other. We look at their qualities and achievements through filtered eyes and want to be like that.

Throughout all of this we are interacting with our parents continually, dealing with them daily, and it is this interaction and the way they treat us that also helps to shape how we come to think and feel about our self.

We have seen how identification with a good role model is ideal and how, in certain cases, strong identification with a parent who isn't even present can lead to great achievement, but this book isn't about these things, it's about the other side of the coin: the development and resolution of problems that relate to severe, misguided identification and how we come to feel about our self.

When parents treat their children badly, whether directly or indirectly, excessively or mildly, it affects the way the child feels. Being treated badly leads only to one thing – feeling bad.

Without doubt, one of the worst things to make a child feel bad is conflict between the parents.

### **Parental Conflict**

*“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.”*

*– Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887)*

Perhaps a truer word has never been spoken. When our parents argue we feel bad, simple as that. How many children have sat upstairs in distress, listening to their parents screaming at each other below? And how many adults with anxiety-related problems can recall such a scene from their childhood?

Fighting parents pose a threat to the child's sense of safety; their fighting instils feelings of insecurity, worry and self-doubt. These things feel bad, and (as we will learn later) one of the key elements in developing anxiety and depression related problems is that when we feel bad, there must be a reason for it – if there isn't, we will find one.

Our parents are right, they know more than us and if something is going wrong between them or between them and us we feel that it must be something to do with us, it must be our fault.

It doesn't take a great leap in imagination or faith to see how regular and extreme arguing between parents can leave a child in an almost constant state of distress. Indeed, arguing parents may affect a child before it is born: if soothing sounds are beneficial to the developing child in the womb, then raised voices and the mother's stressed body may have a negative impact that sensitises the child to such experiences later in life. Perhaps this plays a part in the different temperaments that can be seen in newborns.

Parental conflict affects us deeply but there is something that has an even greater effect on us: parent-child conflict.

Arguments between a child and his or her parent not only create stress and anxiety in the child (and probably also in the parent) but also influence how the child begins to think about itself. As a young child we don't have the acquired brain development, experience and knowledge to work things out for ourselves so we build our self-estimate solely on the appraisal of others and how they react to us. When these appraisals come from our parents we don't doubt them.

The most powerful negative influence on a child's self-concept comes from criticism.

## Parental Criticism

Constructive criticism, given and received correctly, can be extremely beneficial. But there are no benefits from destructive criticism. It destroys children; it can destroy anyone.

Children have an innate need for protection, support, emotional security and love. Anyone who has children has seen siblings competing for the attention and praise of their parents. To a child, being criticised by a parent is seen as a withdrawal of love, which leaves them feeling unprotected and afraid. And we cannot feel this way, for feeling scared signifies that our survival is under threat and we have to do something about it.

And children will do something about it. We see them doing things to try and please their parent, constantly asking if they are doing things well enough and if they are good enough.

With constant criticism, be it direct or implied, we can never do well enough and eventually we come to think that it is actually us, our self, our very being that is not good enough.

Destructive personal criticism is an attack and it's not just the words used. Being told that we are '*stupid*' or '*useless*', that '*we can't do anything right*', that '*we always fail*' and '*will never amount to anything*' or that we are '*pathetic*', '*fat*', '*lazy*' or '*ignorant*' is bad enough but it doesn't end there. It is the manner in which such things are said to us that damages the most.

To be called '*stupid*' by someone jokingly with a smile is not the same as being called '*stupid*' by someone who is angry and exuding hatred and disgust.

Young children, without an understanding of language, have a greater awareness of things that accompany it such as tone of voice and body language. Studies have shown that perception of emotion in the face and voice begins during the first year of life. Necessarily, when vocabulary is limited, a greater emphasis is placed on the way something is said rather than what is said. Children *feel* how their parents are interacting with them. As adults we may still possess these skills, although blunted with time, and use them to judge the real truth behind what someone is saying.

Things said with an aggressive posture in a harsh and accusing tone of voice are attacks, which make a child feel physically bad— usually tense, distressed and anxious. Unfortunately, some parents do criticise their children in just such a way – harsh words said in a harsh manner.

If only we had known at the time, that the anger and distaste displayed by our parents as they criticised us was what they actually felt about themselves.

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The effects of Identification, family conflict and parental criticism are all related to our perceptions of losing the protection and love of our parents. To exist in an environment of conflict and criticism makes us feel insecure and feel as if we are being rejected by our own parents. This perceived loss of love may also occur when parents are absent from the child's life, through, for example, parental separation, being reared mainly by nannies or

sent away to boarding school. Indeed, the latter, sending a young child away from their parent's protection to an often-hostile environment can have a profound effect on many children.

It is important to realise that it is what the child feels that counts. Feeling bad due to our parent's actions causes us to question what our parents think of us and also what is wrong with us for them to behave in such a way. Surely there can be no greater negative life experiences for a child than those that lead to constant feelings of insecurity over their self-worth.

Studies on healthy families, in communities where external stress is minimal, over a number of years have found that when a family has problems it sends stress hormones coursing through a child's system.

In extreme cases, those that constitute abuse of the child, we can see how the child's self-identity can be severely damaged. Here, the child's survival is more directly threatened and negative feelings regarding safety and self-worth can lead to the child blaming him or herself (for the parent's behaviour) even more.

Thankfully, only a tiny fraction of parents really don't love their children and many of these are often severely mentally ill. The majority of parents do love their children but, for a variety of reasons, are unable to show it. Many have their own problems expressing feelings and some don't have the time or emotional energy, or do mean to love their children but never get around to it. Love is also a verb not just a noun.

Identification involves love; we identify with something to enhance how we feel about our self and we love something that makes us feel good about our self.

We wouldn't identify with a parent who never loved us; we would not look up to them nor want any of their qualities. We wouldn't want to be like them and would probably become indifferent to them. It may be that such a situation underpins many psychoses, in which compassion towards others and self-control is rarely shown.

Interestingly, if a lack of love plays a part in psychoses, then receiving love may help these problems. And one study, the Soteria Project, appears to show that it does. Here, acutely distressed psychotic patients were treated with maximum kindness and minimum medication and many of them fared as well as patients treated in conventional psychiatric ways. Perhaps love is all we need?

Strong identification with a parent that we look up to, one that we want to be like, who then starts to treat us in a way that makes us feel insecure and unloved is a situation that can underpin all anxiety-related problems. Same sex parent-child conflicts may have a more profound effect – just how many mother-daughter conflicts are played out on the battleground of anorexia nervosa?

Variations in same/opposite-sex parent identification and the strength/number of conflict experiences probably shape the type and severity of any problems that develop. Of course, strong love from one parent may make up for a deficit of love from the other.

Over time, regular family conflict situations condition us to feel physically bad and bad about our self. A situation that involves alternating periods of being treated well and being treated badly produces the greatest conditioning of all. If we are treated well all of

the time we behave accordingly; if we are treated badly all of the time we also learn how to behave appropriately, but if we are treated well or badly at random – we just don't know how to behave. Even if we are treated well on successive occasions, we never know whether the next time will be good or bad and we can end up constantly anxious.

Eventually, with excessive identification and related feelings of withdrawal of love, we can become conditioned into a state that lies at the heart of all anxiety-related problems: *part of our self feels bad about our self.*

This may explain the core 'feeling bad' found at the heart of many people's anxiety and depression problems. But it's just the start.

Many people live like this, driven by an inner insecurity that promotes a life ruled by shyness or stress. They are often too anxious to try things in case they are rejected or constantly looking for love and acceptance through achievement. Others may go on to develop 'disorders' involving anxiety and depression. But there are other influences and things that have to happen for these problems, these 'disorders', to develop and grow – things we shall come to soon.

It may seem that anxiety and depression problems are therefore ingrained in us and we can't do much about them, but this isn't the case. The past is the past, it has happened and can't be changed, but it's what we think about the past and what we do to our self in the present because of it, that affects us now. And this can be changed.

We need to accept the past (not deny it) and change our beliefs about it so that we can move forward. We have to understand our experiences, the people involved and, more importantly, the conclusions we drew about our role in them, for it is not the experiences themselves that do the lasting damage, it's what we make of them. We have to understand how we learned to think and behave because of our experiences.

Love or the perceived lack of love and the way in which it can relate to our self-concept isn't the only way that we are shaped by our parents. We are also moulded by the things that they teach us, either directly or indirectly. From social anxiety disorder through to eating disorders and depression, the type of anxiety-related problem that we develop may, in part, come from what we learn from our parents.

### **Learning From Our Parents**

Our parents teach us things directly through what they tell us: things we should know and things we should do. Knowing that knives are sharp, fires are dangerous and to be careful when crossing the road ensures our safety, and parents necessarily instil apprehension and fear over something that could harm us. Many fears can be taught directly and are beneficial but if we are constantly prevented from taking risks we never learn that we can overcome challenges successfully.

Humans are obedient to authority, the child is taught to be obedient while taught to be good. Fear of authority is a powerful incentive for behaviour change and as children we are often told how to behave correctly (in our parent's eyes). It's not difficult to see how constantly being told to "look your best" and "do your best" or that "nice girls are clean, not dirty" can set the scene for social anxiety or obsessive and compulsive behaviour, later

in life. Not just words, our parent's attitude and expression can often convey their disappointment in our behaviour. Parents may also provide conflicting information: preaching one thing yet doing another.

We are also directly influenced by the ways we are rewarded or punished for certain behaviour. Children with parents who may not be warm and loving but reward them for excellence may become over-achievers, afraid of disappointing their parents and teachers initially and later of disappointing their friends, employer and spouse. Academic achievement and self-esteem are linked, and achieving becomes a way to be recognised and validated.

Achievement and wanting to achieve is normal, it drives us to perform well, the best that we can. But when this achievement becomes a desperate need, compensation for lack of love, it can be debilitating. With the need for achievement comes expectation, direct or implied, and this can put anyone under tremendous pressure. A child placed under extreme pressure to perform during his or her education can become an adult who feels bad no matter how much they achieve.

Within the family, the expression of beliefs may also shape us. Being told things like "this family are all well-built" or "this family will always have to work hard" can set the foundation for our self-image later in life and stereotypical roles are often played out. Comments about children who are: "the clever one", "the gifted one" or "the pretty one" can leave other children feeling that they are never good enough, and resentment between siblings, fostered by their differential treatment by parents, can last a lifetime.

We also learn from our parents by watching them. In children's play we can often see the entire parental role reproduced, including the appropriate mannerisms, tone of voice and attitude.

Children see and copy their parent's behaviour since they feel that it is the correct way to behave.

We may copy our parent's depression in times of sadness, their anxiety or anger when stressed or their concern with things being seen to be right in public. A mother who feels herself to be 'weak' and 'hopeless' may well generate those same feelings in us.

Being punished aggressively can lead us to believe that this is the correct way to act. Witness the little girl smacking and scolding her doll in exactly the same way her mother did to her.

Our parents therefore shape us enormously, through how we come to feel about our self and how we learn to behave. As we grow, other influences from outside the family come into play. Things like school, peers, teachers, society and the media all play a part and we'll look at these later.

But it's our parents that touch our inner-self and their influence can last many years. Women marry men who have the qualities of their father and men marry women with their mother's features. And just how many people spend a lifetime following a profession that their father wanted?

Healthy identification with a good role model is ideal whereas excessive identification with a weak role model can be disastrous.

Save those parents with severe mental illness, many of our parents treat us in a way that makes us feel rejected and unloved – but why?

### **Why They Do It**

Some parents can't help themselves. Just as we cannot stop scrubbing our hands clean when gripped by the compulsions of OCD, although we know it's wrong, they cannot stop themselves being angry and critical of a child whose imperfections they believe reflect on them. They are driven by their own feelings of weakness and self-doubt.

Are such parents really weak? Are they not strong and it's the child that is weak? Well, consider this...

Without exception, those who criticise others can rarely take criticism themselves and they never fail to tell us just how good they are as they berate us. Most of them would never (dare) say to another adult, the things they say to us and are often kinder to strangers than they are to their own family.

If we were actually behaving in a way that was bad or wrong, a strong parent would explain why it was wrong and show us the correct behaviour; they would guide and support us in order to help us improve. They certainly wouldn't make us feel humiliated and ashamed. Many of our parents have greater problems than we realise. They are angry and frustrated at their own lives and they hate it, they don't hate us – it just feels as though they do.

It's just not possible for some parents to show love, they were never shown any, so how can they? Some may compensate for this by providing a good home for their children and giving them all that they want, but unfortunately, for our inner-self, material possessions are irrelevant. We may have a nice house, nice car, everything that money can buy, but if there is no love in the house we are the poorest of all.

The hopes and fears of our parents can drive much of their behaviour towards us. Their failures drive us to succeed. A father who is a perfectionist in order to cope may strongly believe that his son needs to do things to perfection in order to succeed. A parent who feels hindered in life by lack of education or one who is successful because of it will do all they can to ensure that their children are well educated.

On the other hand, many a parent may try to obtain success through their children. They push them excessively and get angry with them when they fail. Just watch most of the fathers at their child's football game.

At the end of the day, when we look back on our childhood and its connection to anxiety and depression problems, and to a parent that made us feel bad, it may be prudent to think that he or she has probably suffered as bad a problem as we have. Many of them are doing the best they can given their problems and, although often misguided, they are trying to give their offspring the advantages they never had.

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Some people think that our parents barely influence us. They believe that the people who create us, control us, help us survive, provide food, warmth and shelter, teach us what is right and what is wrong, reward and punish us, make us feel good and make us feel bad, and provide daily examples of attitudes and behaviour, don't really affect us. They point to studies carried out on adults who weren't reared by their parents and to those on genetically similar twins reared in different families. Evidence of an anxiety disorder in such studies is seen as evidence that the parent's role is limited, and that the problem is due to other influences or perhaps genetics.

But these studies miss a vital point, possibly an inherent flaw with such studies: children who aren't reared by their parents are separated from their parents. The parents are absent – a situation, which, in itself, may be experienced as a withdrawal of parental love and a precursor to self-doubt and anxiety problems.

Also, many adopted or foster children feel the need to find their biological parents when they are old enough. They are driven to find their parent(s) in order to discover where they themselves came from, hence who they really are.

Our parents are in our genes; nothing will ever influence what we feel about our self like they do. And while we're talking about genes, let's take a look at something that many people feel plays an important role: genetics.

## The Role of Genetics

Many anxiety 'disorders' and depression can be seen to run in families, but it's too easy to see this as proof of genetics being the cause of these problems. A depressed or anxiety-riddled parent may treat their child in such a way, and provide such a role model, that the child could develop emotional problems entirely through learning and conditioning.

Human beings are very complex. If all of the DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid) in your body were laid end to end it would reach to the sun and back over 600 times. Over 99% of our DNA sequence is the same as other humans.

Genes are made of DNA (our entire DNA sequence is known as a *genome*, comprising an estimated 20000-25000 genes); they are pieces of DNA passed from parent to offspring that contain hereditary information. A parent and child share 50% of their genes as do siblings. Identical twins share 100% of their genes.

Once the human genome was mapped (the entire DNA sequence that makes up humans) it was hoped to be able to identify and cure the genetic cause of almost everything. But that didn't happen. Whilst ground has been made identifying DNA mutations or variations that may be associated with a higher risk for certain diseases, the actual situation is a great deal more complex. The position of the genes in relation to others and interactions between them may exert as great an influence as the genes themselves. It's the structure as a whole, the system, not just its constituent parts that is important. Anxiety and depression problems are the same, it is the whole system that counts – our mind and body and the environment they are in.

For all we know, such a process may also apply to the hereditary information that passes between parent and child. Not just physical attributes and behaviour traits but emotional elements could, in theory, be passed on too. We may also inherit such things as

hopes, fears and frustrations – things that have played a large part in the whole system of our parent's existence.

If a person has survived in life (and very importantly, survived at the level of his inner-self) despite an existence racked by worry, compulsions or depression, it's not unreasonable to assume that these survival 'tactics' will be passed to his offspring in order to increase their chances of survival. A lifelong depressive, no doubt, passes genetic information appropriate to having depression to his offspring.

However, DNA is our past not our future. Information that is passed between a parent and child does not result in actual behaviours but predispositions; not fixed behaviours but ways of behaving we are susceptible to develop given the right stimulation. A parent cannot pass on fixed behaviours for the environment the child is born into is unknown. The knowledge we inherit has to be flexible to enable us to adapt and survive – reacting with extreme anxiety to unconditional love would not be adaptive.

We all come predisposed to learn language but the main language we eventually learn to speak depends on where in the world we are born. Racehorses are bred to be good runners but they still have to be groomed and trained. Any genetic information that we receive from our parents can only be put into practice when the appropriate environment exists. Family conflict and destructive criticism are two environments appropriate to the development of many anxiety and depression problems.

Complex interactions between predisposition and environment probably influence the development of anxiety-related problems and the strength of the problem. But it's the environment (our experiences) that holds the upper hand. The genetic influence sits quietly in the background, waiting to develop and flourish in the right circumstances or wither and die if not called upon. A severely 'anxiety-disordered' person can, by treating them in the right way, raise a totally emotionally healthy child... many do.

There is also evidence to suggest that genes can be altered through learning.

The popular belief among scientists has been that, although the environment influenced natural selection, mutation was random. This is to say that environmental changes may favour certain characteristics of a species (so that only those members that possess such characteristics survive to pass on their genes) but genetic changes were purely random, it happened by chance and may or may not confer benefits for survival.

However, experiments by Barbara McClintock in the 1950's showed vast changes in the DNA of plants occurring when they were stressed. A stressful environment actually resulted in whole sequences of DNA moving from one place to another, even inserting themselves into active genes. Not random behaviour, there was a method to their shifting and it was triggered by outside influences. Changes in the environment such as extreme heat or drought, that threatened the survival of the plant altered its DNA. Initially ignored by her peers, McClintock received a Nobel Prize for her work some thirty years later.

Genes were actually changing due to experience in plants. Imagine what may be happening within the complexity of humans.

Intuitively, we would expect this to be the case. Life is about growing, learning and evolving; genes shape our reaction to experiences and our reaction to experiences and learning must shape our genes. We need not be slaves to our genes!

\* \* \* \* \*

In summary:

The helpless infant, we instinctively form attachments to our parents in order to be protected and nurtured to survive. This is seen in all animals where the infant is born reliant on the parent and even in some adult animals. Wild dogs on the edge of settlements become friendlier in order to be given scraps of food and many family pets have now become so cute and cuddly that some people treat them as babies and children.

The bond between the helpless infant (promoted by sounds, smells and appearance) and the powerful parent (receptive to such things) ensures the survival of the infant and ultimately the survival of the parent's genes.

For the first two or three years or so, the vast majority of parents dote on their children, who feel secure and loved – witness the confidence of most small children – and as the child grows they want to be like their powerful, successful parent, generally like the same-sex parent. The more powerful and successful the child views the parent (or even an image of the parent) the greater their desires to be like that parent. This, in itself, can be a healthy and positive situation, however, as the child grows they become more aware.

We start to notice the arguments between our parents, which affect us deeply. We may even have genetic predispositions how to react to stress or have been sensitised to it in the womb. Constant arguing leads to us feeling insecure, unsure about our safety, and afraid. An absent parent can make us feel the same to some extent.

As we grow, the parent whom we look up to may then start to criticise us in a harsh way – it's a destructive criticism that hurts.

The word 'critic' comes via the Latin *criticus* meaning 'a judge', and that's how we feel, judged by our powerful parent and left wanting, feeling that we are never good enough. Be under no illusion, destructive criticism is a destroyer, it has the greatest influence of all. It leaves us feeling not only physically bad (tense, confused, and anxious) but also feeling bad about our very self. Actual physical or sexual child abuse can take this to the extreme.

Being made to feel this way by a parent we look up to can lead to an almost obsessive identification with them, wanting to be like them more and more to help us stop feeling insecure and to be loved. Such an entanglement with our parent can last many years.

Unsure about the effect of destructive criticism?

Well consider this... If we take two small children: one we criticise constantly, put down, humiliate, exaggerate and ridicule their failures, and mock their attempts; the other we praise often, support, help, guide and demonstrate behaviour constructively – which one will grow up afraid to do anything, totally lacking in self-confidence? And which one will have total self-confidence? In fact, we could do the same to two dogs or any other animal that is smaller than us.

Many parents do a fantastic job in raising their children but when the main environment of a child comprises combinations of, and variations in, family conflict, destructive criticism, genetic predisposition and parental absence, the foundation can be laid for anxiety-related problems to develop. This environment can last until the child leaves home.

Constant pressure and distress, in a child without the maturity and experience to cope, leads to one thing – *feeling bad*, and it's a special kind of feeling bad that lies at the heart of a myriad of anxiety and depression problems today.

\* \* \*

As we move towards our teenage years into a bigger, bolder, more competitive world, this vague 'feeling bad', this feeling 'not good enough in some way' (almost always accompanied by feeling insecure) can shape our lives.

Some people stay at this stage, to various degrees, and lead lives ruled by shyness and self-doubt or spend life behaving in self-defeating ways in times of stress. Others may find comfort in food with all the associated problems this brings.

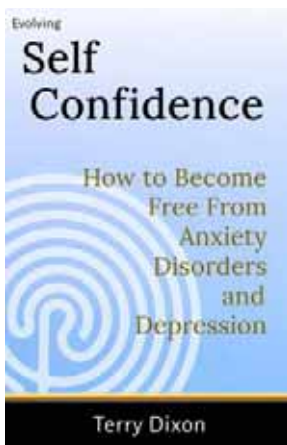
However, for many us, life's progression, coupled with being made to feel bad and scared even more, can take things to the extreme and make the chance of developing an anxiety disorder almost inevitable.

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*Further Reading...*

This eBook is, in essence, the first chapter of:

**Evolving Self Confidence: How to Become Free From Anxiety Disorders and Depression**



Through unique insight into the underlying cause of anxiety disorders and depression, this book shows how to become totally free from these problems.

It takes us on a journey from childhood to adult, through the experiences, thoughts and feelings that shape the creation of these problems. Discover how they start and grow, which disorder develops and why, the ways we strengthen them and how they become part of us.

And then, the answer... learn how to turn them around, to evolve and grow through them, beyond them to become stronger and wiser for your experiences... beyond them to become the unique, worthy individual that it is your birthright to be.

Now available in paperback and digital formats, see: [www.help-for.com/esc-more.htm](http://www.help-for.com/esc-more.htm)

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**The Cause of Anxiety Disorders: How They Start As a Child**

**A Help-For Publication**

**Adapted from - Evolving Self Confidence:**

**How to Become Free From Anxiety Disorders and Depression**

