

WHEN PARENTS HAVE PROBLEMS
A Book for Teens and Older Children
With an Abusive, Alcoholic, or
Mentally Ill Parent



Blue-Butterfly Day

It is blue-butterfly day here in spring,
And with these sky-flakes down in flurry on flurry
There is more unmixed color on the wing
Than flowers will show for days unless they hurry.

But these are flowers that fly and all but sing:
And now from having ridden out desire
They lie closed over in the wind and cling
Where wheels have freshly sliced the April mire.

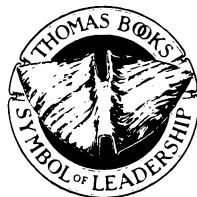
ROBERT FROST

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By

SUSAN B. MILLER, PH.D.



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CIP

For my aunt, Rose M. Wovell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susan B. Miller is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She works with young people and adults in psychotherapy and also spends time writing fiction and non-fiction. She is the author of *The Shame Experience* (1985, The Analytic Press) and is currently at work on a second book on shame. Favorite pastimes include gardening and animals.



PREFACE

Many books have been written for adults who grew up coping with troubled parents. Often the adults who read these books say, “I wish someone had told me that when I was a kid. It might have helped me so much.” Unfortunately, not much has been written for the kids who are coping *in the present* with difficult or troubled parents. In part, that’s because kids may be hesitant to read books about tough subjects, so publishers hesitate to invest money in publishing them. It’s also because kids sometimes get their books from parents and troubled parents seldom recognize their own problems or encourage their kids to read books about living with those problems.

It’s also true that kids with troubled parents sometimes feel funny about recognizing their parents’ shortcomings. They may feel even funnier about bringing home a book that talks about troubled mothers and fathers, or keeping a book like that in a school locker. Some kids would feel guilty or disloyal reading such a book, even though it’s a smart, sensible thing to do and it isn’t something that will hurt their parents. So there are lots of reasons few books have been written for kids who have parents who are ill or alcoholic or abusive or troubled in some other way.

There are also some very good reasons to write such a book and to encourage kids to read it. Difficult childhoods often lead to unnecessary pain and struggle later in life. This book is written with the idea that intelligent kids can use sound ideas to improve their lives, either on their own or with the help of adults. In this book, I try to offer help sorting out whether a difficult situation may in part be a result of a parent’s problems. The idea isn’t to belittle or undermine your parents or to blame them for things that are your responsibility. The idea is to be realistic about the sources of a problem and, if a parent’s difficulties is one of those sources, to help you deal better with your situation. I try to give you an idea of the kinds of problems or challenges your parent’s troubles can cause for you. I also give you ideas on how to deal constructively with your parent’s problems so that you can keep on track with your own growing up.

You may agree with some of my ideas and disagree with others. Some you'll find useful and others may not be of value to you. But I hope reading the book and considering the ideas will help you take some steps along a road worth travelling.



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Many people were helpful to me during the writing of this book. I would especially like to thank my father for the support he has given me for my writing, over many years, even when little success was coming my way. My thanks also to my sisters, Lisa Sablosky and Laura Miller, who are my constants, and to my aunt, Rose Wovell, who has been a special source of love and wisdom, and a person of courage to whom this book is dedicated. Many friends have been helpful. These include my writing group, in its present and past incarnations, especially Ann Hinton and Amous Maue, also good friends Irv and Nancy Leon, Judith Saltzman, and Carol Furtado. Special thanks also to Maria Sylvester for helping me with this manuscript and giving much-valued encouragement. Though she was not involved with this particular project, Joan Blos was most generous with her time and expertise with a number of other projects for young people.

The idea for this book came from my work with a bright young woman who was finding it hard to make sense of her life with a troubled parent. As I began to think about writing this book, many other young and older people came into my thoughts, all of whom had told me their stories of growing up. My thanks to them for sharing portions of their lives with me. Finally, my thanks to Charles C Thomas, Publisher, for their willingness to publish this book on a difficult topic and their responsiveness throughout the process.



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Chapter One

GETTING STARTED

I've written this book for kids whose parents have problems. Of course, all parents at times have problems, but some parents have problems that are serious and lasting, which makes them poor parents a lot of the time. This book is especially for kids whose parents have major, lasting problems. If you are one of these kids, you have special challenges in growing up since your parents often are not able to help you; sometimes they stand smack in your way.

Troubled parents are not all the same. Some parents are abusive or neglectful; their kids may find them cruel or uncaring. Some parents suffer a great deal because of a mental illness or a painful loss or a difficult set of experiences they've not been able to overcome; their children may pity them and feel helpless about their suffering. Other parents have dangerous habits like drug or alcohol abuse or shoplifting or gambling; or they do distressing things like having many extramarital affairs. You wish they'd stop what they're doing, but they don't, no matter how much they hurt the people around them. Though troubled parents come in many forms, they present some shared challenges and difficulties for their kids.

You may be wondering why you should read a book like this. Thinking about parents' problems isn't pleasant. Many kids work hard to believe their parents have no serious problems, even when the evidence points the other direction. You may love your parents very much, or want to love them, and feel it's not right to think of them as troubled. But, unless you're an ostrich, it's always best to face the truth. Seeing what's true—even if that truth isn't pretty—helps you to cope better with the real situation you're in. Seeing an unpleasant truth is never a reason to feel guilty. Seeing what's there doesn't make you disloyal or unkind; it doesn't mean you're trying to hurt or shame your parent. You're not creating the problem; you're just recognizing it, which is better than closing your eyes and your mind.

Depending on the particular parent you have, some parts of this book may be more meaningful to you than others. For example, if you have an

overanxious parent who is generally kind and attentive, the part of the book about mistreatment may not speak to you as much as other parts will. If you have an abusive parent who terrorizes you or your brothers or sisters, the parts of the book about feeling sad for your parents may not be what you need, since you may feel more angry than sad. On the other hand, some kids with abusive parents do feel sad for their parents, and also angry. If some of the sections don't seem to apply to you, you can skip them or you may want to read them anyway. Maybe they'll help you better understand a friend.

You might wonder why I got interested in writing this book. One reason is that I am a psychologist and my work has given me many opportunities to see how often kids with troubled parents can make good use of a little advice and a little support. I'd like to offer those things to more kids through this book. A second reason is that I was myself one of the many kids who grow up having to cope with a troubled parent. I know how confusing it can be and how much a young person can use some help sorting things out. Kids with troubled parents have strengths they can use to cope with their situation. I'm hoping this book can help you make fuller use of your strengths.

I want to say a bit more about the kinds of problems parents can have. Sometimes a parent's problems show up most clearly as particular behaviors a child wishes the parent would stop, but the parent doesn't stop. For example, your mother drinks too much and gets nasty or sexually inappropriate when she's drinking. Or your father gambles and wastes the family's money so there's not enough for rent or school expenses or good food. Or maybe your father has affairs, making for lots of tension between the two adults on whom you rely. Or your mother uses drugs and often is spaced-out or doing irresponsible, frightening things like feeding your baby sister food that's not good for her or driving recklessly; maybe she gets arrested.

Parents' problems can come in other forms as well. Some parents are always unhappy and they complain to their children about how miserable they are. Kids worry that their mother or father might go on feeling sad forever or might commit suicide. Some parents feel very anxious and jittery, or they can't go out of the house without getting panicky. And some parents have a mental illness so they can't function at all normally; they have odd experiences, like hallucinations, that their kids don't understand; or they talk a mile a minute about crazy-sounding things and stay up all night; or they're convinced against all reason that the

neighbors are trying to poison them. A mentally ill parent may have too much on his mind or too much wrong with his mind to take care of you. He may neglect you entirely, or confuse your needs with his own or your brother's, or he may attend to you but give you bad advice that's due to his mixed-up thinking. For example, a paranoid parent may tell you to wear a disguise if you have to go to the neighbor's to borrow the lawn mower. Or a manic parent may insist you go out shopping with him at four in the morning.

Some troubled parents have no obvious illness, but yet there is something wrong with them. They may get along poorly with other adults; maybe your mother gets into arguments and is rude to people so that you feel nervous and embarrassed when you're out in public with her. She may blow up at a waitress over some tiny thing or insult your school teacher. Some parents show their problems by being overcritical of others. They may get down on everyone around them; or they may pick one child or adult on whom to harp, for no good reason; they may pick one person to fault today, and someone else tomorrow.

You may feel confused about whether the problems you experience at home are your problem or your parent's. That's a difficult thing to sort out at times, especially because both you and your parent may be making a contribution. It can be valuable, though, to try to sort it out, especially if you are the kind of person who tends to take blame for everything that goes wrong.

Let me give you a few guidelines that can help you get a better perspective on whether you have a troubled parent. These guidelines focus less on extreme behaviors (like drug abuse or physical mistreatment) than on how your parent feels about you and acts toward you. They focus on the relationship between you and your parent. I'll start with the idea that all people, whatever their age, have their own unique feelings and thoughts and their own needs and wishes. Each person has the right to expect that his feelings, thoughts, needs, and wishes will be treated with respect and taken into consideration by the people around him, especially by the adults who are there to care for him. Having your feelings and needs respected and considered does not mean you'll always get what you want or that your needs will be put above everyone else's; but it does mean your parents will have an interest in knowing what your feelings and needs are and that they will not ignore or ridicule them.

One clear sign that a parent has serious problems is when the parent cannot look at the needs and wishes, feelings and thoughts of his or her