

*a guide to managing
unhealthy
family relationships*

Drama Free

NEDRA GLOVER TAWWAB

New York Times bestselling author of

SET BOUNDARIES, FIND PEACE

Advance Praise for *Drama Free*

“Without a fresh perspective and the belief that we can break the cycle, we can get stuck in family patterns rather than living as our whole selves. With compassion and clarity, Nedra Tawwab offers a much-needed guide to understanding our upbringing—and becoming an agent for change in our own lives.”

—Lori Gottlieb, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Maybe You Should Talk to Someone* and cohost of the *Dear Therapists* podcast

“In *Drama Free*, therapist Nedra Tawwab gives us the tools to understand family relationships and manage them in a healthier way—while staying true to who we are and what we need. This book offers a powerful path forward.”

—Charlamagne Tha God, *New York Times* bestselling author and cohost of *The Breakfast Club*

“Many people go to therapy to work through the issues in their heads, overlooking that their biggest challenges often lie in their family relationships. In this book, therapist Nedra Tawwab offers practical wisdom to help you handle problems with parents, siblings, children, and yes, even in-laws. In a time when mental health is finally getting the attention it deserves, this is a vital guide to building healthier families.”

—Adam Grant, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Think Again* and host of the TED podcast *Re:Thinking*

“*Drama Free* is an engaging and relatable guide to understanding what’s really going on within our families, offering practical steps for creating healthy changes as needed.”

—Myleik Teele, founder of CURLBOX

“The family dynamics we grew up with can feel like an immutable fact of life—a set of patterns and rules we carry with us, for better or worse. In this empowering book, Nedra Tawwab upends this assumption, unpacking these complex relationships and offering tools for positive change.”

—Judson Brewer, MD, PhD, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Unwinding Anxiety*

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Set Boundaries, Find Peace
The Set Boundaries Workbook

DRAMA FREE

A Guide to Managing
Unhealthy Family Relationships

NEDRA GLOVER TAWWAB

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For us, people who need to learn to manage or leave unhealthy family relationships—we are the answer, not the people we can't control

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Introduction

Among the most significant contributors to your mental health, relationships can cause you pain, or they can heal you. Positively or negatively, relationships have an impact on your mental and emotional well-being. Psychologists have long supported the finding that healthy relationships can prolong your life, while unhealthy ones can influence health issues like cancer, heart disease, depression, anxiety, and addiction. So, we must take the health of our relationships seriously and strengthen connections where possible. While this applies to all types of relationships, no type of relationship is as formative as those we have with our family of origin.

My first book, *Set Boundaries, Find Peace: A Guide to Reclaiming Yourself*, helped people understand the importance of boundaries in relationships. Healthy boundaries give you peace even when the other person hasn't changed. They can help you deal with challenges and chaos in relationships. While this book doesn't focus on boundaries, they are frequently highlighted as a way to thrive in family relationships.

When people enter therapy, family relationships are most often what they want to discuss. From a therapist's perspective, many of the issues in marriages, friendships, and other relationships were birthed in our families. People may lament, "Not everything is about my family," but so often it is.

One question that often comes up in therapy is "Who was the first person to make you feel that way?" The answer typically goes back to the first experience occurring in the family. How people engage in the family is usually how they engage in the world.

Family relationships are the most common type of unhealthy relationship. If you're wondering why, I will venture to say that they are where we spend our formative years and a considerable amount of time (if not physically, then mentally). The people in our childhood home are our primary teachers for many years. But what happens when we want to show up in the world with views, traditions, or a lifestyle that diverges from those of our family? It can create tension and resentment.

The truth is that during your childhood, you likely weren't allowed to be yourself, so as an adult, you're becoming more your true self. And it's healthy for you to figure out who you are, separate from who you were molded or told to be. If this does cause friction, don't worry. In this book, I'll cover how to be yourself around your family.

Some people will say, "My childhood has no impact on who I am today." Not true. You can't simply extract all the good behaviors you learned and pretend away the ones you'd rather not possess. Behaviors stick to you until you consciously change them. Tendencies within families

have a way of tricking us into accepting certain family norms. For instance, I've found that people from single-parent homes often struggle to understand the parent-child dynamics when two parents are involved. When they have a partner to support them in parenting, it can be hard for them to understand and embrace the involvement of another adult.

Of course, there's no such thing as a "perfect" childhood. Even when it appears fine from the outside, we have no clue what's going on behind closed doors. For some of us, the most complicated relationships we have are with our family. People tell me that they want to change or improve their family relationships—especially with parents, siblings, and extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—more than any other relationships. Another huge sore point is our relationship with in-laws and blended family members, such as learning to parent children who have become adults. Plus, family relationships set the tone for how we operate in outside relationships, including friendships and romantic relationships.

When I offer relationship solutions, people often ask if my advice applies to family—it does. I know it can be hard to apply general knowledge to family relationships. When it's family, we might make an unhealthy exception because—it's family. But we shouldn't make that mistake. Don't allow anyone to mistreat you, no matter who they are.

This book is not for blaming other people for your life. Instead, it's a tool to help you develop the skills needed to reclaim your voice in a dysfunctional family. It can be scary to face what you witnessed or endured in your family. I, too, at times have avoided or downplayed family issues as a way to keep family norms intact. Often, people avoid being honest about their family experiences because they fear challenging conversations or possibly feeling the need to leave their family behind. Releasing family relationships is only one option of many, and having tough but intentional conversations can create positive change.

I will teach you how to manage dysfunctional family relationships better, and how to sever ties when those relationships become unmanageable. You don't have to tolerate toxic behavior from others, but you might not have to cut people off. This depends on your tolerance and grace, and the intensity of the offending behavior. Dysfunction is not just abuse or neglect; it's also gossiping, unhealthy in-law relationships, feeling like the black sheep, or dealing with a substance-abusing family member.

Indeed, I will offer practical tips for common issues and succinctly break down complex topics, helping you to answer two essential questions:

- How can I successfully have relationships with members of my family when there's an underlying issue?
- How can I disconnect from family members when I no longer wish to maintain the relationship?

Keep a notebook handy or your notes app open, because as you read, it will be helpful to reflect, process, and apply the experiences in this book to your life. Writing is cathartic and can help you sort through thoughts in a deeper way.

In **Part One: Unlearning Dysfunction**, I'll explain what dysfunction looks like and define typical unhealthy dynamics, including trauma, boundary violations, codependency, enmeshment, and addiction. We'll explore why people tend to repeat chaos and continue unhealthy patterns, as well as the impact of generational trauma.

In **Part Two: Healing**, I'll delve into the two choices you have when you want to break the cycle: learn how to manage relationships with people who won't change, or end relationships because people won't change. This section offers guidance for thriving vs. surviving and for building a support system outside your family.

Part Three: Growing will help you troubleshoot the different types of family relationships: parents, siblings, extended family, adult children, in-laws, and blended families.

While reading this book, if you begin to uncover parts of the story that cause you to feel overwhelmed, seek therapy to address those issues. Significant reactions are a sign that something deeper is being experienced, and therapy can help explore the deeper reactions, such as loss of sleep, re-experiencing, racing thoughts, or intense sadness. Therapy is a supportive process that can help you work through the topics in this book, particularly when processing on your own becomes unmanageable. This book is a therapeutic, educational tool and in no way takes the place of having a relationship with a therapist if you need one. If something doesn't feel right for you or you don't have access to therapy and you're having an emotional reaction, pause when needed and return to the material when you feel more equipped to process it.

Each chapter opens with a quote and vignette loosely based on an interaction with a client or member of my Instagram community. From there, the chapters move into clinical concepts and scripts, and end with an exercise of reflective questions to help you apply the material to your real-life experiences. Throughout this book, the term "parent" is used to refer to a biological parent, primary caregiver, adoptive parent, or any adult who was primarily responsible for your care. To protect the identity of current and former clients, names and details have been changed. Many of the stories are composites and rearranged details from my personal and professional lives.

Culture impacts our views of family, and in some cultures, speaking up against unhealthy family practices or wanting something different could seem to be going against your cultural values. Adults can create their own identities, even in family relationships. You are allowed to change aspects of the existing culture in your family—such as visiting without advance notice, taking care of elderly parents while raising your own children, or giving unqualified family members roles in your business. You have the power to create your own story while allowing your family to maintain their culture. You aren't being offensive; you are simply trying to create a life that fits your desires.

The relationships that impact us the most are those with family. The wounds are deep, and the relationships are filled with expectations. Whether you consider your family truly dysfunctional or just want to resolve some drama, I hope reading this book will show you that you aren't alone and that you have the power to decide what you want in your relationships with others. You can choose how to live your life. Believe that you have everything within yourself to make hard and

healthy decisions. I know you can do this because I've witnessed many others, including myself, create healthy relationships.

PART ONE

UNLEARNING DYSFUNCTION

CHAPTER 1

What Dysfunction Looks Like

Carmen grew up in a two-parent home. It was customary for her father, Bruce, to work all day, come home, get drunk, and go into a rage. Carmen's mom, April, spent much of her time in her room disengaged from Carmen and her two siblings. April "drank too much," but she wasn't as bad as Bruce.

When April and Bruce would argue, Carmen and her siblings would tune them out by blasting the TV. Carmen spent a lot of time with her friends to avoid being at home. With her friends' families, she found that it wasn't the norm for parents to be drunk, argue all the time, or be emotionally neglectful.

As Carmen grew older, she learned to rely on her extended family for support. When she needed a ride to hang out with friends, she'd call her grandmother. She couldn't risk her parents picking her up while drunk. When she needed clothes for school, she called her aunt, who gladly took her shopping. What Carmen didn't have was someone to talk to about her homelife. Her friends didn't have these issues with their parents, and her extended family danced around her parents' issues by trying to pick up the slack.

Carmen was lonely and embarrassed. For many years, she thought she was the problem because no one else seemed concerned about her parents' actions. Her siblings accommodated their parents' behavior, and the rest of the family said things like, "That's just who your parents are. You have to love them anyway." She loved her parents, but she was tormented by how they behaved. Their issues even continued into her adulthood.

Most of the time, Carmen just sucked it up, and when she did put her foot down, her family guilt-tripped her, accusing her of acting funny and being mean. She wanted someone to see the issues, validate her experiences, and let her know that it was OK to want something different from her family.

What Does It Mean to Have a Dysfunctional Family?

For Carmen, it meant having parents who were addicts, emotionally neglectful, and at times verbally abusive. A dysfunctional family is one where abuse, chaos, and neglect are accepted norms. In dysfunctional families, unhealthy behaviors are overlooked, swept under the rug, or catered to. As in Carmen's case, it's hard to ascertain dysfunction until you're exposed to other,

healthier situations. And even when exposed to better relationships, it can still be hard to break away from dysfunctional patterns.

If you grew up in a dysfunctional family, you probably thought this was normal:

- Forgiving and forgetting (with no change in behavior)
- Moving on as if nothing happened
- Covering up problems for others
- Denying that a problem exists
- Keeping secrets that need to be shared
- Pretending to be fine
- Not expressing your emotions
- Being around harmful people
- Using aggression to get what you want

When People Tell You There's a Problem, Believe Them

Far too often, people become defensive and resistant to change instead of acknowledging the problem and working toward a resolution. In Carmen's case, whenever she tried to talk to her parents about some of their unhealthy behaviors, they became defensive or blamed her for wanting something different. No one within the family was willing to hear her concerns, likely because they weren't ready to work on the issues.

Carmen wasn't alone, yet no one was willing to stand with her. Her experience was the same as everyone else's, but she was the one who was brave enough to point out that there was a problem. She wanted to learn how to confront the issues that everyone seemed to easily accommodate or ignore.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey

The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey is commonly used to measure the severity of childhood trauma. The survey takes into consideration areas such as these:

- Witnessing violence
- Sexual abuse
- Exposure to substance abuse in the home
- Physical abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Emotional abandonment
- Parent who was mentally ill
- Imprisonment of a parent

Childhood trauma impacts our ability to process and express emotions, and it increases the likelihood of maladaptive emotional-regulation strategies (e.g., suppression of emotions). In particular, children exposed to violence have challenges in distinguishing threat and safety cues.

It's widely known that things like abuse and neglect are dysfunctional aspects within a family dynamic. But family relationships are impacted by other factors as well. Trauma is assessed on a scale from 0 to 10, but childhood trauma can be impactful with a score as low as 2. ACE doesn't even consider financial instability, moving multiple times, or generational trauma, which we know impact mental health. I believe that your ACE score (mine is a 7) or childhood experience of trauma doesn't determine your future. We are powerful and can make choices that are hard in the moment but beneficial in the long term.

What we experience in childhood carries over to adulthood because once the trauma is activated, the cycle is often perpetuated. Children who experience homelessness tend to have higher ACE scores and a higher likelihood of homelessness issues in adulthood.

Other Factors That Contribute to Childhood Dysfunction

- Self-absorbed parents
- Emotionally immature parents
- Domineering parents
- Enmeshed family relationships
- Competitive relationships within the family
- Children parenting their parents

(In Chapters 2 and 3, we will dig deeper into these concepts.)

A compelling documentary, *The Boys of Baraka* is about a program with Black boys in Baltimore, Maryland. Twenty at-risk young men enrolled in a boarding school in Kenya to experience their cultural roots, community, academics, and structure. While away, many of the boys showed improvements academically, emotionally, and socially. The program then lost funding, and the boys returned home. Once they returned to their home environments, which hadn't changed, many of them suffered the consequences of growing up in these at-risk environments, including drug abuse, jail, and repeating unhealthy cycles. The atmosphere in which they lived limited their ability to thrive, and with little hope, they returned to familiar patterns.

Nevertheless, with the right tools, we can heal from childhood and family traumas.

Environment

Where you grow up, who you grow up with, and the things you experience in your home have lifelong implications for who you become. Trauma has long-term effects on your body, mind, relationships, financial health, and emotional and mental health. The first eighteen years of life profoundly impact your entire life. In the book *What Happened to You?: Conversations on*

Trauma, Resilience, and Healing, by Oprah Winfrey and Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., Oprah shares her story of childhood trauma and how those experiences shaped her. Her mother beat her for even the slightest offense, and this abuse turned her into a people-pleaser. It took years for her to realize that her behavior as an adult was rooted in her experiences as a child.

Things You May Inherit from Your Family

- Money management skills
- Communication skills
- The way you attach to others
- Values
- Patterns of substance use
- How you treat your children
- How you handle your mental health

There's so much from your childhood that gives therapists a picture of how you developed the problem you're working through in adulthood. One thing I ask is, "When is the first time you felt that way?" or "Who was the first person to make you feel that way?" Typically, the narrative floats back to childhood. We carry the weight of the years when we were most powerless, as if we have to continue that way, but adulthood gives us the opportunity to change our narrative.

Resilience

Resilience is the ability to embrace what happened. We can overcome our environment when the right protective factors are in place. Protective factors include

- Strong connections with safe adults
- Positive parenting influences
- Strong values or a sense of purpose
- The ability to self-regulate, have a positive outlook, and be resourceful
- Healthy social connections
- Support from peers and mentors
- Continual structured programs that increase exposure to healthy relationships

It's often said that we are a product of our environment, but we can also be a product of exposure to healthy relationships outside the home. Carmen's understanding of her home environment was shaped by what she saw as healthy alternatives outside her home.

Growing up in Detroit, Michigan, and attending public schools, I recall being exposed to programs intended to help urban kids overcome issues they may have faced at home. I stopped littering in elementary school because a group taught us about how littering is harmful to our

environment, and they helped us clean the neighborhood around my school. Although the cleaning efforts were short-lived, the piece about not littering stuck with me.

Strangers have assumed that I was raised in a two-parent home and that my childhood was free of trauma, but neither of those assumptions is true. I had exposure to different perspectives and healthy relationships, and I hoped that my life would be different when I became an adult.

Be Honest (at Least with Yourself) About Your Childhood

Honesty isn't betrayal; it's courage. Stop sugarcoating your experiences and allow the truth to free you. People often misrepresent their relationships and experiences because they're too afraid to admit what's true. But denial will keep you from breaking free from your past.

Hard Things to Accept About a Family Member

- They are selfish and will do whatever it takes to get what they want
- They aren't a good listener
- They make changes, but only temporarily
- They are mean, often without cause
- They take more than they give
- They aren't perfect

Reasons We Don't Talk About Family Problems

Thinking That Family Issues Are a Reflection of Who We Are

You aren't what happened to you. In childhood, you faced many things that were outside your control. Managing your environment wasn't on you. Therefore, you can't blame yourself for what happened in that environment. Your experiences shaped you—but as an adult, you have the power to choose whether you want to be a product of those experiences or move past them to create something different.

Feeling Embarrassment and Shame

One thing that helps with feeling embarrassed about your family story is hearing about people with similar experiences. The only way to connect with those who share your experiences, however, is honesty. You will have to be brave enough to tell the truth. Shame exists when you hide things from others, and releasing the secrets releases shame. Maintaining privacy is not secret-keeping; you can share as much or as little as you feel comfortable sharing. Privacy allows you to discern whom you prefer to disclose to. Sometimes you don't share as a protection to the people who harmed you. Therefore, you might be engaging in preventing embarrassment for others, not just for yourself.

Trying to Ignore the Issues

Ignoring major family issues postpones the healing of unhealthy patterns. You can't recover from things that "never happened." When you ignore them, the harmful behaviors continue because you and your family are unwilling to acknowledge the cycles that need to be recognized and broken.

Believing That No One Will Understand

Celebrities, teachers, friends, coworkers, and many others might have gone through similar issues with their families. Assuming you're alone isn't the best way to find people who can relate to you. Vulnerability builds community. You attract people who are like you by being authentic and open. Sometimes, you find "your people" after you are transparent about your story.

Fearing Judgment

Some people won't understand your story, and you won't always understand the stories of others. Practice feeling OK with the fact that some people won't "get" you. Accepting this will make your life much easier. It makes sense to be concerned about what others think. But caring too much can undermine your ability to create positive change.

Watching the Trauma Unfold

Married . . . with Children was one of my favorite TV sitcoms. In it, Al Bundy, the main character, is a disgruntled shoe salesman whose best years were in high school. He's married to Peg, and they have two kids, named Bud and Kelly. The kids watch as their parents criticize each other, and they are often left at home without food to eat. I recall one episode where the kids are hungry and searching the kitchen for food. They find an old piece of chocolate behind the refrigerator and rejoice. The show is a comedy, and I found many of the dynamics hilarious. But in hindsight, I realize the show highlights aspects of parental neglect, verbal abuse, and unhealthy parental relationships that I couldn't yet conceptualize.

When we don't understand what we see, we tend to stay in unhealthy situations. It can feel normal and inevitable that the people around us seem to suffer the same fate. To better understand your experience, it's vital to develop a different viewpoint.

What Happens When It Takes Years to Wake Up

As long as you are breathing, it isn't too late to change your perspective and behaviors. It's commonly believed that the older we become, the more challenging it might be to change. They say, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Not true! When you're willing to incorporate further information, you can change. Let's revise the saying to "You can't teach an *unwilling* dog

new tricks.” In reading this book, you’ve demonstrated that you’re willing to seek out and incorporate new information.

Sometimes, the problems are blatantly obvious, but because of the indoctrination of family values and beliefs, it can take a while before you start to realize the nature of the dysfunction in your family. Like Carmen, however, you can begin to observe others and notice the differences in your home.

My own after-school routine included watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. As I’ve watched old episodes, I realize now that I wasn’t ready for the topics, but I certainly needed to hear them. The Oprah show covered abuse, neglect, giveaways, celebrity interviews, and almost every other imaginable subject. Her show gave me the terminology to name things in my life and the lives of others. If you listen closely enough, many of the things you watch and read contain something about your experiences in life. Media is one way we learn to connect what we see with our own situations.

But it’s never too late to start rewiring your brain. You’re always learning new things, and choosing to incorporate new ideas is a choice you can make. Throughout this book, I will teach you how to change yourself in order to change your life and relationships. You are a huge part of all your relationships. Therefore, your perspective, behaviors, and expectations can often change how a relationship functions, even if the other person doesn’t change.

You’ll hear me repeat one concept in this book: *You cannot change people*. If I could have one superpower, it would be to change people. But none of us possess the power to change others. Nevertheless, it’s the number one go-to solution when we have problems in relationships. After you read this book, I want you to walk away with the realization that changing *you* is enough.

Starting from Scratch

There’s a scene in the movie *The Little Mermaid* where Ariel uses a fork as a comb. She’s never seen a comb before, so she has no frame of reference for it. When your reference point is dysfunctional, changing to a healthier pattern will often involve starting from scratch. I’ve seen parents become shocked by how hard it is to break dysfunctional cycles with their own children. In this case, parents have options:

- Get upset with their children for being unreasonable and needy.
- Get upset with their parents for not having been more patient with *them*.
- Learn strategies to parent better and manage stress.

All of these options are reasonable. You can be upset while building parenting skills and managing the stress that comes with parenting. It’s OK to feel upset, sad, or even angry about the past while you move forward with your life. Notice that I didn’t say “getting over” the past. Instead, I emphasized moving forward.