

What are the internal and external solutions (concept of resilience) that we can bring to a “toxic” parent (or perverse narcissic manipulator)?

Summary

Understanding the toxic relationships in which victims of a “toxic” parent are trapped, finding tools that will allow these grown-up children to get out of the grip they have been in, often since birth. The aim of this article is to better understand and identify this concept of parental toxicity, not only by the very functioning of the “toxic” parent and the consequences for the child, but also on the potential for social and cultural development and relationships. In other words, how to become a support of effective resilience in the face of toxic relationship dynamics? Moreover, the notion of “perverse narcissic manipulator” is a concept with a low falsifiability for which this article requires in order to distinguish other underlying pathologies. Through research and in-depth bibliographical study of many recognized international works, the main conclusions demonstrate the importance of understanding not only the specificity of the cognitive and behavioral patterns of both the “toxic” parent and those of the adult child, and the possibility of resilience development.

Keywords: parental toxicity, narcissistic perverse manipulator, unconditional love, trauma, parentification, low self-esteem, feeling of self-efficacy, resilience, resources, adjustment, mental representation, emotional regulation

Volume 15 Issue 4 - 2022

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Received: July 06, 2022 | Published: July 25, 2022

Introduction

The association of the words “parents” and “toxic” may seem strange. However, it is a real subject to be considered because it is the whole capacity for the development of children and future adults that is at stake. Harmful influences often act in a pernicious way. There is talk of unconscious mechanisms that are perpetuated from generation to generation. However, it is difficult to accept the idea that one’s parent is “toxic”. It is often thought that they act awkwardly and in good faith and that they punish “for our own good”; that they too have had problems with their own parents and that it is normal to respect and love them by showing them presence, recognition and affection.^{1,2} So, do we have to love and respect our parents unconditionally? To be afraid to admit that “toxic parents” exist is to believe that it is forbidden to “touch” parents under the myth that they are parents. There are parents who respect the personality and needs of their children. However, there are also, unfortunately, parents who behave in a deviant and therefore harmful way, in a world that has great difficulty in spotting them. It is therefore out of respect for all parents who are good to their children that we will try to understand what parental toxicity is. More precisely, the various readings have led us to formulate the question in the following way: What are the internal and external solutions (concept of resilience) that we can provide when faced with a ‘toxic’ parent? Indeed, ‘toxic’ parents are real scourges for their children. Parental toxicity concerns parents who poison their child’s life and prevent them from developing. Instead of supporting them, they put them down. Growing up and developing in the face of a toxic parent is “impossible”. Numerous consequences are documented, including emotional deprivation, low self-esteem, and feelings of guilt, which will affect the child victim for the rest of his or her life, even as an adult.^{1,3} Through the following chapters, we will help identify what a toxic parent is, often called a “perverse

narcissistic manipulator” (PNM). The notion of PNM is, like other concepts such as “burn out”, a “boat” concept with low falsifiability, for which this article requires us to first distinguish it from other underlying pathologies and thus avoid amalgams during our clinical interviews. This is why we have chosen to use the term “toxic”, a much more neutral concept at the diagnostic level. Next, we will look at understanding the relational dynamics in which the child victim of a toxic parent is caught and propose tools that will allow these children, now adults, to get out of the hold they have been in, often since birth. In other words, how to become a tutor of an effective resilience for oneself?

Presentation of the concept of “toxic” versus “healthy” parent

What is a ‘toxic’ parent?

Let’s start with a simple example: a child is playing while running in the garden. He falls. He ‘naturally’ hurts himself. His parent, who is usually guilty in his role, will probably tell him that “it’s nothing and that it doesn’t hurt”. By verbalizing the incident in this way, the parent will convince the child that the pain he or she is feeling is less important than his or her desire to be well. The child, then internally dissociated between his painful feeling and his desire to live up to what he feels is important to his parent, will minimize his feeling of pain by swallowing, learning that, in the choice between what he feels for himself and what his parent tells him he should feel, it is always in his interest to conform to the adult’s perception if he wants to be loved.^{4,5} And we know that every child needs to feel loved. Later, as an adult, having been trained in the emotional confusion between what he feels about himself and what others feel about him, he will distrust his own feelings and will have difficulties in engaging in

relationships (love, friendship...) because he has never been allowed, in his childhood, to experience his own emotions and is very afraid of them. It is therefore difficult to talk about love when, as a parent, one allows oneself to criticise and impose one's parental opinion on the life choices of one's child, now an adult. However, what parent has not fallen into the trap of “I did this for his or her own good”, which has allowed them to legitimise their clumsy, not to say imposing and “abusive” action? Some become trapped in this trap and do not give up. In doing so, they become ‘toxic’ parents because they see their children's needs only through their own needs. From an analytical point of view, we can call this parental dynamic an “incestuous” attitude because it hinders separation by preventing the child from developing on his own and thus from gaining real autonomy. Suzan Forward (2002) uses the term ‘toxic’ to describe these failing parents: “Like a chemical toxin, the emotional damage inflicted by these parents spreads throughout the child's being, and as the child grows, the suffering grows with it.¹ What better word than “toxic” to describe parents who repeatedly inflict trauma, abuse, and criticism of all kinds on their children, and who, in most cases, continue to do so even after the children have become adults? Let's make a small parenthesis to better understand what characterizes incest (the analytical term used above). We shall therefore evoke in the incestuous an absence of fantasy: the incestuous is a matter of action. Racamier (2010) defines the incestuous as “that which in the individual and family psychic life bears the imprint of non-fantasized incest, without the genital forms necessarily being fulfilled “□□□□. But unlike incest, this is a non-genital act. For Racamier, incest is ultimately “a moral incest”. Consequently, authority, the establishment of limits and otherness are difficult for the child to recognise. According to Defontaine (2002),⁶⁻⁸ incest has its roots in the emotional deficiencies experienced in early childhood at the level of an unsatisfactory narcissistic seduction forming a wound, an infantile intrapsychic trauma. For Maurice Hurni and Giovanna Stoll (1996),⁹ authors of “La Haine de l'amour”, incest is considered to be the explanation of perversity. As far as the “toxic” parent is concerned,^{10,11} we can define him or her as a parent who is unable to meet the emotional needs of his or her child. He is defective and dysfunctional. They are brutal, physically, and psychologically violent. He is inappropriate in his behavior. He is also denigrating, devaluing, and overpowering. He can be dominant, manipulative, critical and resigned. They do not provide for the specific development of their child. On the contrary, this parent positions himself/herself as ‘all-powerful’. They destroy the child's self-esteem. He makes him responsible for his unhappiness and offers him neither stability nor a framework.

What is a “healthy” parent?

Arcoulin (2016) will describe a ‘healthy’ parent as a parent who respects their child, questioning themselves and discovering (sometimes even painfully) that, since their child is not them, they do not own them.¹⁰ They then agree that they cannot know everything that is ‘good for them’. In fact, he discovers that, in most cases, ‘loving your child’ means letting him do what he thinks is good for him, even if the parent is convinced, at some point, of the opposite. The important thing is that in stormy moments, when certain weaknesses may appear, the ‘healthy’ parent has the ability to make his or her child understand that it is only temporary, that everything passes and that, even if there are clouds, the sun is always present, behind. So a respectful parent, a ‘healthy’ parent, is a parent who is capable of making his or her child's needs a priority, of being able to offer support and relational support by respecting the choices of his or her child, who has become an adolescent, an adult. In other words, this parent is capable of questioning himself or herself, loving unconditionally, being present

without expecting anything in return, protecting, adapting, supporting and valuing his or her child.¹⁰ In this way, they are able to pass on confidence, self-esteem, ethical values and the strength to stand up to life's difficulties (the concept of resilience). They are also able to offer their child stability and constancy, to give them the authorizations they need to grow, develop and succeed. This parent also knows how to set a framework with limits and rules that the child needs to be reassured in its environmental structure. The ‘healthy’ parent loves their child as they are. They do not expect anything of them. They do not let them take on responsibilities that are not theirs. He lets him play his role as a child. He assures him that as long as he is there, he will look after him. The parent may also be worried about the child and needs to find the right balance between trust and worry so that the child feels both protected and supported. To enable a child or young person to grow up effectively, it is important to let them make their own mistakes. Therefore, let them learn from their own experiences. In conclusion, it is our selfish fear as parents that forces us to believe that acting “for the good of our child” is called loving them. Thus, to prevent him from making certain ‘mistakes’ is to rob him of the tool of his own growth, and this is what the ‘toxic’ parent cannot and will not see. He is convinced that his judgement of others is well-founded and imposes it. He therefore blackmails his child to love him, which translates into this false unconscious law: “I am necessarily wrong when I do not think or act according to the will of my parent whom I love.^{1,10} As a consequence of this relational dynamic, we can speak of a perverted process of parental intra-family loyalty, felt by the child as a non-authorization of self to the freedom of thinking and acting, he/she freezes by a possible self-recognition only by a feeling of indebtedness to his/her toxic parent(s).

What is a “narcissistic pervert”? How can we identify him?

What is a perverse narcissistic personality?

A narcissistic pervert is a person with a serious pathology. Anne-Clotilde Ziegler (2015) and Antoine Spath (2015) speak of “white psychosis,^{5,12} i.e., a psychosis in which there are no delusional or hallucinatory signs (Psychoanalytical concept, André Green and Jean-Luc Donnet, 1973).¹³ This person has narcissistic traits. Furthermore, Anne-Clotilde Ziegler and H el ene Vecchiali (2014) describe a narcissistic person as someone who is “addicted” to his or her own image.^{12,14} In the world around them, they will seek to be in the spotlight all the time, to be the center of attention. This is someone who will be so self-centered that he or she is singularly lacking in empathy for others. The other person is, deep down, a mirror that reflects his or her own image. The narcissist is painful and tiring. The pervert is toxic. He enjoys making the other suffer. He instrumentalizes the other and dehumanizes him. His functioning is therefore arbitrary and asocial.^{3,5} There are degrees of perversity: from the small common perversity (it is obvious that we all have some “small perversity” in us, at times) to the great perversity where the person goes as far as the act of barbarism, committing atrocious acts. What is dangerous in the pervert, according to Anne-Clotilde Ziegler, is that this character advances “masked” where he combines several hats.¹² The first mask is a mask of seduction. The pervert will try to show his victim the image that she expects that she wishes to meet. Behind this mask of seduction, there is a second mask that is more pernicious: it is the mask of “normality”. This means that the pervert will play the victim and it is the victim who will find excuses for his hurtful behaviour. The narcissistic pervert lies all the time. However, there are major differences in terms of frequency. Normal” people may lie once in a while, but will end up feeling ashamed or guilty for

doing so. In contrast, a narcissistic pervert will lie continuously and blatantly. For example, when we, as a good person, do something, we do it for a purpose, even if sometimes it is not a good thing to do. The narcissistic pervert, on the other hand, aims to take power over the other person in order to enslave them.^{4,5} The narcissistic pervert also has a very colorful emotional life. He alternates moments of euphoria when he is drunk with himself and moments of depression when he suffers a setback or humiliation, and it kills him. The emotion of the narcissistic pervert is a counterfeit emotion which is also called parasitic emotion or false emotion.¹² In this way, he uses the whole range of emotions in the blink of an eye depending on the situation that presents itself to him. The victim, on the other hand, does not question his or her identity and is able to say “I”, without any problem.⁵ It is difficult for them to imagine that the nature of their person (naturally possessing a quality, power, property without being aware of the value and importance of what they possess) could be the object of a desire coveted by the manipulator.

Different pathologies not to be confused with the perverse narcissistic personality: The notion of “narcissistic manipulative pervert” is a concept with low falsifiability, for which this article needs to distinguish from other underlying pathologies such as bipolar disorders, alexithymia, or paranoid disorders (listed in the DSM-V). Indeed, in order to avoid making amalgams or wild diagnoses and labelling anyone as a “narcissistic pervert”, Anne-Clotilde Ziegler has identified a few pathologies that are close to the behaviour of the pervert.¹²

Narcissistically manipulative pervert versus bipolar disorder: In bipolar disorder, the person alternates between so-called “manic” phases (euphoric and megalomaniac excitements) and “depressive” phases, which can sometimes lead to melancholy. In bipolar illness, between two crises, the person becomes ‘normal’ again and has the ability to criticise his or her crises. They realize the abnormality of their emotional state and what they have done during their episodes. In contrast, when a narcissistic pervert is drunk on himself, he is almost in phases that can resemble manic phases. He is driven by his emotions and when you try to get him to take a critical look, he defends himself tooth and nail.^{12,15}

Narcissistically manipulative pervert versus alexithymia: People with alexithymia are people who are unable to put their emotions into words. These people can appear very cold and are incapable of empathy. They have many difficulties in relationships. However, when challenged, in a skillful way, by addressing their thinking, they have the ability to understand that there is something they do not see. She will try, in therapy, to learn to understand what is happening to the other person. The narcissistic pervert, on the other hand, will defend his coldness. Indeed, behind this coldness, there is emptiness and he cannot come down from that.^{11,12,15,16}

Narcissistically manipulative pervert versus paranoid pathology: Paranoid pathology is defined in two components: Decompensated paranoids: people who are completely delusional. They can be identified quite quickly because they say implausible and incoherent things; The paranoid personality (before decompensation): these are people who may never decompensate. The paranoid personality is characterized by four traits that are quite similar to the traits of narcissistic perversion: distrust (inability to be close), pride, psychoridity (stating great principles, very clear and very tangible) and falsity of judgement (inability to perceive reality in its nuanced shades). What will make the difference is psychoridity. This means that the paranoid will be psychorid for himself and for others. This is completely pathological behaviour. As for the narcissistic pervert, he

will be psychorid as it suits him. He will give a version of things at certain times as it suits him. Then, the diametrically opposed version at another time because it suits him. He doesn’t mind the inconsistency of the two. Then, the paranoid and the narcissistic pervert are not on the same emotion and on the same fear. The paranoid is filled with terror. He fears that someone wants to harm him. He fears that he will be hurt. Whereas the narcissistic pervert is filled with jealousy and hostile envy.^{12,15}

How does a parent with a perverse narcissistic personality, also known as a “toxic parent”, behave with their children ?

Anne-Clotilde Ziegler maintains that there is a very particular and terrible relationship of control, without any seduction phase since the child is immediately locked into the state of parental omnipotence.¹² The ‘toxic’ parent will initially use the child as a narcissistic extension of himself. Indeed, the children will not be called upon to have a “normal” life, a serene psychological life, a true identity, a desire for self-fulfillment. Instead, they will be made to be a “stooge” for the parent. The child will be robbed of all his or her victories for the benefit of the parent, as an extension of his or her narcissistic reflection. More specifically, the child is even asked to perform activities not for the sake of fun but for the sake of winning (e.g. “winning is what matters!”) and to achieve the victories that the parent wants him to have based on what he himself has achieved or failed to achieve before. Furthermore, the “toxic” parent is envious, and this makes him/her harmful, toxic. He wants to destroy the other from what he has because he wants everything the other has. So, as soon as a child of a “narcissistic pervert” starts to succeed, to have friends, loves, to be beautiful, to grow up as his parent gets older, the “toxic” parent will try to put him down, to destroy him, to prevent him from succeeding by all possible manoeuvres. This can range from small, scathing, and destructive comments to fierce tantrums. He will sabotage his child’s every move. And finally, he will whine in victim mode about having children who are as bad as they are incompetent, which he himself has produced and which he will not acknowledge.^{2,10}

How does the “toxic and manipulative” parent put his or her child under control?

As we have already understood, the ‘toxic’ parent does everything possible to put those around him/her under control. From then on, we are interested in knowing how this toxic parental relationship dynamic is exercised on the child? The different phases set out below have been highlighted by different concepts according to different authors such as Marie Andersen, Isabelle Nazare- Aga, J. Arcoulin and Antoine Spath in order to define the different stages of the hold in order to better understand how this relational process of interactive domination of the “toxic” parent acts.^{2,5,10,17}

The honeymoon phase: For I. Nazare-Aga and J. Arcoulin, the “toxic” parent establishes a strong attachment and creates an emotional dependence with his child. They make you blind to what they are doing. He promises an extraordinary life where the other person will be pampered, adulated, praised.^{2,10} The relationship, through the ‘toxic’ parent, takes up all the space, occupies the mind constantly. To such an extent that the person under its influence can no longer think or breathe without it. This is an emotional dependency in which the ‘toxic’ parent presents himself as a saviour, but also as a victim, telling all his woes and painting an unflattering picture of all the people of whom he has been the poor misunderstood victim. In this way, the ‘toxic’ parent transmits his or her mental representations and emotional feelings to the child through narcissistic projections.

The phase of doubt and destabilization: When the ‘toxic’ parent feels that the emotional dependence is established, he or she begins the process of massive destruction: he or she devalues. The child is weakened. The child ends up believing that he or she is nothing and even less than nothing without the parent. The “toxic” parent establishes a feeling of dependence and “does everything for the other person”. Self-confidence, self-esteem, thinking skills and critical thinking skills are impaired. The child, under the influence of the parent, ends up doubting himself or herself and his or her sanity.^{2,10}

The isolation phase: The ‘toxic’ parent does not like the child’s environment, the child’s resources: friends, family, colleagues are not good and so the child will learn to avoid them in order to dodge the tantrums, insults, violence or threats of the ‘toxic’ parent or to please him/her (parental loyalty to satisfy the toxic narcissistic projections of the parent).^{2,10}

We then looked at the strategies used by the ‘toxic’ parent to consolidate their parental hold. We detail more than a dozen of them below:

Giving poisoned gift(s): In the case of the ‘toxic’ parent who gives a gift to his or her child, the situations can be very varied and paradoxical. This parent, apparently very generous, is in fact deeply thrifty and stingy. The gifts he or she gives will only be an instrument to induce a feeling of indebtedness, as if the child owes him or her debt. Gifts from a ‘toxic’ parent can be very poisonous indeed because they infiltrate the child’s sense of shared return, supported also by subtle but guilt-inducing speech. Then, the more important the gift, the stronger and easier the hold will be. These gifts are just another tool to control the choices that the ‘toxic’ parent thinks are best. These gifts also allow the ‘toxic’ parent to maintain his or her social image by showing off his or her great generosity to third parties and at the same time reminding the child of his or her actions. In the long term, this toxic process of parental domination and manipulation will put the child, now an adult, in a permanent tension with resentment of guilt and above all of responsibility. The more disproportionate the gift, the greater the hold it has on the other person.^{2,5,10}

Use flattery excessively: Flattery and constant and excessive compliments are also other forms of poisoned gifts. For Antoine Spath (2015), the ‘toxic’ parent in this case does not offer the child an object or a symbolic good, but inundates him with little phrases that flatter his ego. He or she strokes the child in the direction of the hair in order to get what he or she wants.⁵ The objective is, of course, to put the child ‘in his pocket’ while showing himself in the best light. How, then, can you deny your parent something if they hold you in such high regard (even if it is totally false). This excessive flattery is all the more unhealthy as it prepares the ground for the devaluation that will take place in a second phase. All the qualities that were first emphasized and valued will later be criticized and annihilated.

Instilling vagueness/blur: When communicating with a ‘toxic’ parent, the less clear they are, the more they can turn on the other person as they retain control over how the discussion is conducted. For a child, this continued vagueness can be difficult to live with. A child needs clear instructions, clear boundaries, simple requests that they can understand and respond to. The damage of ‘unclear’ communication with a child can be disastrous in the long term. Indeed, children who are kept in a blurred communication style may find it difficult to communicate afterwards. They feel very stressed about responding to a request or question that they feel they cannot understand and this is expressed in their speech by hesitations, absences, stammering and other language difficulties. The demands of the ‘toxic’ parent will always be equivocal and they will always blame the child for not

understanding them. The aim is to blur communication in both form and substance.^{5,17}

The double mind (paradoxical injunction): Double bind is a manipulative technique that involves delivering two opposing messages to a person, which then become a paradoxical injunction. This can drive the child ‘crazy’ as they do not know which injunction to respond to. The double bind can be done through words and also through attitudes.^{2,5,17} Here are some communicative examples: “You can go and play in the mud but don’t get dirty”, “You are the best in your class but 9/10 is not enough”, “Go to the nursery but don’t play”.

Playing with timing: the last minute or the art of presenting a fait accompli: The ‘toxic’ parent is good at making demands or changing the programme at the last minute. This allows them to maintain control and avoid those around them objecting to their decisions. He often presents others with a fait accompli. For him, the right of reply and free will are two things he wants to avoid at all costs. They are far too dangerous for him.^{2,10}

The constant change of opinion: The author has the art of never giving a precise opinion on an issue. And if he or she does express a ‘semblance’ of an opinion, it changes constantly. The ‘toxic’ parent will fiercely deny having changed his or her mind, even if it means becoming aggressive and blaming the child. This is done with an aplomb and assurance that often leaves the child dumbfounded: “I never said that” or “You misunderstood me”. This parent never questions himself. They are always right.⁵ As we understand it, the “toxic” parent manipulates his or her child according to his or her objectives, interests and life events that the family is going through. This “toxic” parent takes everyone with him/her whenever he/she wants when he/she sees himself/herself as a saviour and victim parent.

The art of preaching the false to know the true: For Spath, it is a matter of putting forward false, moderately true, or even distorted information, so that the other person (in this case the child and sometimes even the adult) starts to justify himself or herself or reveals what he or she might not have revealed if the question had been asked directly. The ‘toxic’ parent has a highly developed sixth sense and can ‘guess’ something. To confirm his impression, he will argue that he knows the truth. They will say that they have been told this or that, and the child will be at a loss as to whether what the ‘toxic’ parent is supporting is true. Chances are that the ‘toxic’ parent will put forward a distorted version, so the child will want to set the record straight. The child is thus trapped.

Playing with emotions: emotional blackmail: Implicitly, subtly, the ‘toxic’ parent will emotionally blackmail the child. The blackmail of suicide is the most blatant. Indeed, it is always done against a background of guilt. It puts the child of a ‘toxic’ parent in an unbearable position. In the long run, the child feels that he or she has to take charge of the parent, that he or she does not have the right to live his or her own life. They end up believing that if they live their life, it is to the detriment of their parent. The beliefs take hold and the child, now an adult, will forbid himself to be happy and to live his life. More precisely, it is the fulfilment of their own parent that takes precedence. Emotional blackmail is used by the ‘toxic’ parent to remind the child of his or her responsibility, his or her unconditional care and love for the parent, but also to reinforce the feeling of guilt that the child of the ‘toxic’ parent will find difficult to shake off. This strategy is directly related to commitment.⁵

Threats of all kinds

These are blackmail in disguise. These threats can be direct or indirect. They can be subtle or as big as a house. The ‘toxic’ parent

will do anything to achieve his or her ends. They create a situation of fear or anxiety in the child while offering a solution that will enable them to solve the problem and thus relieve the child’s anxiety □5□. In this way, he retains the role of all-powerful guarantor over the child.

The surprise effect

Antoine Spath will describe that the principle of the “surprise effect” is to create, in the other person (the child, the adolescent or the adult), a situation of shock which will generate a state of stupefaction, blockage and closure of thought.⁵ The “toxic” parent puts the child in a state halfway between stupor and anguish. The ‘toxic’ parent thus has free rein to ‘deliver’ a message that will alleviate the stupor and fear created in the child and which, consequently, will be more easily accepted.

Guilt and victimization: The ‘toxic’ parent poses as a victim. They turn the situation to their advantage so that their victim feels guilty and responsible for their misfortune. It is the constant repetition of guilt/victimization that makes it a dangerous tool. The child feels responsible for the misfortunes of the ‘toxic’ parent, because the parent has cleverly convinced the child that he or she is responsible. Guilt is exhausting. It is psychically exhausting. The person who feels guilty is constantly questioning himself or herself, wondering if everything the ‘toxic’ parent says is actually true. The mental fatigue builds up and the child, a victim, no longer has enough energy to analyze the situation objectively and realize that he or she is not responsible for all the wrongs that the parent accuses him or her of.⁵ Here are some examples: “If you don’t want to do me a favour, I’m going to be in a bad way, is that what you want for Mum?”, “I don’t want you to suffer like me from the other children’s mockery, you won’t do scouting, it’s for your own good”.

The illusion of free will: The ‘toxic’ parent makes it seem as if the other parent is making decisions for him/herself, without influence, but the reality is different. They use guilt, emotional blackmail, threats, victimisation and conditioning in a skilful way to direct their child’s choices. In this way, he gives the child the impression that he is the one who has decided, when this is not the case. Moreover, the child has unknowingly given in to the wishes of the toxic parent. The child, through his choice, also has the desire to be loved unconditionally.⁵

Repetition and conditioning: Repeating the same message or the same reproach over and over again establishes a form of “conditioning”. In psychology, this term is defined as “a set of associative operations by which we manage to provoke a new behaviour in man”. Indeed, the more we repeat a piece of information, the more it tends to be engrained (i.e. engraved) in the mind. A child who constantly hears from a toxic parent that “he sucks” will come to believe it. Eventually the nail gets hammered in. This tool is used to devalue and/or empower the “toxic” parent. When conditioning starts in the cradle, one can imagine its effectiveness.^{5,10}

The different phases reviewed above are the most common. They are all related to each other. They intertwine and overlap to ensure the power and survival of the ‘toxic’ parent. We can remember that guilt is used for emotional blackmail. Poisoned gifts are used for guilt. Flattery is used for poisoned gifts and so on. In conclusion, for Spath and Arcoulin, what we must keep in mind is that a ‘toxic’ parent is a parent who is incapable of giving his or her child the essential elements and foundations for education: self-esteem, unconditional love, everything that enables the child to build a secure attachment.^{5,10} Through our readings, we understand the importance of the psychological, cognitive and behavioural risks and damage caused by a toxic parental interactional dynamic, a feeling of efficacy and low

self-esteem, a difficulty in emotional regulation, dysfunctional and blurred mental representations, and a difficulty in personal fulfilment. In order for the child, now an adult, to be able to completely free himself from the hold of his “toxic” parent, he will have no other choice than to set up a regulation of limited distances if possible or to cut off ties with him. Unfortunately, a break in the parental relationship is sometimes essential with a ‘toxic’ parent.

What are the characteristics of a child of a “toxic” parent?

There are signs that allow us to observe certain behaviours as well as particular character traits in a child who is under the influence of a “toxic” parent. This chapter will enable us to observe some of these signs, to understand them and translate them into behavioural characteristics:

The child victim doesn’t show emotions and feeling; For J. Arcoulin, it is a survival strategy for the child and not a character trait. More precisely, it is a defence mechanism, a self-protection mechanism. When the child is faced with a parent who uses the slightest emotion, the slightest weakness, the slightest frown against him or her, the child quickly understands that it is necessary to show as little as possible. The ‘toxic’ parent will quickly exploit the slightest weakness in the child. They will use the slightest sign to do harm. However, this self-control makes the children of ‘toxic’ parents adults resistant to stress and dominant in their non-verbal communication. They are seen as reliable and solid when things fall apart. They can keep a cool head in many situations. Nevertheless, they need to find a way to get their pent-up emotions out. The difficulty in evacuating emotional overflow prevents the regulation of our emotions and thus a return to a “normal” mood. Thus the child learns with a “toxic” parent to contain and deny his or her own personal emotions because only those of the parent have absolute recognition and veracity. Their sensitivity is often underestimated and they are often seen as insensitive people. This is only an illusion because this “insensitivity” is only a mask that they had to put on at some point to preserve themselves. One might think that they have become “a-lexi-emotional” adults, whereas deep down they are hypersensitive and suffer from it.

He is very careful to ensure consistency between words and actions: A ‘toxic’ parent, according to J. Arcoulin, has the art of selling dreams, of throwing smoke in the eyes, of making promises that, of course, they do not keep. Everything is good to sow confusion, to lead the child’s mind into confusion. And this sometimes even creates a climate of suspicion.¹⁰ The child will learn very quickly to validate or not the words of his parent with his friends or entourage. They will learn to pay attention to the consistency of words and actions, to the faithfulness of the different versions of the same story. If he finds stability elsewhere, the child will quickly develop a critical and analytical mind. These children of ‘toxic’ parents are often sceptical and distrustful. They are cautious and give the benefit of the doubt to others.

He’s used to taking it in stride: A characteristic related to apparent behavioural insensitivity. Indeed, since children of ‘toxic’ parents quickly understand that it is not in their interest to show their emotions, they seem to take what happens to them in stride. Arcoulin will describe these children as having a great capacity to remain unaffected by events. Indeed, they can take insults, blows, and reproaches without showing any sign of reaction. They may appear to be self-effacing, even though internally they are in meltdown □10□. These children are often quite resilient individuals, able to shut themselves away in their own bubble to protect themselves from the destructive onslaught

of their ‘toxic’ parent. These children also tend to face situations alone, relying on no one. These people find it difficult to express their emotional feelings. Their bodies may end up manifesting these traumas in the form of illness or physical discomfort.⁵ For example, this can manifest itself in a wide range of psychosomatic illnesses such as stomach ache, headache, muscle pain, back pain, language disorders and psychomotor development.

He very often minimizes what happens to him: These children, now adults, have learned not to express their emotions. They take it in stride by minimising what happens to them. Indeed, with each problem, they have heard the ‘toxic’ parent tell them that their situation will always be less serious than what they are experiencing or have experienced themselves. However, not dramatising and relativising are not necessarily bad things for J. Arcoulin. Arcoulin. Indeed, it can give these children a certain resistance to painful life events. It can be an effective resilience strategy to cope with life events. The problem lies in the total lack of recognition of the suffering and difficulty experienced by the child of this ‘toxic’ parent.^{2,10}

The victim feels that he/she is subject to “impostor syndrome”: Impostor syndrome is a form of constant self-doubt that consists of attributing one’s successes, accomplishments and growth to everything and everyone but oneself. The idea that their skills and values may be responsible for their successes does not even cross their minds. These children think that what happens to them is not the result of their qualities and hard work. They live in fear of being found out, in fear that those around them will realise the deception. A brief aside for the so-called “high potential” children for whom this feeling is also strongly felt in a natural way. Indeed, these people affected by this syndrome have facilities in certain areas. They then draw the conclusion that what they accomplish is not due to their skills. So, if they are children of ‘toxic’ parents, the feeling of being an imposter is increased tenfold.^{10,18} Success, unlike failure, is not recognised between the child and the ‘toxic’ parent.

He is also prone to the “self-didact syndrome”: This syndrome is closely related to the “impostor syndrome”. It consists in storing up information and knowledge on one’s own, through reading, hours of surfing the net, lectures and any other source of information. This tendency serves to fill the feeling of a lack of knowledge and skills. However, it also tends to reinforce their feeling of imposture (just like high potential children or adults). These people are never convinced of their competence. This feeling is born out of the fact that the ‘toxic’ parent has repeatedly made them understand, subtly or not, that they are no good, that they will never amount to anything. No matter what they do, the children of ‘toxic’ parents will not find favour in their eyes. These children tend to do sabotage work when they are victims of the projection of the toxic parent’s own frustrations. These children also have the capacity to question themselves.¹⁰

The victim is always looking for unconditional love: A “toxic”, manipulative parent is incapable of loving his or her child in a benevolent manner. Anne-Clotilde Ziegler will say that their narcissistic fault line is too large¹². He struggles with his lack of love for himself, with the emotional deficiency caused by his parent(s) who loved him conditionally. He has therefore not learned to love unconditionally. For J. Arcoulin, as long as the child complies and behaves as he/she wishes, he/she is in the “good books” of the “toxic” parent¹⁰. But if the child, now an adult, decides to use his or her free will, critical mind or any other capacity to challenge the parent, this triggers conflicts where the child is considered ungrateful. A normal parent loves his child for what he is. They give love without seeking to receive it. By loving their child unconditionally, they give

them permission to love themselves as they are. A ‘toxic’ parent does exactly the opposite. The child of a ‘toxic’ parent learns very quickly to adapt, to keep a low profile, to be the perfect child, to respond to his parent’s wishes. They do this with one goal in mind: to be loved. They believe that love is earned and is a form of reward for adapted behaviour. The child of a “toxic” parent will therefore tend to accept the unacceptable in his relationships because he has not integrated the fact that he is loveable for what he is. They do not even imagine that they can be loved for who they are. That he has enough quality to be a lovable person and that, even with his faults, he has the right to be loved. This child of a ‘toxic’ parent is often chasing something he or she will never catch.^{10,12}

He suffers from emotional dependence: This dependence, for J. Arcoulin is the consequence of the fact that the child is constantly seeking to be loved. As an emotional dependent, the child or adult puts his or her needs, expectations and happiness in the hands of the outside. This leads to low self-esteem, fear of loneliness, fear of abandonment and rejection, not feeling worthy of being loved, constant need for approval from others, fear of displeasing, seeking to have their needs met by and through others. In order to be loved, the emotionally dependent person does things that are totally at odds with him or herself and their values □ 10 □

What about the child of ‘toxic’ parent(s) facing himself?

We have seen how a child of a ‘toxic’ parent develops and relates to those around him/her in the previous chapter. What about the relationship of the child of a ‘toxic’ parent to himself or herself? What feelings do they have inside?

The child tends to feel guilty: The “toxic” and manipulative parent, according to I. Nazare-Aga, is a master of guilt-tripping, which he uses to get rid of his responsibilities and to pass them on to someone else.² The objective is to victimise oneself in order to make the victim accountable. Indeed, guilt is a feeling of “omnipotence”. Feeling guilty means having the impression that the other person will not manage without us, that we are responsible for his or her actions, failures and successes, and that he or she is therefore not responsible. This creates a “guilt-ridden” relational dependency. In this perspective, guilt prevents each person from taking responsibility for his or her own actions and only his or her own (not to be confused with the fact of questioning oneself, which is a quality). What is important, according to J. Arcoulin, is not to carry what does not belong to us and to learn to ask ourselves, if we feel guilty about something, if it is indeed a responsibility that belongs to us.¹⁰

He also has the fear of disappointing his parent: This fear is linked to the “over-adaptability” and “the quest for unconditional love” that we mentioned earlier. Over-adapting’ means doing everything, to the detriment of one’s own needs and desires, to conform, meet expectations and please those around them. This has become a vital need for the child of a ‘toxic’ parent. They learn to forget and ignore themselves completely. Very early on, the child will understand the injunction to “be perfect”, otherwise it will provoke reactions of denial, rejection, violence, devaluation, blackmail and guilt on the part of the “toxic” parent. These children and adults will be sensitive to criticism, to what people think of them, to the feedback they receive. They will want to please everyone in order to get positive feedback and feel ‘loved’. They will be very attentive to anything that proves to them that they are appreciated. They will have difficulty saying “no” and setting limits.^{2,10}

This child is often hypervigilant: When we talk about hypervigilance, we have to think of post-traumatic stress disorder. PTSD is an

anxiety disorder that manifests itself following one or more events experienced as traumatic.¹⁹ It is a psychological reaction that occurs after a situation in which one’s physical and/or psychological integrity has been threatened and which often leaves an emotional, physical and psychological mark. It is called a “traumatic memory”. Later, when something reminds one of this experience, physical tensions arise: anxiety, discomfort. When confronted with stimuli reminiscent of the previous experience, the brain and body go into a state of vigilance to avoid reliving the event. These phenomena are manifested by reliving (intrusive images or flashbacks of the event, nightmares), avoidance and neurovegetative reactivations.²⁰ In children, there may be immature (regressive) behaviours (e.g. child being ‘clinging’, ‘clinging’ or having difficulty falling asleep), aggression, games or drawings that repeatedly re-enact the traumatic event or themes associated with it.¹⁹ A hypervigilant child (or adult) is constantly at the highest level of threat, even if there is no real objective evidence to feel in danger. Everything is subject to negative anticipation. These people, children and adults, suffering from hypervigilance may feel lonely, abandoned, stressed, misunderstood, irritable, tired, lost, constantly in danger. They doubt everything. They may have insomnia. They may have difficulty concentrating and very often have a very low self-esteem: they think they are useless, stupid, unlivable, ashamed and feel guilty about everything. This is one of the most dramatic consequences that children of a toxic parent can experience.^{2,10,20}

He also tends to be anxious: Anxiety is the logical consequence of hypervigilance. How can one not develop anxiety when faced with a parent who restricts, punishes (too) often, belittles, and makes a child bear responsibilities that he or she does not have to bear, asks J. Arcoulin¹⁰ The child (or adult) of a ‘toxic’ parent is afraid of many things: not being liked, doing something wrong, making a mistake, behaving inappropriately, being scolded and/or punished, not being appreciated. He tends to anticipate everything. He adapts and does everything in his power to meet the expectations of his “toxic” parent when it is all in vain. The “toxic” parent, by definition, will never be satisfied because his mechanism prevents him from recognising the qualities of the other. The ‘toxic’ parent puts so much pressure on the child that the child can never release the tension.^{5,10}

And also, he tends to brood: Between hypervigilance and anxiety comes rumination. The child learns to anticipate, to doubt, to think (too much), to reflect, to replay the scenario dozens of times, to regret... to be sure of not being wrong. They constantly ask themselves if they did the right thing by replaying in their head the film of a situation or a discussion with their ‘toxic’ parent, analysing and dissecting. As an adult, it is the same cognitive process of the vicious circle of maintaining anxiety through rumination. He replayed everything in a loop, wondering if he was crazy, if the problem was his own, if his ‘toxic’ parent wasn’t right in the end. Finally, his thoughts are directed and devoted to everything that is happening around and with the ‘toxic’ parent. This is a consequence of the hold, insofar as the ‘toxic’ parent infiltrates and invites himself into the victim’s thoughts. The ‘toxic’ parent makes sure that the child or adult can no longer think for themselves, that they doubt and feel guilty. It is therefore difficult not to fall into ruminations.¹⁰ Ultimately, what maintains this negative feedback interactional mechanism is explained here by the fact that the child cannot allow himself not to satisfy his ‘toxic’ parent.

The child is consumed by a sense of injustice: Everything a ‘toxic’ parent says (about their needs, desires, vision of things) or does is based on them and them alone. They never question themselves. He puts his responsibilities on others, makes them feel guilty. He does not take into account the opinion of anyone. He condemns, judges, criticises, devalues at all costs. Nothing holds water. Nothing is fair. Nothing is

balanced or honest. Nothing is rational and objective. Everything is always done, thought out, decided according to the ‘toxic’ parent. A child of a ‘toxic’ parent does not really have a childhood because he or she grows up too fast and takes on responsibilities too early. He is not lucky enough to have two ‘healthy and loving’ parents. He has had to sacrifice himself for the benefit of his “toxic” parent and this parent has never taken him into account, his needs, however basic they may be. With a ‘toxic’ parent, the child will have to choose between truth and peace, between justice and freedom, between acknowledging his or her suffering and rebuilding. To have a ‘toxic’ parent is to mourn the loss of what is just and true in order to taste freedom and peace. This is deeply unfair and painful □2,10□. In other words, the child finds himself in a real existential dilemma and battlefield; respecting myself and daring to say no to being used by my ‘toxic’ parent (rejection of the other) or staying in his good graces by keeping his sense of belonging to his family to the detriment of my personal desires, feelings and projects (rejection of the self).

The child has a profound lack of recognition: The child of a ‘toxic’ parent lacks many things. We can speak of attentional and emotional deficiencies. Indeed, such a parent tries to destroy his or her child by all means. In a way, they prevent the child from existing. The moods of the child of the “toxic” parent or of the adult he or she will become are rejected. Their needs are ignored. Their emotions are used against them or even denied. His personality is annihilated. Nothing the child or adolescent or even the adult does exists. Simply put, nothing is recognised, encouraged, loved or respected. He or she does not get any compliments or appreciation, let alone a minute’s attention. This need for recognition also comes from the fact that everything the child of the ‘toxic’ parent does is in the hope of being loved. The child of a toxic parent needs a lot of recognition and has difficulty believing the signs of it, since he or she has learned to be suspicious and to interpret signs of recognition as a sign of manipulation.^{2,10}

The child has low self-esteem: In reading all the above, the self-esteem of the child or the adult he/she has become is flayed. All the weapons used by the “toxic” parent are aimed at destroying the very essence of their prey (spouse or child). Studies show that parents who ridicule their children, humiliate or punish them when they do not succeed in something, ask too much of them and do not care about them, have a very negative impact on their self-esteem.^{2,10}

He is losing his identity and feels like is nothing

By being told that “he is nothing”, by feeling that his needs are less important than those of his “toxic” parent, by being reduced to serving the interests of his parent, the child of the “toxic” parent does not know who he really is. Indeed, as Arcoulin explains, the ‘toxic’ parent does not take his child into account, because his priority is himself.¹⁰ Their goal is to keep power and their child in their grip, to make them a puppet serving their cause and their narcissistic flaw, throughout their life. As a result, the construction of the child’s identity can be difficult.

The child of “toxic” parent(s) facing his/her parent

After having gone through all the ways in which the child, who has grown up with a ‘toxic’ parent, in an unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship established by the latter, can behave in relation to those around him, in relation to himself, but when he is confronted with his ‘toxic’ parent, how does he react?

The child, a victim, feels responsible for his parent: Indeed, the ‘toxic’ parent has made his child bear the responsibilities that he was unable to assume. He then justifies this transfer of responsibility by invoking education:²¹ such and such a burden will be of great use

to his child later on. Sometimes it is more subtle. The child learns to take on things that a child should never have to do. The child is very often the guarantor of many things, such as morality, family management, accounts, food stocks, the credibility of the parent, sleep, bills, finances. The child learns to play the role of guarantor in the eyes of others: he or she nods when the stories told are true and frowns when they deviate from the truth. These children are actually broad-shouldered adults. They can handle a lot of things at once. They are resourceful and quick-witted.¹⁰ Similarly, we can more commonly speak of parentification when the parent(s) expect their child to take on, at certain times, a caretaker role for their own parent by assuming responsibility for tasks inappropriate to their real age. The child raised by a ‘toxic’ parent often becomes parentified. By definition, parentification is a process whereby a child is made to take on responsibilities disproportionate to his or her age.¹ They become, in a sense, the parent of their parent.²¹ If parentification is transient and recognised, it is not harmful to the child. The child, faced with the distress of his parent, will want to make up for or repair the wounds of his ‘toxic’ parent. The latter will use guilt, emotional blackmail and even suicide blackmail and its position as a victim to obtain the help and support of the child who falls into the trap.^{1,21}

He protects the parent (especially from himself): The child feels responsible and is afraid to leave the (toxic) parent to his fate, because he knows that he is a bad manager, that he will let himself go, that he will put himself in danger, and that there are many other possibilities. He not only wants to protect him from others, but more importantly, he wants to protect himself from himself and his bad choices. Sometimes he will even ‘cover for him’ to protect him, torn between decisions he should never make. Finally, he comes to believe that if he is no longer there to help his (toxic) parent, his life will fall apart, and he will get into unbelievable and dangerous situations. He thinks that he is invested with the mission of being a “guardian” for his parent and feels morally obliged to be the latter’s guarantor and caretaker.

This child, a victim, very often feels indebted to this parent: The Judeo-Christian culture, siding with the “toxic” parent, the child (now an adult) hears recurrently from those around him/her, phrases such as: “yes, but it’s still your father/mother”. The implication is: “Whatever he/she does, you must respect him/her”; “do not cut off contact, be there for him/her and put up with what he/she does”. Arcoulin will say that the tools used by the ‘toxic’ parent to establish their hold and power, between guilt, victimisation, emotional blackmail and double bindings, make it difficult for a child of a ‘toxic’ parent not to feel indebted.¹⁰

He has a conflict of loyalty: For the children of ‘toxic’ parents, who have also become adults, it is not uncommon for them to blame themselves for hurting the parent opposite (the healthy parent) when they could not do otherwise. The conflict of loyalty in which the child finds itself (or perhaps still does, as an adult) is a consequence of the hold of the ‘toxic’ parent. The child cannot see through it, cannot fight, cannot ‘favour’ the other parent because the child’s deepest nature is to be loved by the ‘toxic’ parent. It is a natural reflex, no one can blame him for this and certainly not the (now adult) child himself.^{2,10} This problematic interactional process can also extend to social relationships, to interpersonal networks through which the adult child repeats this over-adapted interactional mode and loyalty caused, among other things, by this deficient need for love and recognition of social belonging.

He is often over-adapted: As mentioned earlier, building up with a ‘toxic’ parent is a bit like going out to sea without knowing the weather. You are never prepared for what is going to happen. It’s dealing with instability, inconsistency, constant change, blackmail,

guilt, lies, fabrications and brainwashing. It is impossible to satisfy the ‘toxic’ parent, no matter what you do. As soon as the child masters a skill, the ‘toxic’ parent will constantly destabilise it. However, the child will always try to make the ‘toxic’ parent like him or her and make him or her proud. The child has a need for parental and family recognition. Thus, for J. Arcoulin, the survival strategy put in place by the child under the influence of a “toxic” parent is “over-adaptation”.¹⁰ As long as the child (even as an adult) has not understood that he or she has the right to respect himself or herself, that he or she should not meet all the expectations of others to the detriment of his or her own needs, there is a good chance that he or she will always be extremely helpful. These people are incredibly adaptable, as they have become accustomed to having to perform better than chameleons.

How can a child of a “toxic” parent rebuild after living under their influence?

It is a relief to know that anyone who has lived under the influence of a “toxic” parent or spouse can recover. The work of reconstruction may or may not be long. The most important thing is to know that each person, each situation has its own rhythm and that it is important to respect it. Each day, on this path of reconstruction and liberation, lifts the weight of the toxicity and harmfulness of the toxic parent. To do this, there are certain steps to be taken, such as symbolic mourning for a parent who is still alive. The person is helped to recognise his or her personal suffering, which has been buried for a long time, and which has been stifled within the person. The patient learns to let go of the idealized or functional parent and the limits of possible interactions. There is also a reflection to be made on the relational chains to be broken and the beliefs to be re-evaluated and above all, there is love to be learned to give to oneself and for oneself. It is important, in this process, to be accompanied by a therapist who is informed, even trained, on this issue and who, above all, understands it. To accompany you on this path □5,10,14□ we therefore propose some avenues, some thoughts, perhaps some solutions. Everyone has the choice to find what they need by asking themselves.

Personal reconstruction: what are the losses that a child of a “toxic” parent must learn to make?

Griving for living parent: Indeed, for J. Arcoulin, we should not expect shared love to fill the void of absence.¹⁰ If there is love, it is a one-way street and it comes mainly from the child (or the child who has become an adult) that we are. What must be filled are the voids of the deficiency of this parent who is as toxic as the deadliest of poisons. Cutting ties with this ‘toxic’ parent is vital for the survival of the child as much as for the child who has become the adult.

Mourning the relationship: Learning to mourn the loss of what the child had a right to expect, of the efforts he or she made to make things ‘better’, of this bond that was important to him or her because it was his or her parent, or at least it was supposed to be. A relationship has to be worked on, maintained and cherished, explains J. Arcoulin (2016).

The mourning of hope: The child (now an adult) took a ‘long time’ to admit, to understand, to see that his parent was toxic. This is because this child still had the hope of changing him or her by relying on the child’s ability to question, notes J. Arcoulin.¹⁰ Driven and inhabited by common sense and hope, the child of “toxic” parent(s) cannot imagine that a person he or she considers intelligent cannot have the same common sense as him or her, that he or she continues to deny the obvious.

Mourning the unconditional love of the “toxic” parent: The child who has become an adult will have to learn to admit that a parent may not love his or her child unconditionally and/or may not love him or

her at all, explains Hélébe Vecchiali.¹⁴ Indeed, our Judeo-Christian society in which we live does not give us the right to think this. This complicates this reality even more. Should we forgive or not?

Mourning the wounded parts of oneself: There are many wounds. The ego suffers. The child has learned to build himself by trying to dodge bullets, but taking them all the same. Every little piece of him or her that has been hit by this ‘toxic’ parent needs to be bandaged and healed. These children lose little pieces of themselves as they grow up. Or they do not develop certain aspects of their personality to over-adapt and be loved.¹⁰ These parts, according to Hélébe Vecchiali,¹⁴ will be able to blossom if an awareness is created and the (adult) child gives himself the necessary authorisations.

The mourning of what the parent is not: The child (and the adult he or she has become) must learn to accept what the toxic parent ‘is’ and also ‘what he or she is not’. Indeed, according to Arcoulin, for this mourning to take place, it is important that the child of a ‘toxic’ parent gives up the search for what he or she will never receive from his or her parent.¹⁰

Mourning for the environment that is still under control: When the adult wants to break the ties with his or her “toxic” parent, unfortunately, and this is often the case, the rest of the entourage remains under the influence. Under these conditions, the child (and even the adult he or she has become) of the “toxic” parent feels even more alone. Especially since, in addition to mourning the loss of their parent, they must also mourn the loss of their siblings (if they have any), their family (cousins, uncles and aunts, etc.) and their friends. He will be misunderstood and judged. He will be made to feel guilty and often rejected. Sometimes, “cutting ties” with the “toxic” parent also means “cutting ties” with the other parents (the “healthy” parent, the family, friends, etc.) who are still under the influence.¹⁰

The mourning of recognition: According to J. Arcoulin, this involves several acknowledgements: acknowledgement of the child’s suffering, acknowledgement of everything he or she does to be loved by his or her parent, acknowledgement of all the injustices and atrocities he or she experiences or has experienced (abuse, incestuous climate, etc.).¹⁰ The ‘toxic’ parent will never give this recognition. If they do, it will be disguised and always accompanied by a “yes, but I have suffered more than you”.

The mourning of justice: It can be considered as the mourning of all mournings because if all the points mentioned above have injustice in common, when the ‘toxic’ parent is not punished for his or her actions (abuse, psychological mistreatment, when the entourage is blind and condemns the wrong person (often the child or the adult for his or her positions),¹⁰ reaching the end of this mourning process is not simple, according to her. It is important that the child (or the adult he/she has become) of a ‘toxic’ parent learns to be patient and kind to him/herself. Everyone has their own pace and this should be respected. Even if for some these grief processes seem insurmountable, the important thing is to never admit defeat. One day, someone (a therapist, a friend...), a sentence, a word will make the click.

Beliefs that should be cleansed

The ‘toxic’ parent soon teaches his or her child beliefs, preconceived notions about his or her personal opinions, values and perceptions in order to establish his or her control. But these beliefs do not belong to the child or to the adult he or she has become. They belong to the ‘toxic’ parent who put them there. The ‘toxic’ parent has used all these favourite tools as a weapon of mass destruction to convince the child of his or her supposed mediocrity (emotional blackmail, double bindings, projection of the toxic parent’s own faults

onto the child) since birth.^{1,10} Since then, the child has developed a whole series of beliefs, not only those linked to experiences with the “toxic” parent that are anchored in the child, but also those that have developed by deduction. These beliefs have become totally limiting in the construction of the child’s psychological and developmental growth. According to J. Arcoulin, there are two types of beliefs: limiting beliefs that block the child in his or her achievement and prevent him or her from having self-confidence (e.g. “I don’t deserve to succeed”, “I’ll never make it”, “no one can be trusted”, “I don’t have the right to say no”, “it’s still my father/mother”, “I have to put other people’s desires before my own”. ...); and the helping ones (“I am capable of achieving my goals”, “I will get through anything”, “I have the right to be happy in all areas”...) which push the child, give him/her confidence and support him/her. The limiting beliefs are often fed by those around them. Who said that being a parent gives you the right to mistreat your child? Who says that a child is obliged to accept physical or psychological abuse because the parent is the perpetrator? Who gives legitimacy to the limiting words of the ‘toxic’ parent? So how can we get rid of these beliefs? First of all, it is important to identify the belief anchored in our mind. Secondly, learn to recognise the survival strategies that have been put in place: this is an adaptive capacity that the child or the child who has become an adult creates to adapt to the situation. Finally, to see what quality this survival strategy has enabled the child of the ‘toxic’ parent to develop. For example: availability, friendliness, sincere feelings, etc. This allows us to see the good side of things when a negative experience can be transformed into a positive one. It also allows the child of the “toxic” parent to become aware of his or her resources, value and qualities.¹⁴

The resilience: Boris Cyrulnik defines resilience as the ability to get back to living normally or as well as possible after a trauma. This notion is one of the keys to reconstruction. He identifies different ways to help a person increase their resilience depending on the moment. There are three moments: before the trauma, during the trauma and after the trauma.²²

Before the trauma: As a therapist or as a member of the family of a child (or a child who has become an adult) of a “toxic” parent, we can help the child to understand that he or she can count on other people to help. Indeed, for Cyrulnik, the quality of the bonds formed is more important than the person with whom the child forms them.²² Therefore, if a parent is toxic, it is not necessary to leave him or her in the child’s landscape. As long as the child finds ‘resilience tutors’ along the way, he or she can create links and a social fabric, and then start the resilience process on sufficiently fertile ground. What the child needs is to feel secure and safe. The ‘toxic’ parent cannot provide this. The people around them can. It is important that the child can become the actor of this social link that he needs and ask for help.

During the trauma: When a traumatic event occurs, the person affected may feel overwhelmed and feel that he or she will never get over it. It is important to remain hopeful and to always tell yourself that there are solutions, that it will be alright, that it is possible to get through it. Those around us must reaffirm their support and benevolence, be present and supportive and also encourage, give confidence and repeat tirelessly that the necessary resources are within each of us. It is necessary to come out of isolation and avoid ruminations by surrounding oneself with good people with whom one can put words to one’s ailments. In the case of toxic parents, the aggressions (in the broadest sense of the term) are committed within the family itself. B. Cyrulnik explains that in the case of intra-family trauma, there are two scenarios: one in which the child was able to form ties before the trauma (in this case, resilience will be easier); and the other in which the child was not able to form ties before the

trauma, and here things become more complicated.²² The child (or the adult he or she has become) of the ‘toxic’ parent will become alert, hypervigilant, and will feel constantly in danger even though there is no longer any danger. Everything will become traumatic since everything is aggression. The child (or this adult) will develop a state of distrust, anxiety, emotional anaesthesia (a-lexi-emotional).

After the trauma

If we are faced with a child or adult who is not expressing themselves, it is important to tell them that we know it is difficult for them to speak at the moment and that it is not serious. When the time comes, we will be there for them. The children of a ‘toxic’ parent need a reassuring presence. It is important to make sense of what has happened and is happening to the child of a ‘toxic’ parent. There are simple things that can be done to increase resilience: having a good social network. The social and relational fabric is an important element in the factors that promote resilience. The certainty of being able to count on loved ones or resource persons (such as a shrink, for example) is a power. Increasing self-confidence, when it has been destroyed by a ‘toxic’ parent, is not easy. It is up to the adult he has become to (re)build it. Reading subjects and doing exercises on this theme helps to rebuild. Teaching the child or adult to reconnect to his or her own inner resources. Having a “toxic” parent will have allowed the child to develop a lot of survival strategies. We can help them to see these as resources and accompany them to do an exercise to clean up their beliefs (see above). It is important to teach them to always see the glass as half full rather than the other way around. The capacity for resilience will depend on how we look at things. All of this is to make people aware that we all have the possibility to act and change the way we look at things. The more connections we have made, the more capacity we have to initiate the resilience process. And even if you are alone, all is not lost. For H el ene Vecchiali, we have other resources such as writing (keeping a diary), art therapy, art... which help with resilience and getting out of the grip of a ‘toxic’ parent.¹⁴ As an adult, they may also seek out a discussion group where they can share their suffering and find an echo. Desensitisation or affect reduction techniques such as EMDR,²³ energy psychology techniques (TCM, EFT, TAT, etc.), cognitive-cognitive approaches (e.g., the use of the “TAT”), and the use), trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural approaches,²⁴ Sensory-Motor Therapy,²⁵ Somatic Experiencing²⁶ and of course the many affect reduction techniques used in hypno-analysis or hypnosis, EFT, Lifespan Integration²⁷ are interesting tools for people²⁰ who have suffered trauma. We are all the first actors of our reconstruction.

Conclusion

In this book, we have seen that the relational toxicity in which the victim (child or adult) of a ‘toxic’ parent is caught is a real scourge that can prevent them from building themselves. Indeed, our various psychoanalytical and systemic readings have revealed to us that emotional deficiencies, poor self-esteem and feelings of guilt are wounds that will mark the child and the adult for life and thus create or not a risk of a relational pathology. In this respect, we were struck by the similarities between different disabling psychiatric pathologies such as bipolar disorders, alexithymia, paranoid pathology versus the narcissistic and perverse behaviours of the “toxic” parent’s personality. Indeed, the notion of “narcissistic manipulative pervert”, like other concepts such as “burn out”, has become a “boilerplate” concept with low falsifiability, for which this article needed to distinguish beforehand with other underlying pathologies and thus avoid amalgams in clinical interviews. For this reason, the term “toxic” was chosen as it is a more “neutral” concept. Consequently,

these disorders should not be confused, in order to discern what is pathological and what is toxic, and thus avoid any amalgam in the diagnostic proposal during the consultation.

Through this book, we have sought to understand: how does the “toxic” parent put his or her child under his or her control? Through this first approach, we note different relational phases set up by the ‘toxic’ parent: the honeymoon phase, the phase of doubt and destabilisation, isolation, poisoned gifts, excessive flattery, instilling vagueness, double bind, constant change of opinion, timing, repetition and conditioning, threats of all kinds, the surprise effect, guilt and finally victimisation. These different phases are all linked to each other by dysfunctional cognitive patterns, behavioural networks to ensure the ‘toxic’ parent’s power and survival. In a second approach, we discussed the psychological and cognitive-behavioural characteristics of a child of a ‘toxic’ parent. It appeared that in general, it is difficult for the child to show emotions and feelings. The child is very careful to ensure consistency between words and actions. They may also suffer from different syndromes (impostor and self-taught). And unfortunately, they are constantly searching for that unconditional love that will be denied them by their “toxic” parent. The risk is to develop a post-traumatic syndrome which will lead him to be in a state of constant hypervigilance often developing anxiety disorders (rumination, obsessive-compulsive disorders, ...). Often plagued by a sense of injustice, they will also suffer from a profound lack of recognition and self-esteem. He will often have this feeling of loss of identity and the impression of “being nothing”. In reaction, he will tend to feel responsible for this parent (parentification) and will protect him (especially from himself). More precisely, there is a form of accountability (debt) registered towards this parent activated by the remarks of the entourage. The conflict of loyalty and the over-adaptation are of course present. In order to try, in spite of everything, to respond to all this, the child or the adult that he or she has become, will have to learn to make relational mourning: the mourning of a parent who is still alive (a parent who does not consider his or her child in his or her personal identity), the mourning of the relationship, the mourning of hope, the mourning of unconditional love, the mourning of recognition, the mourning of justice... But above all, in order to get out of this toxic relationship mode, they will have to learn to clean up certain beliefs that have been anchored and fed by those around them: facing limiting beliefs in order to finally create helping beliefs. And then comes resilience: the ability to bounce back and live normally after these traumatic events. Finally, we would like to insist on the postulate that as long as there are life forces, any trauma (psychological, physical) is curable, no matter how sordid its content. We now know that brain plasticity allows neuronal networks to be reshaped in infinite ways²⁰. Children and adults who are victims of a “toxic” parent must never forget that this parent only has the power they give him/her.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Funding

None.

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