

Emotional Inheritance: An Enabling Concept for Separated Males and their Children

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ABSTRACT PRESENTED

Work with fathers experiencing separation crisis in both community and prison settings, has highlighted a prominent, though poorly recognised source of abiding fear and stress for such clients. This article seeks to define aspects of this source of difficulty, which is arguably related to disruptions to a phenomenon that will be termed “emotional inheritance”. Objective measures of the functioning of separated fathers will be offered (N=504) which corroborate the extent of grief, depression, and behavioural risk associated with separated fathers’ sense of disenfranchisement from their children. It is maintained that social, legislative and therapeutic responses that are not informed and attuned to this aspect of post-separation adjustment, will continue to be experienced by “contact” fathers as superficial to punitive.

Rather, it is argued that the substantive pain experienced by most ‘contact’ fathers relates to their progressive awareness of diminished contribution to the “emotional inheritance” of their children. The reality and utility of this concept is rarely articulated (initially at least) by the men themselves and poorly understood, by even experienced practitioners. Specifically, the anger, frustration, confusion and fear expressed have little to do with traditionally understood “loss of control” in a patriarchal sense, but more about the loss of a dream. It is therefore maintained that pathologising post-separation fathers is a cruel and misinformed response. Additionally, the over simplifying or even de-humanising of contact fathers not only makes our communities all the poorer (social capital), but limits critical (emotional) inheritance factors for children involved.

An alternative model and range of strategies is therefore offered which addresses these factors.

SUMMARY OF MAIN POINTS

- Most males experience significant degrees of role deconstruction as a result of separation and divorce (*loss of the 3xP's*).
- Most males have not been fathered/mentored/initiated in the ways of acknowledgment and empowerment through emotional honesty, (self-declaration of present experiencing) and do not articulate their needs particularly well during crisis and/or pain.
- The language and socio-political climate of change has resulted in more pretending and an underground new-age culture for many males.
- Male-friendly language and concepts are required to validate male experiencing in non-judgemental ways.
- Engaging males in significant pro-social ways requires the necessary (though not sufficient) condition of “safety” with others; but particularly other males.
- Enabling and facilitating mentoring between older/more functional males with younger/less functional males (as in separation crisis) is a key strategy for pro-social post-separation change.
- Children benefit from interaction with and influence of higher functioning post-separation fathers.
- The *MENDS* program represents an effective (statistically validated) platform of engagement, containment and transition for separating/divorced males.

EXISTING MODELS OF HOW DIFFICULT MALE BEHAVIOURS ARE UNDERSTOOD

	Model/Meaning	Typical Client Messages
Clinical	1. Medical/Psychiatric Models – behaviours understood in terms of pathological (usually depressive, anxiety, suicidal) symptoms and syndromes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Your body and mind are experiencing a chemical imbalance (or disease), which is most effectively rebalanced using medication.
	2. PTSD/Adjustment Models – behaviours understood in terms of adjustment/ reactive symptoms related to prior crisis and shock.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By identifying and debriefing critical incidents regarding your past or current crises, the recurrent, negative thoughts, emotions and poor impulse control will subside.
	3. Grief/Loss Models – behaviours understood in terms of loss of social supports, defining roles etc and associated grief response/s.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> With the right kind of emotional support, you will systematically overcome your fears/ obsessionality and reconstitute your sense of well being.
Sociological	4. Socio-economic Models – behaviours understood in terms of male inability to appropriately adjust to greater financial independence and political power exercised by females and/or other males.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wake up mate! What has been going on for at least 30 years worldwide has finally caught up with you; so cop it sweet!
	5. Gender-Role Models – behaviours understood in terms of poor male adjustment to changing gender roles (eg out-of-home careers) of modern woman.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You are sadly lacking in your understanding and/or acceptance of social history (especially feminist ideology) and need to be re-educated.
	6. Power Adjustment Models – behaviours understood in terms of male inability to adjust to loss of privileges associated with patriarchal systems and associated roles and relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You deserve all you are getting because you've been unfairly enjoying the privileges of the oppressive patriarchy and its time to even the score.
Interplanetary	7. Mars-Venus Model – behaviours understood in terms of gender and species-specific inevitabilities as a consequence of co-habiting earth with Venusians.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you're going to successfully consolidate your place on earth, you're going to have to learn about Venusians and evolve into a truly sensitive New-Age, interplanetary specimen.

Table 1 – Models of Understanding of Difficult Male Behaviours

WHAT CURRENT MODELS SHARE

1. Males are pathological (i.e. most of the problem, and either mad or bad).
2. Males lack appropriate personal resources (inadequate).
3. Symptomatic intervention approach (addressing selective difficulties)
4. Male behaviours are extreme (unwarranted and dangerous).
5. Male behaviours are inherently egocentric and self-destructive
6. Males are in need of accepting some form of “value-added” intervention.
7. Fail to address core issues (identity, roles, attachments etc)
8. Fail to acknowledge the range/ complexity of required adjustments.

MALE ENGAGEMENT

CONCEPTS

- Action Distraction
- Being Real
- Boundary Riding
- Cavalry Waiting
- Cliff-dwelling
- Continuing Stewardship
- Doing the best I can
- Emotional Inheritance
- Father Hunger
- Father Time
- Fence Leaning
- Functional Pretending
- Headspace and Heartspace
- Healthy Healing
- Keeping it up
- Living behind enemy lines
- Making Time Friendly
- MCR's – Male Coping Responses
- Mexican Stand-offs
- No Man's Land
- One-size Boots
- P.I.G. (Problem of Immediate Gratification)
- Prodigal Father
- Real Time
- Reconnecting with Myself
- S.U.D.S (Seemingly Unimportant Decisions)
- Someday Isle
- Stress Signature
- Taking Inventory
- The 4 F's –(Frozen, Flight, Fight, Freedom)
- The 4 L's – (Letting go, Losing, Lifelines, Loving)
- The Dialectic March
- The Haunting
- Time Travelling
- Time-shifting
- Tooling up for change
- Touchy Feely
- Unconscious Roles
- Valhalla
- Work-woundedness

SUMMARY STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF 'PAI'S

as at 1 September 2001

Table 2

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

TOTAL DATA SET (N=488)		
SCALE	<i>t one-tail</i>	<i>t two-tail</i>
ICN	5.18E-09	1.04E-08
NIM	3.49E-11	6.98E-11
SOM	7.21E-11	1.44E-10
ANX	2.5E-17	4.99E-17
ARD	2.03E-17	4.06E-17
DEP	1.88E-23	3.75E-23
PAR	1.15E-12	2.29E-12
SCZ	4.45E-22	8.9E-22
BOR	7.69E-19	1.54E-18
ALC	1.01E-05	2.01E-05
DRG	6.15E-05	0.000123
AGG	4.16E-08	8.32E-08
SUI	8.97E-12	1.79E-11
STR	5.11E-22	1.02E-21
NON	1.07E-21	2.13E-21
RXR	1E-20	2E-20
WRM	1.89E-10	3.78E-10

Table 2 – Total MENDS Data Set (N=488)

Table 3

t-Test: Paired Two Sample for Means

PILOT AGENCIES DATA SET (N=119)

SCALE	<i>t one-tail</i>	<i>t one-tail</i>
NIM	1.38E-06	2.76E-06
PIM	3.64E-07	7.29E-07
SOM	3.06E-05	6.11E-05
ANX	2.14E-08	4.29E-08
ARD	5.77E-06	1.15E-05
DEP	1.29E-09	2.59E-09
PAR	1.21E-08	2.42E-08
SCZ	3.66E-09	7.33E-09
BOR	5.76E-08	1.15E-07
AGG	8.98E-05	0.00018
SUI	1.45E-06	2.91E-06
STR	2.55E-07	5.09E-07
NON	2.53E-08	5.05E-08
RXR	3.02E-09	6.04E-09

Table 3 – F&CS Trial Data Set (N=119)

PAI Scale Descriptions

SCALE (<i>abbrev/no of items</i>)	DESCRIPTION
	Treatment Scales
<i>Inconsistency (ICN)</i>	Based on ten pairs of items to determine if the respondent is answering consistently.
<i>Infrequency (INF/8)</i>	Used to determine if the respondent is responding carelessly or randomly.
<i>Negative Impression (NIM/9)</i>	Items suggest an exaggerated unfavourable impression or malingering.
<i>Positive Impression (PIM/9)</i>	Items suggest an exaggerated favourable impression or over-idealising
	Clinical Scales
<i>Somatic Complaints (SOM/24)</i>	Items focus on preoccupation with health matters and somatic complaints.
<i>Anxiety (ANX/24)</i>	Items focus on phenomenology and observable signs of anxiety.
<i>Anxiety-Related Disorders (ARD/24)</i>	Items focus on symptoms and behaviours related to specific anxiety disorders.
<i>Depression (DEP/24)</i>	Items focus on symptoms and phenomenology of depressive disorders.
<i>Mania (MAN/24)</i>	Items focus on the affective, cognitive and behavioural symptoms of mania.
<i>Paranoia (PAE/24)</i>	Items focus on symptoms and more enduring characteristics of paranoid personality.
<i>Schizophrenia (SCZ/24)</i>	Items focus on symptoms relevant to the broad spectrum of schizophrenia.
<i>Borderline Features (BOR/24)</i>	Items focus on attributes indicative of a borderline level of personality functioning.
<i>Anti-social Features (ANT/24)</i>	Illegal acts, anti-authority, egocentrism, empathy, loyalty, stability and excitement seeking.
<i>Alcohol Problems (ALC/12)</i>	Items focus on problematic consequences of alcohol use and alcohol dependence.
<i>Drug Problems (DRG/12)</i>	Items focus on consequences of drug use(both prescription and illicit) and dependence.
	Treatment Scales
<i>Aggression (AGG/18)</i>	Items tap characteristics and attitudes related to anger, hostility and aggression.
<i>Suicide Ideation (SUI/12)</i>	Items focus on suicidal ideation, from hopelessness to distinct plans for a suicidal act.
<i>Stress (STR/8)</i>	Measures the impact of current or recent stressors in major life areas.
<i>Non-support (NON/8)</i>	Content measures a lack of perceived level and availability of social support.
<i>Treatment Rejection (RXR/8)</i>	Measures attributes and attitudes predictive of interest and motivation for personal change
	Interpersonal Scales
<i>Dominance (DOM/12)</i>	Assessing the extent of controlling and independence in personal relationships.
<i>Warmth (WRM/12)</i>	Assessing the extent of supportive and empathic features in personal relationships.

The above tables (2 & 3) represent a summary of statistical analysis conducted with MENDS clients over the past six years. Table 2 represents a summary of the total data set. Table 3 represents a summary of the pilot data set from trials conducted under Department of Family and Community Services – Men & Family Relationships funding.

Closer analysis of both data sets demonstrates valid changes on several high-risk indices for clients. This is particularly reflected in the changes for anxiety, depression and suicidality; but also across a number of important well-being measures.

Results of this objective psychometric testing strongly corroborated verbal reports from both MENDS participants and facilitators alike.

Such results strongly argue for the efficacy of the MENDS platform as an approach to engaging separating and divorced men.

EMOTIONAL INHERITANCE: AN ENABLING CONCEPT FOR MALES IN CRISIS

Working with males experiencing separation crisis in both community and prison settings, has highlighted what appears to be the most prominent, though least articulated source of abiding fear and pain for such clients. This brief article seeks to define aspects of this source of difficulty for such clients, which is arguably related to disruptions to a phenomenon that will be termed “emotional inheritance”.

When we think of the word inheritance, we invariably relate such concept, primarily to physical resources (eg houses, estates, objects or money) that are bequeathed following a death. Common understanding is as a sort of property settlement following the death of a relative or sometimes even a friend. In any event, most commonly experienced as part of an intentional plan and legal process established by the original property owner prior to their actual demise. Most of us can readily associate those ‘reading of the will’ scenes in movies where most often, less than deserving descendants gather and sit on the edge of their seats as the lawyer reads out the deceased’s wishes. Irrespective of how fair or otherwise those persons (or indeed ourselves if we’ve been involved in such a scenario) think of this process, such is nevertheless normally straightforward, legally defined and supported by law. If we’re lucky, we get something from Aunt Thelma, Grandad, Mum or Dad. If they’ve been particularly successful and if they’ve grown to like us in their lifetime, maybe we inherit a substantial portion of their resources. Regardless, the process is most commonly well defined, and despite the media focus on challenging of wills; the vast majority of recipients simply settle for what has been prescribed as their lot.

Separation and divorce often introduces a range of complications into the distribution of inheritance between parents and children. This is particularly so if remarriage occurs and involves not only new partners for one or both parents, but stepchildren or additional biological offspring into the equation. Many children from the original, intact family can often experience a systematic disenfranchisement from what they might have originally received or expected. Given that approximately half of all marriages now fail in Australia, and given that most divorcees eventually repartner; its clear that inheritance decision-making and outcomes commonly involve other than biologically related persons. The potential for bereavements to involve feelings of unfairness, betrayal and/or loss of a perceived birthright is increasingly commonplace in contemporary society.

Despite such problems, it has been the writer’s experience that non-custodial (non-resident) parents (mainly fathers) show little substantial concern about how much property they can pass on to their children by way of physical and/or economic resources. Few report agonising long-term over the substantial legacy of divorce as being their reduced capacity to pass on the products of their labour or investments. I’m purposely jumping over immediate post-divorce settlements, maintenance arrangements etc, which clearly involve considerable angst for many parents. It seems, however, that following an economic adjustment period, there remains for many, the most disturbing impact on inheritance that is not defined in economic terms. Let’s call this factor, “emotional inheritance.” From personal and professional experience, this

factor is worthy of considerable description, identification and focus, since it underlies the most significant disruption and substantial disinheritance experienced by non-custodial fathers and their children following family breakdowns.

Let's try and understand this concept of emotional inheritance by momentarily shifting the focus away from separated fathers and their children to aspects of relationships with our own parents. If we ask ourselves, what is it that we consider we have really inherited from them; or even more simply, what are those memories that most sharply define the quality of the relationships we have or have had with our own parents; the answers often become remarkably simple. We quickly realise that whether or not our parents lived in a stately mansion, drove expensive cars or lavished us with worldly goods; (while clearly a factor), such simply take a back seat to other aspects of our experience.

More pointedly, such defining memories appear related to; how much time they spent with us, what we did during those times, how they interacted with us, talked, laughed, shared disappointment, administered discipline, dealt with frustration and anger, how they treated each other, whether they were there for sporting games, graduations and times of celebration, if they made themselves emotionally available when you were struggling, hurting or failed in something, and whether they took the time to listen to you, encourage you or celebrate with you. Such collective memories form the substantial mosaic of emotional attachments, identity and sense of safety with our parents. In essence, the sense of how much they were supportive, actively involved and available to your life, more clearly defines parent-child relationships. Such experiences seem to cluster together into what is termed the 'emotional inheritance' gained from our parents. This quality of connectedness invariably affected how we think about the world and ourselves in general. Further, the nature of our emotional inheritance is maintained to subsequently impact on the nature of the emotional inheritance we pass on to own children.

It seems almost innate for children to really want to know their parents. Not just what they do, but how, when, where and why they do things. That sense of knowing, of real visibility of our parents seems to provide a sort of emotional safety net and appears critical to the development of self knowledge in children. Equally, not really knowing our parents, or our parents being invisible to us, seems to produce a vacuum within which the development of a stable self-esteem is hampered. It's as if a very real disinheritance of sorts is experienced. Tragically, this has become the hallmark of relationships between hardworking (absent, distant and tired) fathers and their children; even in intact families. How often have you heard, or indeed even spoken similar words describing your father.

'He was a good man and worked very hard to provide for our family. But (and there's always a but); I really wish I'd gotten to know him as a person before he died''.

On the other side of the coin, after nearly two decades of working with fathers, the writer would like a dollar for every time a male client expressed the following sentiments.

'I've worked hard to establish a home and opportunities for my children. I was shocked at how quickly they went off the rails when they hit their teens. I really wished I'd worked less and spent more time with them. Maybe we'd have a better relationship now.'

Paradoxically, many of those same fathers will often say

'But I really enjoy playing with the grandkids, they are a real delight. I take them on walks, to their activities, attend their speech nights, etc etc'.

Those same grandfathers have often expressed the sadness and grief associated with their awareness of having “missed out” on so much of the good things with their own children. Often, as much motivated by guilt as opportunity; they plunge themselves into meaningful activity with grandchildren as work commitments tail off. Alan, a 48 year old grandfather of 3 grandchildren wistfully explained

'In a way, I know I'm trying to make up for what I didn't give to my own kids. I wasn't really there for my own, but I'm bloody well sure I'm not going to make the same mistake with these grandkids'.

Now, here's the zinger (by Alan again)

"You know what's really sad? I see my own son busy, building up his business, and making the same mistakes with his own kids that I did with him"

In the words of that great ballad by Cat Stevens (*Cats in the Cradle*)

*"and as I hung up the phone it occurred to me,
my boy was just like me, yeah, he'd grown up just like me..."*

The utility of the concept of “emotional inheritance” in working with males, particularly where post-separation fathering opportunities may be limited to 48 hour time windows every two weeks, has been found to include:

- A face-valid, affirming idea to enable significant grieving that is commonly stuck at an agitated and angry stage of adjustment, projected externally yet experienced internally which may become entrenched in a victim role.
- A concept which can motivate non-resident males to sustain contact arrangements with their children through difficult times and changing roles/responsibilities on their (or their ex-partner's) part.
- A concept that reinforces commitment to appropriate, child-focused, post-separation maintenance payments by removing such from difficulties between parents.
- A concept that provides hope and value to post-separation fathers who may grow to regard their fathering role as reduced to that of a “walking wallet”.
- As a general pro-social and far-sighted concept which can shift the typical focus on blaming, deservedness, failure and guilt to strategies that are more appropriately “*in the best interests of the children*”.

The lasting pain experienced by ‘contact’ fathers relates to their progressive awareness of diminished contribution to the emotional inheritance of their children. Working with separated men has reinforced the reality and utility of this concept that is rarely articulated (initially at least) by the men themselves and poorly understood, by even

experienced practitioners. Specifically, the anger, frustration, confusion and fear expressed has little to do with “loss of control with the patriarchally dominated social system” but more about the loss of a dream. Realisation of the extent of wasted time and energy in pursuing financial goals and stability at the expense of being able to pass on what is the most substantial part of themselves (emotional inheritance) is the core loss/ adjustment and the “rock in the stomach” as graphically expressed by on father.

Social, legislative and therapeutic responses that are not informed and attuned to this aspect of post-separation adjustment, will continue to be experienced by contact fathers as superficial to punitive. While “deadbeat dads” exist, they most likely did so in their intact families prior to separation. In the writer’s experience, the overwhelming majority of fathers who demonstrate difficulties in sustaining post-separation, financial support for their children (when they are able to), are those who come face-to-face with limitations on their contributions to their child/ren’s emotional inheritance. These men rarely give up on their kids because they have suddenly been transformed into selfish, uncaring, irresponsible party-animals. Rather, their capacities to hold on to images of giving away daughters at future weddings or of hanging around maternity wards to celebrate the arrival of grandchildren have faded or gone completely.

Surely, in this age of awareness of the value of “social capital” of our communities, the concept of emotional inheritance should not escape us. Pathologising post-separation fathers is, in the writer’s experience, a cruel and misinformed response. Further, the de-humanising and vilifying of fathers not only makes our communities all the poorer, but limits critical inheritance factors and development of our children.

PDF copies of the papers on Emotional Inheritance and Males Engagement Concepts are available for download from the MENDS web site at www.mends.com.au