

Turning Around Toxic Intensity

by Carey Sipp

LAST FALL I MOVED my beautiful eighteen-year-old daughter into a dormitory at the college where she hopes to study nursing. During the drive home from one of several pre-move errands, I asked her to tell me which important life lessons from our years together she was taking with her. In a particularly tender moment, I asked her to tell me what she considered the most important lesson she'd learned from me.

When she told me I'd taught her a lot about patience, I almost ran off the road.

You see, I am a mother with ADHD. Before children, I had no patience muscle.

I did not know what ADHD was, or that it was the likely cause of my forgetfulness, my being "scattered, covered, and smothered," until about sixteen years ago. I did not know until then that my untreated ADHD was probably the cause of many unfulfilled dreams, challenged relationships, problems with finances, and issues with addiction. I did not know my ADHD and childhood experiences contributed to my addiction to what I call toxic intensity—the mother of all addictions.

Creating intensity

An addiction to toxic intensity—a term I use for self-created angst and drama and the angst and drama created by others—is common, I believe, among many of us with ADHD. We create intensity as a form of self-medication, since a crisis can make our bodies produce the adrenaline we "need" to focus and succeed at something, even if the newly "ginned-up" intensity just helps us get out of the trouble we've created.

We also create intensity to divert our attention from what really matters: the sometimes-boring option of simply taking care of ourselves and our families. So while I've tried to practice peace, poise, and patience for almost two decades, my addiction to toxic intensity comes naturally, and helped create havoc for many years.

A little background: I grew up in an intense, violent, alcoholic home. My father grew up in intensity and abuse. For a while, I was afraid I would somehow repeat the cycle with my own two children. Looking back, it is easy to believe that many of my father's addictive behaviors could have been self-medicating for undiagnosed ADHD.

Science backs up the fact that people who grow up in homes affected by addiction have a much greater likelihood of becoming addicts. Women who grow up with an abusive alcoholic are five times more likely to become alcoholics. People with ADHD are more likely to self-medicate with alcohol or other substances. Thus, the odds of my having issues with addiction were pretty great. Thank God my having children helped me see, and want to stop, the cycle.

Stopping multigenerational addiction isn't easy. In my own experience, and in working with others, I've seen that if there is a high level of toxic intensity in the home, the children are likely to try to recreate it with self-destructive behaviors. Further, people unconsciously recreate what they know from childhood because even if it is bad, it is what they know, and people find com-

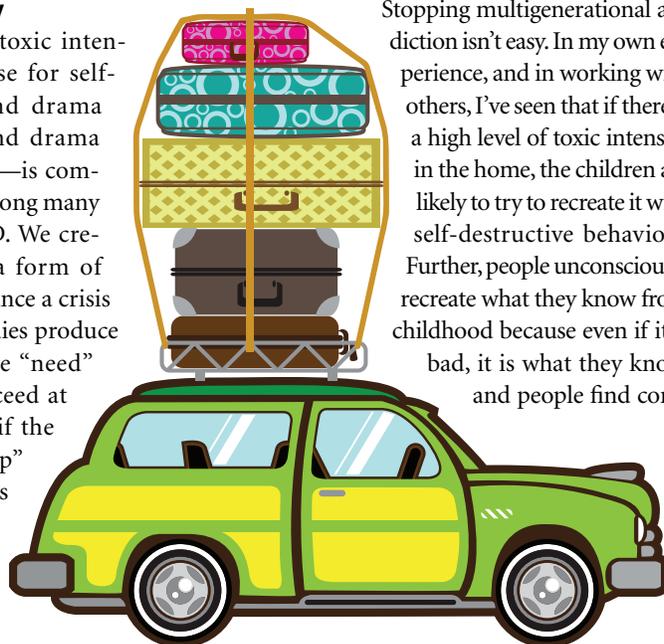
fort in the known. If children hear arguing and verbal abuse, they become accustomed to it, and when they get into relationships of any kind (friendships, romantic relationships, work), they may attract someone who is toxic for them, unaware that they are being abused or abusing others until the pain almost kills them.

Toxic intensity can be created with violence, addiction, gossip, abuse, money mismanagement, rushing, obsessive thinking, overwork, or any other destructive, compulsive behavior. Being addicted to toxic intensity is a challenging, adrenaline-filled habit. Breaking this addiction takes work in self-care, in setting and keeping boundaries, and in coming to love peaceful times. It is particularly difficult for someone with ADHD to break this addiction, as often, adrenaline-producing anxiety attacks have been our friend, helping us to push through to complete work and meet commitments.

Life-changing events and information

It was during the first time I was alone following my divorce, when my children were visiting their dad and everything was suddenly very still and very quiet, that I tore into a number of books, including *Toxic Parents*, *Adult Children of Alcoholics*, and *Codependent No More*. This was a life-changing trilogy, and what I learned from the books was reinforced when I started a powerful therapy program and worked with a parenting expert. The parenting expert was great in that he warned workshop attendees about the way intense, perfectionist parents were likely to have children who mirrored their parents' unforgiving behaviors. He explained that their intense, perfectionist children were likely to be even harder on themselves than their parent role models. That certainly spoke to me!

About that same time, I started doing a little research about second- and third-generation alcoholism. Literature from the National Association for Children of Alco-



holics (NACoA.org) was helpful, as was my attending a support group for families and friends of alcoholics. I have no doubt that attending those meetings helped save my life, and that they continue to help make my life more manageable. All of the events, elements, and information were lining up to help me see how I had become such a tightly-wound skin-and-bones being who, more than anything, wanted to stop the insanity and not let my pain hurt my children. It was the veritable “perfect storm” of events and information that came as I was hitting bottom about eighteen years ago.

The final piece in the puzzle was my ADHD diagnosis, which came about sixteen years ago. Suddenly, so much made sense! Why I daydreamed. Why I could not focus in high school (depression was part of it, but what else was going on? I’d made good grades before...). Why I was drawn to intense relationships. Why I was attracted to high-pressure work requiring a tremendous amount of focus and creativity. Why I put so much pressure on myself.

I knew I did not want to put that kind of pressure on my precious children. Among the breakthroughs that helped the most with easing that pressure was the realization that medication could help. An antidepressant cleared much of the fog. But the addition of a neurostimulant led to an almost audible click in my brain. Suddenly I could connect the dots to better figure out the logistics and resources required to be the working single mom of two active children.

A parenting coach, therapy, support groups, medication, spirituality, and taking on the task of writing a book—the book I needed myself—helped me learn, at the cellular level, how to overcome the impatience and intolerance I had for myself, so I could be more patient and tolerant for, and with, my children.

Affirmation

As I drove my daughter on those final errands before she moved out of our home and on into her own adult life, her telling me that one of the most important lessons I’d taught her was the importance of patience was an amazing affirmation.

It was affirmation that once, when I dropped a full pot of chili on the floor, her watching me take deep breaths instead of freaking out did make an impression on her. It was affirmation that resisting the urge to rush her when she was young had helped to create a much more self-confident young woman today. And it was affirmation that my trying to put people ahead of things had been absorbed by the little sponge-like beings that are now my almost-grown children, who will remind me at times, “Don’t cry over anything that can’t cry over you.”

There is no question that it was worth it to invest all the work in learning, and teaching myself, how to have greater patience. The work, the medication, the dedication to taking the time to learn how to give *her* time, meant we could have this sweet time together now. And I am grateful beyond measure. ♡

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Carey Sipp is the author of *The TurnAround Mom: How an Addiction and Abuse Survivor Stopped the Toxic Cycle for Her Family, and How You Can, Too* (Health Communications, 2007). A parent-education advocate, Carey is also a well-regarded speaker. Contact her at turnaroundmom.com.