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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

The No-Contact Generation: Gen Z, Isolation and Intimacy

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My family is no stranger to estrangement. I grew up with the adults in conflict. Whispered conversations that sounded like gossip, but with one quick look beneath the surface, I came to know those whispers as pain and suffering. It was confusing to me as a child because I loved all the adults in my life, and I felt the love from them in return. How could people who were so “good” to me be so “bad”?

Almost every family holiday was riddled with tension. There was always food, laughter, sarcasm, and unresolved feelings from the prior year, the main dish served with a side of bubbling resentment.

From a young age, I remember feeling everything: words left unsaid, nonverbal communication, and what I’ve now come to know as energy. It was so uncomfortable; all I knew how to do was eat my feelings to numb the loneliness I felt. Then the focus could be on something superficial. My weight. Comments like “you’re such a pretty girl, but only if you’d lose some weight” were common and acceptable. The proverbial big pink elephant took up so much space in the room, but no one was naming it. The in-laws knew it too; their answer was to take a nap at family functions because what could they do about it? Years of anger, like hot lava beneath the surface, were no match for anyone big or small.

On the rare occasion that there was a real conversation about what was actually going on, I would carefully sit at the end of the table, listening, while the adults gathered round. I didn’t move, didn’t make a sound, and tried to be as invisible as possible so as not to get kicked out of the adult conversation. I would even loom in the adult space when they were talking about nothing but laundry detergent and where it was on sale that week, out of a glimmer of hope that something real may come up in the conversation. Those were the times that gave me relief. When they finally acknowledged what I had been feeling all along, and then there was an explanation. Those were the best times. But then the crushing reality that I couldn’t fix it reared its ugly head, and I was right back to being a kid with adult problems. Don’t get the wrong idea. This wasn’t completely altruistic on my part. I didn’t want to be a superhero for the sake of “helping.” I wanted to feel better inside myself. I hid in the help. I wanted the adults to be ok, so they could be there for me. It was mostly self-centered and self-serving.



I knew I wanted to be a child psychotherapist when I was ten, and I didn't know why. I was always so fascinated by family dynamics. I wanted to know how and why a family that was raised in a culture that values marriage, birthing an abundance of children, honors God, and teaches that blood is thicker than water could be riddled with so much resentment and anger toward each other.

By the time I was in my 20s, studying psychology in school, a happenstance encounter with a palm reader confirmed my instincts. He took one look at my palm and said, "You feel other people's pain, you must be a psychologist."

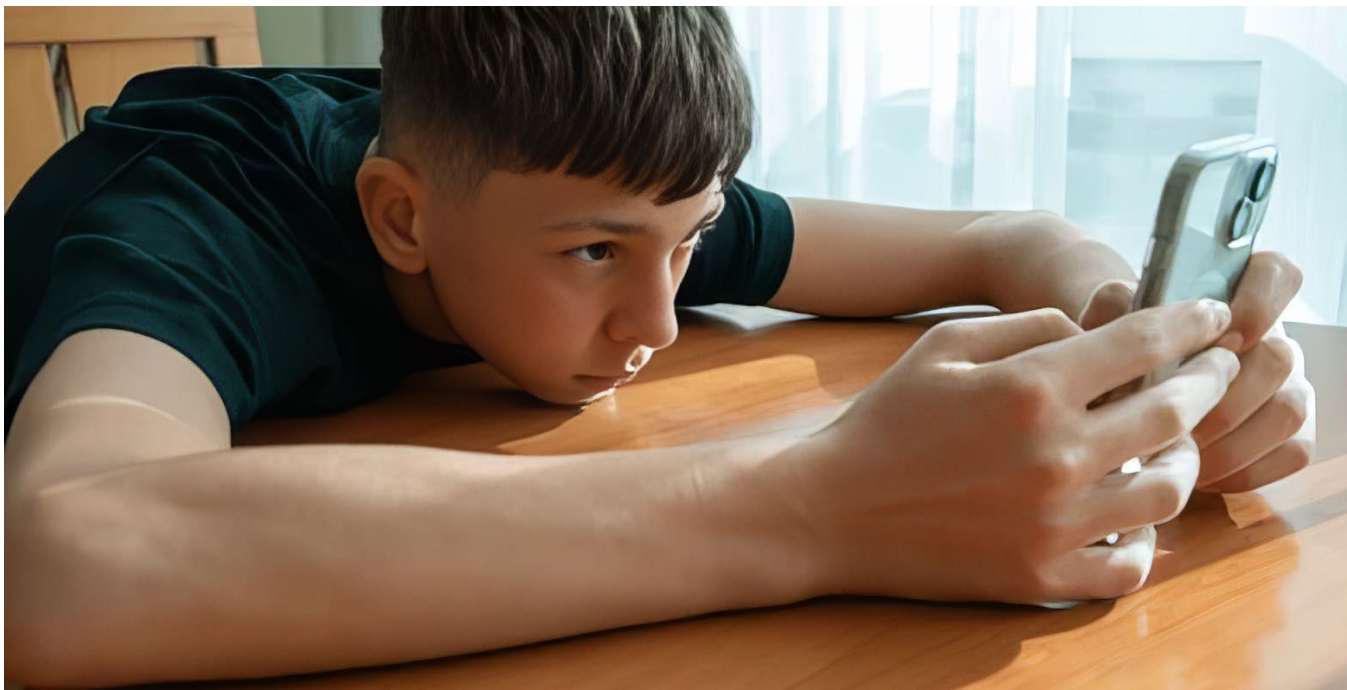
You feel other people's pain.

The words lingered before me, swirling around as if I could see, touch, and feel them.

No one had ever put it into words. So concrete. So final.

Before this, it was a premonition, a calling, a force. Something I had no choice in. I didn't want the burden. I wanted to travel, be free, live in a big city where no one knew my family, and not be so connected to other people's pain. My family's pain. Any chance I got to go far away, I took it. But I couldn't get away. Something always brought me back to my roots, where I came from. When I was in Prague studying abroad in graduate school, I even had a dream where my deceased grandfather came to me and told me I had to stop galivanting and traveling the world, I had to go home and heal what was broken in my family. He told me they needed me.

So I did. I came home the second year of graduate school and finished my degree, got a job close to home, and have been here ever since.



When I learned about the Generation Z cultural phenomenon called, going no contact, with family, I wasn't surprised. Of course, this generation is separating from their families. And now the conversation is in the forefront with the Beckhams. Their eldest son is calling his parents toxic and refusing to speak to them. I don't pretend to know what went on in their family, but I do know from doing decades of family work that there are three sides to every story. Your side, my side, and the truth. Perception is everything, and most families, with tolerance for pain, discomfort, and conflict, can get to the other side of it without having to cut off contact.

Generation Z was coddled. Told they had to feel safe and comfortable at all costs. Their physical safety wasn't enough. They had to be emotionally safe, too. The adults aggressively plowed over lives to create a perfectly manicured path for them, and any time they experienced discomfort, they called "offended," and the party that made them uncomfortable had to back off, including their parents.

A generation raised on social media, where you can ghost, unfriend, unfollow, and otherwise cut someone out of your life because you don't like something they said. They ghost each other on text threads to send the message that they don't want to be friends. Romantic relationships break up over text, or ghosting.

Generation Z parents created monsters.

Entitled, narcissistic monsters.

Parents prefer to be friends with their children for their own comfort. Their desire to be happy overruled their God-given parental authority

Why are the parents surprised that the kids are turning on them?

Permissive parenting causes anxiety, uncertainty, insecurity, and entitlement.

The developmental phase Generation Z finds themselves in is Intimacy vs. Isolation. The internal crisis from 18-25 is that if I don't know how to connect deeply and intimately to someone else, I will be alone. And since this generation was not permitted to feel pain, discomfort, disappointment, embarrassment, disgust, anger, and anything under the category of a negative emotion; they aren't connected to themselves. If we can't connect to our feelings, hear them as messages, and learn to solve our problems, we can't connect to others. *I can't have others if I can't have me.*

So they are alone. They feel better that way. Because being in a relationship with anyone means experiencing pain.

The magical thinking of childhood ends when the world expects more from you than your parents did. Young adults are disillusioned. They become apathetic and wonder what the point of life is. Their brains, wired for addiction early on in their lives from gaming, smart devices, and social media, don't know how to calm their nervous systems. The wonder and awe of adult life, the idea that anything is possible, dreams, aspirations, and goals, are dead.

So they look to their parents for the answer in adulthood. Because their parents perpetuated the illusion that they would fix everything, pave a perfect path for them, and they wouldn't ever have to feel pain. A clean life, a perfect life.



We all know that isn't real, and when the young adults of today face that reality, they are enraged at their parents. *"How dare they stop curating my life? Who the hell do they think they are?"*

Then no contact. It is socially acceptable because therapy culture has beaten the words into their heads their entire lives. Toxic, generational trauma, boundaries, self-preservation, self-care, and happiness.

I have come to know that I can only heal my family wounds in myself and cannot change entire generations of something I was not here to experience. But I can change this dynamic for future generations.

I didn't have to go no contact to do this work. If I had, that would have been damaging to my healing. I can change this dynamic for future generations. Families don't have to experience uncomfortable holiday get-togethers as I did, nor do they have to go no contact. Families have to work through hurt, pain, and discomfort. They have to learn how to communicate and get to the other side of conflict and pain. This generation of young people needs to tolerate their pain so that future generations can heal.

It's not going to change until we are willing to look at our parenting, until we are willing to experience the pain of acknowledging we made mistakes. There is going to be an entire generation of children who don't know their grandparents. The children of the "no contact" generation won't experience the wisdom their grandparents have to pass down, and they won't feel the unique and pure love only a grandparent can give.

Unless we change it now!

Parents need to be parents again! Step up! Be the firm, loving, authoritative parents our kids need. High love. High demand.

Because the only way out is through.



***Nicole Runyon** is on a mission to show parents a better way to make a difference in their children's lives. As a psychotherapist, parent coach, keynote speaker, and author of the bestselling **Free To Fly: The Secret To Fostering Independence In The Next Generation**, she is renowned for her expertise in child and adolescent mental health. Across her twenty-three-year career, and as the mother of 2 children, she helps adults understand the minds of their children, so that they can better support them. She dedicates her life's work to empowering parents and educators to help children grow and mature into young adults with purpose, strength, and confidence.*



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