

Recovery from Childhood Emotional Neglect with Dr. Jonice Webb

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KRISTIN: Hey everyone! This is Kristin Sunanta Walker, host of Mental Health News Radio. I'm here with Jonice Webb. We're going to talk about Childhood Emotional Neglect. Jonice, thanks so much for coming on the show.

JONICE: Hi, Kristin. Thanks for having me.

KRISTIN: Absolutely. Tell our listeners a little bit about your background.

JONICE: I'm a licensed psychologist in Boston, MA. I am also a blogger and an author. I have two books. My topic is Childhood Emotional Neglect, and both of my books are about that topic. I've been writing and speaking about Childhood Emotional Neglect for the past five years since my first book came out. I'm very passionate about this topic.

KRISTIN: We are too. I think how we found you was when we came across one of your great articles and then reached out to you.

JONICE: Yeah.

KRISTIN: This is a big topic, especially for our listeners. Because there are a lot of behavioral health providers that listen to the show and they're always curious why something is a guest's passion, why is being in the mental health field your passion, and why this particular subject matter?

JONICE: That's a great question! I always say I was born a psychologist. I cannot imagine having anything else as a career. It is literally how I think and how my mind works. I am fascinated by human behavior, and I have been since I was a child. Becoming a psychologist was just genetic I think. But then my passion within a passion is the topic of Childhood Emotional Neglect, and I feel so strongly about it because I started to see it in my practice so often starting about eight years ago. As I began to notice it, I began to realize how powerful Childhood Emotional Neglect is and how many people it affects. I did a massive review of American Psychological Association databases and realized that Emotional Neglect was almost never mentioned. If it was, it was talked about as physical neglect. That's when I realized I needed to write my first book. It's called [Running on Empty: Overcoming Your Childhood Emotional Neglect](#). From then on it has been a road of people saying, "Thank you for talking about this." I do see it talked about more; other bloggers and other authors are picking it up, and that makes me very happy.

KRISTIN: Yeah, that is so great when you introduce something that isn't there that is so pivotal. It's so true. I definitely dealt with that as a child, and the running on empty – oh my gosh! I just figured out that a coping mechanism for me and many of my friends are like this as well when we get to that point where we are running on empty and life is out of control: eating, maybe drinking, and spending. All of this is because we are emotionally caretaking of other people that are just a vortex of needs and suffering from their own Childhood Emotional Neglect. We're getting to that place where we're in these co-dependent relationships and we are running on absolutely empty. How to get out of that place is a very tricky minefield to get back to a center and take care of our own needs. We evacuate our own needs for those of everyone else.

KRISTIN: Exactly. It's really interesting, because that doesn't happen to everybody. It happens to many, many, many people – but not everybody. The way that I see the risk factors, it's when you grow up in a household where your feelings and your emotions are under responded to or ignored. As a child, the message you receive is, "My emotions are not valuable. They are not welcome. I need to push them away." This isn't a conscience decision, of course, but the child ends up pushing away his or her feelings, walling them off from himself or herself, and then the child grows into adulthood without proper access to his or her emotions. That is where the empty space comes from. If you're disconnected or not connected enough to your own emotions, you're disconnected from a vital source of energy, connection, motivation, and direction. It leaves you over responding to other people and under responding to your own needs. It sets up a dynamic that plays out in every area of your life as an adult, even your relationships.

KRISTIN: It does. When you came up with the title, *Running on Empty*, since what I said was a piece of it, what did you mean by that title?

KRISTIN: I meant the empty space inside of you when your feelings are pushed away. One of the things I noticed happening for so many of my patients who grew up with their emotions under attended to – and it’s a really subtle thing to see, which is why I think it’s been so over looked in the mental health field – many of them complained about having empty feelings at times, feeling numb, feeling incomplete somehow, or feeling different from other people. It turned out that the reason they feel this way is because of that empty space that is left because they aren’t accessing, using, and feeling their feelings in the way they are meant to be.

KRISTIN: How about situations where one or more parents are so emotional there is no room for your feelings or what happens to you as a child. To exist or to have a crisis of some kind as a child, the parent is always going to trump that with whatever is going on with them. I have many friends whose parents are screaming, crying, or hiding in the bathroom; this child is having to deal with this parent that is completely emotionally unstable; and the whole house is filled up with this person’s emotions. There is no room for the child to have any emotions whatsoever. They are certainly not going to be attended to. Is that something that you see as well?

JONICE: Absolutely. I think there are a variety of different ways that this happens to children. In my first book I identified twelve different parent types that can lead to Childhood Emotional Neglect and exactly how it plays out with each parent type. One category of parents is the self-involved: the ones who are narcissistic, authoritarian, addicted, or even sociopathic. The parent takes up too much room, and the child learns how to take up very little room. That is the definition of Childhood Emotional Neglect - when the child’s emotions are either ignored, unnoticed, actively discouraged, or overshadowed. It all has the same effect in the end.

KRISTIN: What symptoms would you see for a child growing up in that environment having, let’s say in a narcissistic, sociopathic home, what kind of symptoms would you see in the child as they grow into adulthood?

JONICE: Basically, I’ve gotten to a point where I can really see Childhood Emotional Neglect in people pretty quickly. I hope that doesn’t make any listeners feel uncomfortable if they ever meet me. But it’s really just this tendency to take up little space and when it feels that the right thing to do is to: not shine, not be yourself, not let your needs be known, and not let your feelings be known. It’s a feeling of being squelched; but it’s the way you grew up, so you don’t even realize that you are squelching yourself now. Adults who grew up this way are squelching such an important part of themselves. The most deeply personal, biological part of who we all are is our emotions. If you are squelching that, you are squelching yourself and your true light. People who grew up this way tend to feel like they are missing something and like they are different from other people. But they don’t even realize it. They just think everyone feels this way.

KRISTIN: I’ve noticed too that some who go to therapy, do the work, start to express themselves, individuate, find their voice and use it, and maybe even delight in themselves for the first time in their lives ... that parent who is still doing whatever it is they do because they haven’t gone through this process and done the work – whatever it may be – absolutely will support this for a while. But if the child’s self-esteem gets too high or something gets too high, man the parent wants to reel that back in. Usually what I’ve seen when talking about this with friends is that it’s their anger, resentment or envy because they can’t find that voice of their own, so they want to squelch it from their child. (It can be that the person is really narcissistic so that’s of course what they do because that the nature of their disorder.) But it also can be envy on the part of the parent that their child gets to experience this, will say, “No”, have boundaries, and not continue to let their parent behave this way towards them as an adult. The parent really has a problem with that.

JONICE: Yes. I always say there’s a way that the self-involved or narcissistic parent has of holding back the best and brightest in their family because they don’t want to be overshadowed. That is the antithesis of what a parent is supposed to do. It has a huge effect. When we’re talking about narcissistic parents, yes there is Childhood Emotional Neglect there, but there is also an active damage that happens; whereas true Childhood Emotional Neglect in its purest form can happen from a parent who is actually loving and well-meaning and wants to do right by the child, but he or she himself grew up without adequate attention or response to her own emotions. The parent doesn’t understand

emotions, doesn't pay attention to emotion, has that blind spot, and treats her child like they have no emotions either. It's this blind spot that ends up squelching a vital source in the child and transfers invisibly from one generation to another.

KRISTIN: How do you get in and start working with someone to break those patterns?

JONICE: Well, I've been developing this theory over the last five years; and I've developed a series of steps that allows the person who grew up with Childhood Emotional Neglect to begin to break through the wall that they have set up and start accessing their emotions. It's really amazing what that does. It's an incredible difference when you decide, "Okay, I want my feelings now. I want them back." You start trying to reach them and you can actually do that. I've had people say, "I don't have feelings. I just don't have them." But as soon as I start working with them on retrieving them, they do start to have feelings. That's just step one.

KRISTIN: Yeah, that can be really scary because if you've ... That's a step I've found even in myself thinking, "I feel really uncomfortable," but to be consciously aware of not running to things to stuff those down like I did as a kid. Don't go to the refrigerator; don't go to alcohol; don't go to a toxic relationship. Just sit here and feel your feelings – uncomfortable or not. Sometimes really happy feelings are hard to deal with too, because it just feels like too much. That's an interesting exercise because for many years I just acted out of my sub-conscience and did anything I could to squash those feelings, because whether it was a good feeling or a bad feeling, it was all foreign.

JONICE: Yeah, and that's what happens when you have a lot of painful feelings that are on the other side of the wall. They don't go away. They sit there and get activated by things that happen in your daily life; but because you aren't in touch with those feelings and you aren't aware of them nor even know they are there, they are in the driver's seat. So, they get touched off like a volcano. They spew their lava up, and you're sitting there with a bunch of lava not knowing what to do with it. If your feelings have been ignored your whole life it means you didn't learn the emotion skills which are the key to health. The emotion skills are what you were just talking about: being able to sit with an emotion, put words to it, tolerate it, accept it for what it is (which is a big one), and try to understand and process it to decide if it is trying to tell me to do something that I should do or if it is a feeling that I should just let myself feel and manage. It's amazing how that makes emotions far less powerful when you do that.

KRISTIN: Yeah, otherwise you're running around. I know many of us have talked about how we are running around from diagnosis to diagnosis. "Well, you have bipolar disorder. Well, you are borderline. Well, you've got PTSD." While some of those things may be true, what I love about what you've written is that as you learn that you can have emotions, you learn where they sit in your body and that it is okay to feel them, and so on, it's like taking the lid off of a boiling pot and letting some steam out. All of a sudden you aren't reactive to every single thing that goes on in your life, so you are much calmer. Your resting state is calmer. Those diagnoses tend to go away because what you are really dealing with is what you're talking about. You are putting what you just said to use. Does that make sense?

JONICE: Yes! It makes perfect sense. I couldn't agree more. A lot of people will come to me and say, "I have depression. My PCP referred me to you." If you start helping them access their feelings, listen to their feelings, and use their feelings – they aren't depressed any more. That's not to say that medicine along with that isn't often needed just to get the brain chemicals back in line. But changing how you deal with your emotions is huge! It can help with anxiety. It can help people with personality disorders. It can help depression. It can help relationship issues and people having problems with their marriage. If you teach them how to deal with their emotions differently, it makes a tremendous difference.

KRISTIN: Well, let's keep going down the list because I stopped you at one!

JONICE: This could be a long interview!

KRISTIN: That's okay. We can always have you come back on. The first one was emotions. Number one from one of your books.

JONICE: The steps for healing.

KRISTIN: Yeah.

JONICE: So, reaching your emotions. Then the second is learning the emotion skills. So actually, we've talked about two. Once you start accessing your emotions, it's really important to have the skills to deal with them. That's the second thing to begin to work on. Then one thing that is very common with people who grow up this way is a feeling of not being quite as valid as everybody else. It's just this sort of one down position: what you want is more important than what I want, what you need is more important, what you think is more important, I need to hold myself back or I will alienate people, or I will lose people in my life. That kind of back burner stance is a huge problem. But once you start accessing your emotions and working on using your emotion skills, you can start applying them to yourself. You start feeling more empowered, like you have accessed this source within yourself that gives you so much more power. I can see it, when people reach this point, that they start to express themselves differently and act differently, paying more attention to what they want for themselves, what they need, what they feel. So, the third step is using all of that to start to feel more valid and on more equal footing with everyone else. Then part of that is learning assertiveness skills because that's another skill set you can learn. Anyone can learn how to be assertive if you work at it hard enough.

KRISTIN: Boy, is it uncomfortable, but you can learn it.

JONICE: Yes, exactly. You have to be willing to take some risks because it can feel so wrong when you're programmed as a child to not speak up for yourself. The reason I wrote my second book, which is called [*Running on Empty No More: Transform Your Relationships with Your Partner, Your Parents, and Your Children*](#), is because of the fourth step of recovery which is beginning to use everything that you now have (your emotions, your emotion skills, your increased feeling of validity and empowerment) and starting to put that into your relationships. It ripple-effects throughout your entire life. It really makes a huge difference in every relationship of your life once you start taking up the amount of space you are supposed to take up.

KRISTIN: We'll go to five next, but have you seen people that are like a pendulum swinging? They evacuated as much space as possible as a child, and then they start working on your steps for example and then they perhaps overcompensate for a bit – maybe annoy some people with their new sense of empowerment – and then sort of come back to center.

JONICE: You know, that's a very interesting question because people say to me all the time, Childhood Emotional Neglect people, that is their greatest fear in their recovery – that they will become self-centered. I have yet to see that happen with anyone who grew up with Childhood Emotional Neglect. They may think they are being that way, but actually they are just behaving in a normal, take-up-the-right-amount-of-space way. I think it's so hard, once you are programmed that way, to fight against it. I really don't see people going to the extreme except in one way. Coming back to the assertiveness skills – the assertiveness skills are so important because once you start knowing what you feel and trying to express it, being able to do it in a way that doesn't offend or hurt other people, that is where those skills come in. So, I have heard that. I've heard people say, "I'm standing up for myself more now, and people at work are getting mad at me." Then we just go back and work on assertiveness skills. That's all it is.

KRISTIN: Okay. See, you can tell I'm a Childhood Emotional Neglect person because I have this new sense of empowerment and am surrounded by so many friends that say, "You're not behaving badly"; but the parent who isn't happy with the behavior is saying, "You're self-centered. You're ..." whatever it is. It's hard not to try to go back and fight it. Just like people who have been in a relationship with someone who has narcissistic personality disorder, what we see all the time is that the victim's in the relationships, the spouse or the children, get to a place where they question, "Am I the narcissist?" We always say, "The fact that you even ask that question means that you're not." It kind of sounds to me like what you are saying there. Someone who suffers from Childhood Emotional Neglect would think, "Oh yes, I've gone way off the deep end. Now I'm completely self-centered." It's probably just that it's really uncomfortable to finally put yourself first in some instances,

JONICE: Yes, exactly! Of the hundreds of people that I have worked with ... I have this online recovery program and I talk to people in the program on the phone every two weeks. I have never once, of all the people that I've walked through the recovery process, had one single one who bounced too far in the other direction. I just don't think it's a thing.

KRISTIN: Yeah, we think it is because we get uncomfortable, but it isn't.

JONICE: Exactly.

KRISTIN: If you have a very controlling parent and they are not taking care of their own Childhood Emotional Neglect issues, then they will definitely want to squelch your doing that for yourself as an adult.

JONICE: Yes. One thing I wanted to say about that is as a therapist (and I'm sure a lot of therapists have this in common with me) as soon as I hear a parent describe one of their kids as selfish, my alarm bells go up, because often the selfish one in the family is the healthiest one. It's the one who got out, broke away, started growing and had to keep boundaries. That makes you be called the selfish one. From the perspective of the parents, and maybe some siblings too, it can make that person look selfish.

KRISTIN: Yeah, it can. I think some of it is some envy (maybe that's not the right word) at their own not doing it for themselves. I don't know if that is the right word at all, but that is something that I've felt at times. I know you're not happy with your life, and you have the ability to change your life. I can't do it for you. I can't fix this for you. But I'm not going to stop my path of feeling good and happy and having healthy relationships just because you are upset that ... Your upsetness with me has nothing to do with me; it has to do with you and you holding yourself back from your healing.

JONICE: Yeah, and don't you think it has to do with having to share the limelight or not being the person in the limelight. So, I think that's probably what you're calling envy, which I think is a fine word for it. The narcissist feels like, "I have to be the one. I'm the one! What are you doing? You're shining? You're distracting from me. Get back here!"

KRISTIN: Oh yeah. I've had moments where I'm breaking out in my career; I'm doing better than I ever have. But it's still a journey – for everyone. Five minutes before I get up to do a speech, I'm getting ranting and raving phone calls from a parent about things when they know I'm about ready to get up and give the biggest speech of my life. The phone call comes five minutes before hand, and normally I would just try to placate. Finally, I got to a place where I said, "You know what? This is not acceptable. Do not call me about this. You know I'm getting up to do a speech. This is not okay. Don't ever do this again." And then hang up. Boy, was there punishment later for that! But I never got called again. It popped up in other areas, but we're dealing with some pretty severe narcissism so that's why that happens. But taking those steps as an adult, as a kid you couldn't really say, "You're running all over my boundaries!" Well, you're eight. Get over it! You know what I mean?

JONICE: Yes. Plus, eight-year-olds don't have that language either. They don't even know that this isn't how it's supposed to be. Yes, as a kid you are just helpless.

KRISTIN: Yeah, I remember as a kid being offered up to do things for other people to make the parent feel good or special. Even at that young age thinking, "I am not a monkey on a stick for you to dance around like a chess piece. I'm me; and if I don't want to do something for someone, I want to say that I don't want to do that." Sometimes it was for someone who was abusive that the parent has completely ignored. So, I was glad that I had these awarenesses when I was very young, that I don't want to do that. But I couldn't say, "No!" I just stuffed it with food and whatever else would help me get through it. But I was really angry and resentful a lot of the time because I would have to. Then I was told, "Well, you're such an angry kid. You're so this or that." I'd think, "Okay, so now this is again getting turned into my being the one with the problem. No – the originator of the problem is you." But you don't figure those things out until you have lots of therapy and you do what you are talking about with the assertiveness and so on.

JONICE: Yeah. I find that so many people with Childhood Emotional Neglect have narcissistic parents. It just goes with the package. It's impossible to escape it when you're a child growing up in that situation. In my newest book that just came out, *Running on Empty No More*, one of the character's in the book has a narcissistic mother and the question is should she try to talk with her mother about Childhood Emotional Neglect. Of course, that is just a minefield. For most

people in a situation like that there is no way it's going to go well. But sometimes it helps to just have a conversation that says exactly what you feel and what you think to a parent like that because it sets up a boundary. At least when you don't return the call, you don't answer, or you distance, you have told the parent exactly why you are doing that, and it eases some of the guilt.

KRISTIN: It does. You're absolutely right. That's fascinating to me. One of the things I made sure I did with my son (and I was no perfect parent, believe me) in trying to get out from what is generations of abuse in our family – rampant high narcissism – I said, "Listen. Go to therapy because God you need it. Your dad and I were your parents and we didn't know what we were doing." We both came from Childhood Emotional Neglect so we both were lacking in many ways. We just ran towards each other as the other's saviors. Thank God we still love each other thirty years later. But I said to him, "Go to therapy. Tell everything you need to tell about me. I don't care if I'm Mental Health News Radio and your therapist has heard the show. I don't care. Tell everything you need to tell. If you need me to come in there and sit and own everything that you experienced, I totally will."

JONICE: Oh, my gosh! I wish every parent in the world would do that. It would be a massive healing.

KRISTIN: Yes, it would! That's what I've said to.

JONICE: The problem is parent's who won't own their mistakes. I'm the same way. I've made so many mistakes with my kids, and I completely own them. It's impossible to do anything else.

KRISTIN: Yeah, that was another conversation with my son. I said, "I carry guilt for what you had to deal with, but I can't carry the shame anymore." I had that conversation with him. I said, "I know you don't know what to do with that, but I'm just telling you I can't keep carrying the shame around it anymore because it is actually crippling me from getting better. I know that's what you want, and I know that's what I want. So just know that I do feel guilty sometimes about things that you experienced, but I don't feel ashamed of it anymore." I took myself off the rack for it and used the guilt to examine, look at, heal, move on to the next stage – which is ultimately what is best for your child anyway. The best thing that they could see you do as a parent, even as adults, is to continue to become a more evolved, more connected, more healed person.

JONICE: Absolutely. That is for sure.

KRISTIN: Well, this is fascinating to me. So, when you are talking to people and they are coming to listen to you speak, how many lightbulbs, or how long does it usually take? I know it depends on the person. But when they start hearing you talk and the repetition of what they are doing, what they've experienced, and the validation that is so huge, what is it like for you to see that the lightbulb has been turned on and they are starting to get it?

JONICE: It's tremendous! It really is. I kind of miss that experience a little bit. At this point, most people I come in contact with, either in my office, in my online program, or anywhere else, have already read something that I wrote and have already had that lightbulb moment. That's why they are contacting me, right? That's great because then we can just jump right in. Before this was all put out there so much, I did have more of that experience of leading people to it. It can be hard to help someone see it in themselves. I think most people get it easily if they read *Running on Empty*, the first book, or any of my blogs. With the blog, a lot of people's lightbulbs turn on. It's very rewarding though. I guess that would be my answer to your actual question.

KRISTIN: Yeah, that's the thing that I find fascinating. Once you find this, you have a name for it and you can work from root pain, root trauma, or you literally are going to the root of things for yourself, it is painful. But the other side of that is really the best life you can live.

JONICE: Yes. I want to emphasize, for a lot of people it's not necessarily trauma and it's not necessarily a lot of root pain; it's more just a process of walking through the emotions in your life because you are disconnected. These are the people who grew up with what I call "well-meaning-but-neglected-themselves" parents. I think that affects untold numbers of people who grew up that way and feel they had a good childhood, but this one tremendously vital

ingredient (emotional responsiveness from their parents) was missing. They have no idea what's wrong. So, the process of getting in touch with their emotions is still scary, but it doesn't necessarily have to involve a lot of trauma or pain.

KRISTIN: Okay. Good point. In terms of narcissism, that is such a hot, trending topic. I can tell you every show we do on that particular subject goes through the roof in terms of downloads. I've said on shows, "I'm kind of sick of talking about it." I did experience it in many different ways, but I do get tired of talking about it. And yet, that is what people crave to hear about. So, I just get over it and talk about it anyway because God do I know it inside and out. Nothing like lived experience! What do you say about that: our culture, what's happening, and why that would be such a hot topic now? What are your thoughts on that?

JONICE: I think it's because once people started talking about it ... You know, personality disorders in general are hard to understand. They are hard for lay people to understand, which makes a lot of sense, because a character disorder is not like depression where it has really clear symptoms. I think personality disorders have really not been talked about at all until the last maybe two or three years when narcissism started to be addressed. Once that door was opened and people started understanding what narcissism is, the floodgates opened because almost everybody has someone in their life who has these traits or the full-blown personality disorder. Many, many people have struggled in a relationship with someone, whether it's their parent, a sibling, or a romantic relationship. It's just so painful and hard and difficult to navigate. It's like the door opened a crack and people are running through it because they are so hungry for this information.

KRISTIN: That's why I think what you are talking about and then talking about narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorder are so critical because of the damage that you have to unravel over the course of a lifetime. It's just unbelievable!

JONICE: Yeah, it's a big piece. But also, to become narcissistic a person has to have other forces present in childhood.

KRISTIN: Right, and that's a whole other show that we could do just on that.

JONICE: Yes, it is!

KRISTIN: Well, this has been fantastic. Tell our listeners where they can find your incredible articles, and believe me, listeners, when I tell you these articles are so, so good. Please let them know where they can find them.

JONICE: On my website. It's emotionalneglect.com, which is easy to remember, and also I have a weekly blog on PsychCentral.com. It's the emotional neglect page on PsychCentral. Also, I developed a questionnaire I should mention, which if you are listening and you are not sure if Childhood Emotional Neglect applies to you, you can go to my website and [take the questionnaire](#). It's free and it will help you know if you grew up with this or not.

KRISTIN: Fantastic! Well, thank you so much for coming on. I truly appreciate it. I hope you will come back on again.

JONICE: Thank you, I'd love to.

KRISTIN: Alright, and thank you to our listeners of another edition of Mental Health News Radio.