

## CE: 7 Subtle Signs of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN)

(Katie Morton—Licensed Therapist, author, and public speaker, well-known for her YouTube channel focused on Mental Health)

\*This information can be useful in helping clients understand the connection between unmet needs in childhood and the subtle ways this can manifest later in life. It can also provide insight for the counselor to consider when working through the history-taking and construction of the LMD.

**Definition of CEN:** *Childhood Emotional Neglect is where a child's emotional needs are not met by their caregivers, leading to a lack of attachment and emotional development. This neglect may involve ignoring a child's emotional distress (examples: not attending to a crying child; failing to provide comfort or support, or failure to respond at all to any emotional cues, such as when a child reaches for you or groans). The effects of CEN can last well into adulthood, affecting our relationships, our self-esteem, and overall mental health.*

### 7 Subtle Signs of CEN:

#### 1. \_\_\_\_\_

- feeling unable to feel emotions
- complete disconnection
- trouble expressing emotions to others
- sometimes “praised” for this
- ways to assess or “check” that you are feeling full range of emotions, ask
  - ✓ Do you get angry sometimes?
  - ✓ Do you feel sad, or allow yourself to feel sad sometimes?
  - ✓ Are you afraid or happy sometimes?
- If we tend not to respond to our life experiences “right,” or if there is no emotional response at all, our feelings may have “gone underground” because we did not learn how to accept them as children and it was just safer to stuff them and forget that they exist altogether.

#### 2. \_\_\_\_\_

- CEN can lead to feelings of worthlessness, which can manifest as low self-esteem and negative self-image
- We can believe that we don't have a right to take up space, or to be seen or heard.
- We can believe that we are unimportant.
- Being unable to generate love and support when we reach out for it, can lead to the belief that there is something wrong with us.

3. \_\_\_\_\_

- This can sound like:
  - ✓ “All men are emotionally unavailable.”
  - ✓ “No one is ever attracted to me.”
  - ✓ “I always end up in terrible relationships.”
- Though we may want a partner who is vulnerable, kind, and loving toward us, our brain can feel “safer” with what we know, which could be someone who is a little distant or emotionally unavailable. We subconsciously sabotage our relationships or friendships with healthy people before they even happen because something feels off to us. This “sabotage” can look like:
  - ✓ Picking fights.
  - ✓ Looking for small things we don’t like.
  - ✓ Acting passive-aggressively toward them to get them to leave.
- Because of CEN, we may feel uncomfortable with someone who seems to desire to be in a relationship with us, thinking subconsciously, “Why would they be interested in me? What’s wrong with them?”

4. \_\_\_\_\_

- Not having caregivers who stepped in to help us navigate through and manage our impulses or to help us set boundaries in order to develop a sense of self-control, can lead to impulsive behavior in adulthood, such as:
  - ✓ Overeating
  - ✓ Substance abuse
  - ✓ Promiscuity
- It may sound like, “I just can’t control myself around \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Statements like that can indicate that part of the brain is stuck in a childlike way of thinking, and may not have fully learned how to develop and manage urges.
- This indicates that we need to be “reparented”; that the “inner child” has been “running the show” inside.

5. \_\_\_\_\_

- Those who have experienced CEN, may have trouble managing their emotions, leading to outbursts or constant mood swings.
- We don’t come from the womb knowing how to regulate our emotions; we need to be taught how to accept and identify our emotions, and then what to do with them.

- Not having parents there for us emotionally can lead to beliefs that the way we feel is wrong, shameful, or to be ignored.

6. \_\_\_\_\_

- People who have experienced CEN may feel an intense need or pull to be perfect, which can result in a constant state of stress and anxiety.
- While this can play out as trying to be perfect, it may play out as in not trying something at all.
- “Checking out,” procrastinating, and “dialing thing in” can all be symptoms of perfectionism.
- Perfectionism is essentially “all or nothing” thinking; black or white. Our brains can be thinking that in order to be secure and safe, we have to do everything perfectly. So we strive every day to do things just the right way in the hopes that we feel valued, loved, and worthy of care.

7. \_\_\_\_\_

- The person who has experienced CEN may struggle to make decisions, feeling like they are always seeking validation from others.
- This is due to the inability to regulate emotions well, meaning they can have a hard time getting the information needed from emotions to make healthy decisions. Either our emotions feel way out of control, or we don’t trust them, or both. And wither way, we are no longer in tune with them as a source of information.
- Because of this, they may have made some bad decisions in their lives, or have trusted others to make them for them, and therefore don’t trust themselves to make any decisions.
- Or, they may have a “fractured sense of internal trust.” Part of the way we learn to trust ourselves is through our parents or caregivers. They reflect back to us that we are safe and capable. When that gets distorted, or we aren’t getting any feedback from them, we may feel like we are unable to make decisions, or like we can’t trust our gut because we don’t even know how to tap into it. And when we have, we have been told that’s wrong, leaving us confused.