COLLECTION

The Essentials of Applied Psychology

The Absent Father



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First edition — May 2026

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INTRODUCTION -- The Silent Wound

There is a pain that is seldom spoken of. A pain that leaves no visible scar, that appears on no medical certificate, that entitles no one to sick leave. It is the pain of the child who grows up without a father. Or worse still, perhaps: the pain of the child who grows up with a father who is there without being there.

This wound is silent because our society has long minimized the role of the father. For decades, it was assumed that the mother was sufficient, that the father was a benign extra whose absence could be compensated for. Research in developmental psychology has definitively debunked this idea. The father is not an accessory. He is a fundamental pillar in the psychological development of the child, and his absence -- whether physical or emotional -- leaves deep marks that often manifest years, even decades later.

In France, it is estimated that roughly one child in five grows up in a household where the father is absent. This already considerable figure does not account for all those fathers who are physically present but emotionally absent -- those who are there at dinner but whose gaze is elsewhere, those who share the same roof but not the same inner life. If this emotional absence were included, the number of affected children would be staggering.

In my practice, every week I see men and women who come seeking help for difficulties that appear unrelated to their childhood: relationship problems, chronic anxiety, difficulty asserting themselves at work, a persistent feeling of not being good enough. And yet, when we trace the thread of their history, when we explore the patterns that govern their reactions and choices, we almost always arrive at the same point: a father. A father who left, a father who was never truly there, a father who caused harm, a father who did not know how to love.

This book was born from these encounters. It was born from all the stories I have had the privilege of hearing, and from the deep conviction that understanding one's wound is the first step toward healing. This is not about blaming fathers -- many of them are themselves children of absent fathers, caught in an intergenerational chain for which they have no key. Nor is it about victimizing those who suffered from this absence. It is about naming, understanding, and transforming.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), in which I trained and which I practice daily, offers concrete and scientifically validated tools for working on these deep-seated wounds. The early maladaptive schemas described by Jeffrey Young -- particularly the schemas of abandonment, emotional deprivation, and mistrust -- find in the absent father a striking illustration. Throughout this book, I will offer you practical exercises drawn from this approach, adapted for personal use.

But beyond the tools, this book is first and foremost a space of recognition. If you have opened it, it is probably because something resonates within you. Perhaps you grew up without a father and are only beginning to measure the impact of that absence. Perhaps you are a parent yourself and fear repeating what you experienced. Perhaps you are supporting someone -- a partner, a friend, a patient -- who carries this wound.

Whatever your situation, know this: you are not alone. And above all, you are not condemned to remain a prisoner of this story. Psychological research shows it clearly: childhood wounds, even the deepest ones, can be worked through, softened, transformed. The human brain possesses remarkable plasticity, and it is never too late to begin the work of repair.

This book is structured in eight chapters that follow a logical path: from awareness to reconstruction. We will begin by exploring the different faces of paternal absence, for not all absences are alike. We will then examine the specific impact on sons, then on daughters, as the consequences differ according to gender. We will look at the particular case of the emotionally absent father, then at the legacy of toxic fathers. We will address the specific challenges of blended families. Finally, the last two chapters will be devoted to the process of grieving the ideal father and to rebuilding oneself.

Each chapter contains fictional clinical cases inspired by real situations, solid scientific references, and practical exercises that you can do alone or with the support of a professional. I encourage you to take your time with this book. Some passages may awaken intense emotions. That is normal. It is even desirable. Allow yourself to set the book down, to breathe, to cry if you need to. Healing does not happen by avoiding pain, but by moving through it -- at your own pace, with kindness toward yourself.

One last word before we begin. If during your reading you feel that certain emotions become too intense or difficult to manage alone, do not hesitate to consult a mental health professional. This book is a companion on the road, not a substitute for therapeutic support. On the website psychologieetserenite.com, you will find additional resources and the option to schedule a personalized consultation.

Turn the page. Your healing journey begins here.