

*“...Opens doors to richer, more connected relationships by naming the elephant in the room ‘Childhood Emotional Neglect’.”*

—HARVILLE HENDRIX, PhD & HELEN LAKELLY HUNT, PhD

Authors of *New York Times* Bestseller *Getting the Love You Want*

# RUNNING ON EMPTY NO MORE

*Transform Your Relationships  
With Your Partner,  
Your Parents & Your Children*

**Jonice Webb, PhD**



#### **A NOTE FROM DR. JONICE WEBB**

Thank you for purchasing my new book, *Running on Empty No More: Transform Your Relationships With Your Partner, Your Parents & Your Friends!* I'm so glad you have decided to take on the Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN)

that is blocking you from the most important people in your life. I am sure that you will identify with some of the lovely people you will meet in these pages, and you will see your struggles in theirs. You haven't just bought a book, you have joined a community, and I look forward to walking through your healing process with you!

Sincerely,

*Dr. Jonice Webb*  
Dr. Jonice Webb

## **RUNNING ON EMPTY NO MORE**

### Praises for *Running on Empty No More*

Jonice Webb opens doors to richer, more connected relationships by naming the elephant in the room “Childhood Emotional Neglect” and offering readers clear guidance and support to talk with their loved ones on a new and deeper level. This book will speak to many.”

—**Harville Hendrix, Ph. D. and Helen LaKelly Hunt, Ph. D.**,  
authors of *Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples*  
and *The Space Between: The Point of Connection*

Filled with examples of well-meaning people struggling in their relationships, Jonice Webb not only illustrates what’s missing between adults and their parents, husbands and their wives, and parents and their children; she also explains exactly what to do about it.

—**Terry Real**, internationally recognized family therapist, speaker and author, *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *20/20*, *Oprah* and  
*The New York Times*

Dr. Jonice Webb describes the almost indescribable in a way you can understand. Childhood emotional neglect can cause trauma and long-lasting devastating effects on emotional development and relationships. Embrace it now. In Dr. Webb’s book, *Running on Empty No More*, you will find practical solutions for everyday life to heal yourself and your relationships. This is a terrific new resource that I will be recommending to many clients now and in the future!

—**Dr. Karyl McBride**, author of *Will I Ever Be Good Enough?*  
*Healing the Daughters of Narcissistic Mothers* and  
*Will I Ever Be Free of You? How to Navigate a High-Conflict*  
*Divorce from a Narcissist and Heal Your Family*

In Dr. Jonice Webb’s second book, *Running on Empty No More*, she turns the powerful lens of Childhood Emotional Neglect from healing the individual to strengthening and deepening the most important relationships in our lives. She answers questions like:

How can parents change their interactions with their children to provide them with the emotional validation they need in order to grow into healthy, strong adults? Can relationships with emotionally neglectful parents be healed? How do you reach out to an emotionally neglectful partner or spouse? By combining riveting, personal vignettes with clear, practical exercises and touches of humor, *Running on Empty No More* answers all of these questions in a way that will validate and motivate readers.

—**Randi Kreger**, nationally recognized speaker and expert on borderline personality disorder and author of the international bestsellers, *Stop Walking on Eggshells* and *The Essential Family Guide to Borderline Personality Disorder*. Founder of *BPDcentral.com*

Jonice Webb has hit another home run with her book, *Running on Empty No More*. A well-organized and comprehensive book about the practical side of Childhood Emotional Neglect (CEN), Dr. Webb’s work is especially poignant because the material is fresh and relevant, the explanations are clearly articulated, and her writing style is refreshingly down-to-earth and accessible. Clinicians like myself as well as the lay reader will find this book to be a necessary companion to her break-through bestseller, *Running on Empty*, which introduced a topic that needed to see the light of day. As an amorphous but wide-spread condition, readers of her first book will applaud Dr. Webb’s use of illustrative case examples, step by step instructions, practical exercises and skill building worksheets. I will be recommending this book to my clients, and to those who want to understand that CEN is not curse, but a legitimate psychological condition which a person can overcome.

—**Ross Rosenberg, M.Ed., LCPC, CADC**, author of *The Human Magnet Syndrome: Why We Love People Who Hurt Us*

Dr. Webb’s first book, *Running on Empty*, was a paradigm-changer. In *Running on Empty No More*, which is helpful for laypeople and clinicians alike, she expands on the idea of Childhood Emotional Neglect and provides readers with concrete ways to change their interactions with

the people most important to them. Written in easy-to-understand but descriptive language, with lots of examples, Dr. Webb helps readers learn how to create healthier, more expressive, and more fulfilling relationships with the central people in their lives.

—**Samantha Rodman, PhD, LLC**, Founder of Drpsychmom.com  
and author of *52 Emails to Transform Your Marriage*  
and *How to Talk to Your Kids About Your Divorce*.

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NEW YORK

LONDON • NASHVILLE • MELBOURNE • VANCOUVER

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Your Parents and Your Children*

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*For My Clients*



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Denise Waldron, herself an author and in the process of writing her own book, always manages to read my chapters, correct errors for me big and small, and deliver honest reactions. I can never thank Denise enough for being a supportive, honest, reliable colleague and trusted friend.

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Two major inspirations for this book, as well as the prior one, are my children, Lydia and Isaac. Raising you has required me to ask questions I would never have otherwise known to ask, and grow in ways that I would never have otherwise known were possible. Just by being who you are, you taught me what really matters in this world. If not for you, this book could never have been imagined.

Lastly, I would like to thank my dad, now 15 years gone. In your final days, you said seven words to me that planted the first seeds of my realization of the power of Childhood Emotional Neglect. I have included your words in this book, in hopes that they may inspire others, as they did me.

## INTRODUCTION

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In 2012 I wrote *Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect*. Since the day of its publication, I have received thousands of messages from readers who are relieved to finally understand what’s been weighing on them for their entire lives.

Some of these folks have had epiphanies that turned their lives around by dramatically alleviating their shame and confusion, and setting them on a forward path. For others it’s been more of a series of quiet realizations taking them out of the darkness and into the light of self-understanding and strength.

Beginning to feel your emotions is no small thing. In fact, it’s deceptively tremendous. As you chip away the wall that your child self built to block out your emotions, you begin to feel more and more valid, and more and more alive.

If you started out feeling little to nothing, you can find yourself a bit disconcerted by these new experiences. Bit by bit, you find yourself feeling the weight of sadness in your chest, the zing of excitement in your belly, or perhaps some anger or hurt from past wrongs that were done you. Some of these emotions can be painful, yes. Others are joyous and loving. All of them, positive and negative, connect you to your true self, to the world, and to the people around you in a new way that you never imagined.

Everyone is different, of course. But one factor is shared by all who are on the path of CEN Recovery: all are changing their lives by changing themselves on the inside. And changing on the inside has

ripple effects on the outside. Every positive, healthy change that you make in yourself affects the people around you. This can lead to some very unexpected challenges.

And that is the reason for this book.

Before we go on, a quick refresher on Childhood Emotional Neglect (or CEN). CEN is as simple in its definition as it is devastating in its effects.

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**Childhood Emotional Neglect** is what happens when, throughout your childhood, your parents fail to respond *enough* to your emotional needs.

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What happens to you as a child, growing up in a household that is either blind to your emotions or intolerant of what you feel? You must adapt to your situation. To ensure that you don't burden your parents with your feelings or emotional needs, you push your emotions down and away. You become intolerant of your own feelings, and you try hard to have no needs.

Most likely all of this happens outside of your conscious awareness. Your little child brain knows exactly what to do to protect you, and how to do it. A metaphorical wall is constructed to block your feelings away, protecting your parents from needing to deal with them. This automatic, adaptive move may serve you quite well in your childhood home, but as an adult, you will suffer.

Living life with your own feelings partially walled off is painful and challenging. Your emotions, which should be connecting you, motivating you, stimulating and guiding you, are not available enough to do their job. You find yourself living in a world that seems less bright, less vivid, and less interesting than the world you see others enjoying. You struggle to know what you want, what you need, or how to thrive. Indeed, you find yourself running on empty.

These natural effects of having your emotions walled off can also be quite baffling. Especially if your parents provided for you well materially,

or if they loved you and did their best while raising you, you will struggle to understand why you're not happier, and why you feel different from others in some unnamable way. "What am I missing that others seem to have? What is wrong with me?"

The reality is that what you are missing is the most vital thing you need in order to have rewarding, resilient, meaningful relationships. You are missing ready access to your emotions. A CEN relationship can often be described as a watered-down version of what a relationship should be. Sadly, most CEN couples don't realize this, since it's all they have ever known.

---

#### **Wondering if you have CEN?**

CEN can be invisible and hard to remember, so it can be difficult to know if you have it. If what you have read so far rings true to you, I invite you to visit [drjonicewebb.com/cen-questionnaire](http://drjonicewebb.com/cen-questionnaire) and take the Emotional Neglect Questionnaire.

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To learn how the CEN adaptive pattern in childhood continues to affect you throughout your adult years and how to heal it, see my first book, *Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect*.

If you've already realized that CEN is a part of your life and are experiencing some of the benefits of addressing it, or if you suspect that someone you care about has CEN, read on. Because this book is for you.

Recovery from CEN is a process. As you recover, you start to feel differently and act differently. As you get in touch with your feelings, you have more energy, more motivation and more direction. As you get to know yourself better, you realize that you have wishes and needs, and what those wishes and needs are. As you realize that you're not weak or damaged after all, you start feeling good about taking up more space. You start to realize that you are just as valid and important as everyone else. You start feeling closer to the people around you, and you may start wanting more emotional substance back from them.

As you're working hard, cleaning up all of the havoc that CEN has wreaked throughout the decades of your life, you can't help but wreak more havoc of a different kind. It's a healthy kind of havoc that's brought on by the healthy changes you are making. Yet it's havoc nonetheless.

The transformation of the CEN person may be dramatic, may be slow and steady, may be intermittent/sporadic, or may be all three at different times. But no matter how you transform your inner self, it affects the people who are closest to you. They may become puzzled, confused or surprised by you. They may sense different feelings, or a different depth of feelings coming from you. They may find you more assertive, and they may even resent you for it.

No matter where you are in your recovery, simply becoming aware of your CEN can throw many parts of your life into question. As you see the effects of CEN, you may feel your own relationships disrupted. You may feel angry or guilty or irritated at your parents or your spouse. You may become aware of what you're *not* getting from these people to whom you are the closest. You may become aware of what you've *not* been giving them.

What do you do when you are becoming healthier and changing for the better, and yet you find your life becoming more complex?

### The Three Big Questions I Get Most Often:

1. How do I heal the effects of CEN on my relationship?
2. How do I deal with my parents, now that I realize they emotionally neglected me?
3. How do I deal with the effects of CEN that I now see in my children?

Each of these Three Big Questions encompasses many more:

- I think my husband has CEN. How do I talk with him about it?
- What about the special case in which both partners in a relationship grew up with CEN?

- Should I talk with my parents about Emotional Neglect? How do I do it?
- I feel guilty about how angry I am at my parents. What should I do?
- I can see how CEN has affected the way I've raised my children. Is it too late to fix it?
- I can see the effects of CEN on my adult children. How can I reach out to talk with them about CEN?
- Is it possible to heal the emotional distance in my relationship?

If any of these questions resonate with you, you are not alone. You are in the same boat with many other CEN people like yourself who are working and striving to better their lives.

You are brave, and you are strong. Otherwise you would not be reading this. You deserve guidance, warmth and care. You deserve the answers and help that you were denied in childhood.

It is for you that I write this book.

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PART 1

**CEN AND YOUR  
RELATIONSHIP**

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## Chapter 1

# THE CEN RELATIONSHIP: A PORTRAIT

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### When One Partner Has CEN

#### *Marcel and May*

Driving home from work *alone in his car*, Marcel is lost in thought. In his mind he's replaying over and over the scenario that happened the previous night between himself and his wife, May.

*In the scenario*, Marcel walked through the door, dropped his briefcase on the floor, crouched down and opened his arms to his two small children, who ran into his arms yelling, "Daddyyyyyy!!" The giant hug turned into a wrestling match as he took turns tickling one after the other.

"Children, get off your dad! He's been working all day and he's too tired for silliness," he heard May declare loudly as she walked into the room. Marcel watched his children's small faces fall a bit as they extricated themselves from the Daddy Pile. His own heart sinking a little, he stood up and gave May a hug.

Distractedly, May gave him a half-hug back while glancing over her shoulder. "Can you fix that broken window this evening? And keep an eye on the kids for a second?" she asked as she ran down the steps into the basement to get something.

*Watching the children play, Marcel had an uncomfortable feeling in his gut. Sad, lost, alone. Yes, definitely alone. He mustered his courage to try to talk to May when she came back up those steps.*

*“May, I need to talk to you for a minute,” he said to her that evening after the kids were in bed. “I just keep feeling like something is wrong with us.”*

*“What? What are you talking about? I don’t understand,” May responded, with tears instantly springing to her eyes. “Do you not love me anymore?”*

*“Of course I love you, as much as ever,” he reassured her. “It’s just...I don’t know what it is. I just don’t really feel like everything is how it should be,” Marcel began. As he finished the sentence, he looked up and saw that May’s tears were gone. May had seized on the only sentence she needed to hear, “Of course I love you as much as ever...” The rest of his words were lost on her. Already she seemed to be thinking about something else.*

*“Well, Marcel, honestly. We love each other, and that’s what matters, right? I mean, I think you’re probably being over-sensitive about something or other. Seriously, I wish you’d just relax and be happy.”*

*Marcel looked at May, fully aware that he had already lost her concern and interest. Helplessly he searched for words to try to explain to her that this was a serious problem, and that he needed her to try to understand.*

*But feeling frustrated, hurt and angry, no words came.*

*Fast forward to Marcel driving home in his car the following evening.*

*“Am I crazy?” he wondered to himself. “Is it me or is it her? She’s right that we love each other, but is that really enough? I know there’s supposed to be more to a marriage. Why doesn’t she feel what’s missing the way I do? What can I say to explain this to her? How can I get her to talk to me?”*

The portrait above illustrates how it feels for a person without CEN (Marcel) to be married to someone who has it. Only Marcel realizes that something is wrong. He grew up in a world colored by emotion, and now is experiencing his home life in May’s CEN style: grayscale.

It’s difficult for the partner of a CEN person to understand exactly what the problem is. “Is it me or is it her?” he might wonder often. “Are my expectations unrealistic? Is this simply what it’s like to be married? Am I overly needy? Am I nitpicking or making mountains from molehills?” These are all questions that run through the mind of the non-CEN partner.

From May’s perspective, everything is fine in the marriage, except for the brief periods when Marcel expresses dissatisfaction. “Why can’t you just be happy?” is the typical response of the CEN spouse. May loves Marcel and genuinely wants him to be happy, but she is unequipped with the skills or emotional perceptiveness to understand what he needs or wants. She may view Marcel’s healthy emotional requests as needy, or even as weakness on his part.

No matter how compatible May and Marcel are or how much they love each other, their relationship is at risk for growing more troubled over time. Marcel may grow tired of knocking on May’s “wall,” and angry at what seems like her refusal to allow him in. Feeling more and more alone in the relationship, he may eventually begin to feel hopeless.

Or, in a different possible outcome, May could grow annoyed and smothered by Marcel and his needs. Lacking the emotion skills to put any of these problems into words and work them through, dissent, hurt and pain can accrue through the years on both sides, and slowly erode the couple’s positive connection. Eventually, one day they might sadly realize that they no longer like each other very much.

Fortunately there is a bright side to the single-CEN relationship. Marcel knows that there is something missing, so this couple has a huge advantage over many others. May’s CEN is not her choice or fault, and Marcel senses this. He can see that May is a good person who is trying, and that she loves him. And everything that is missing in this relationship is possible to attain. All of these factors will play a tremendously important role in their future recovery.

Now let's continue on to a vignette describing a relationship in which both partners grew up with CEN, as they grapple with the invisible issue that they cannot identify or name.

## When Both Partners Have CEN

### *Olive and Oscar*

*Olive and Oscar sit across the table from each other, quietly having their Sunday morning breakfast.*

*"Is there any more coffee?" Olive asks absentmindedly while reading the day's news on her laptop. Irritated, Oscar stands up abruptly and walks over to the coffee-maker to check.*

*"Why does she always ask me? She's so manipulative. She just doesn't want to have to walk over to the coffee-maker herself," he cranks inwardly. Returning to the table with the pot, Oscar fills Olive's cup. Placing the empty carafe on the table with a slight bit of excessive force, Oscar sits back in his chair with a sigh and an angry glance at Olive's still-bowed head.*

*Olive, sensing something amiss from the placement of the carafe and the sigh, quickly looks up. Seeing Oscar already absorbed in his newspaper, she looks back down at her laptop but has difficulty focusing on her reading.*

*"I wonder what's going on with Oscar," she muses. "He seems so irritable lately. I wonder if his work stress is coming back. It must be his job pressure getting to him again."*

*After thinking it through, Olive makes a plan to avoid Oscar for the day in hopes that giving him some alone time will help his mood improve (with the added bonus that she won't have to be around him). Olive makes a plan to ask him about work at dinnertime to see if he is indeed under stress.*

*Later that evening Olive returns from her errands and finds that Oscar has made dinner for the both of them. Sitting down to eat, Oscar seems to be in a better mood.*

*After a brief exchange about Olive's errands, she asks, "So how are things at work?"*

*Looking at Olive quizzically, Oscar answers, "Fine, why do you ask?"*

*"No reason," Olive replies, relieved to hear him say it was fine. Do you want to watch the next episode of Game of Thrones while we eat?"*

*The TV goes on and they eat dinner in silence, each absorbed in the show.*

The double CEN couple seems much like every other couple in many ways. And yet they are very, very different. This type of relationship is riddled with incorrect assumptions and false readings. And unfortunately neither partner has the communication skills to check with the other to actually find out what he is thinking or feeling, or why she does what she does.



*"Then maybe you should just tell me what you want for your birthday instead of saying you don't care."*

Since neither partner knows how to talk about the frustrations and conflicts that naturally arise (as they do in every relationship), very little gets addressed and worked out. This is a set-up for passive-aggressive retaliations that eat away at the warmth and caring in the marriage,

outside of both partners' awareness. Small, indirect actions like carafe-slammings, avoidance, ignoring and forgetting can become the primary means of coping and communicating in the relationship. None of them are effective.

In the scenario above Oscar misinterprets Olive's thoughtless absorption in her reading as "manipulative," and Olive misinterprets Oscar's irritation with her as the possible result of job stress. Instead of dealing with these issues directly in the moment, Olive chooses avoidance for the day. Her question to Oscar that evening at dinner is too simple and off-target to yield any useful information. She is left with a false sense of reassurance that Oscar's mood magically improved, and that nothing was really wrong in the first place.

So forward they go, into the coming weeks, months and years, with Oscar viewing Olive as lazy and manipulative, and Olive on constant guard against a return of Oscar's job stress. Drastically out of tune with one another, they live in separate worlds, growing ever distant from each other.

Olive and Oscar sometimes feel more alone when they are together than they do when they are apart. They are divided by a chasm as wide as the ocean. They each sense that something important is wrong, but sadly, neither can consciously describe or name it.

Fortunately for Olive and Oscar, they actually have loads of potential. They each have plenty of feelings; they are simply not aware of those feelings or able to use them in a healthy, relationship-enriching way. At the heart of their marriage is companionship, history, concern and love. All that is really missing from their marriage is awareness and skills, both of which can be learned. There is a good chance that one day, one of them will "wake up" emotionally, and knock on the other's wall.

As you read on you will see that is exactly what happened.