

# THE IMPACT OF LOSS AND MOURNING ON SOVIET EMIGRE TEENAGERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

## Some Implications for Practice

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*This article integrates a three-year experience of working with Soviet adolescents and their families in individual, family, and group psychotherapy that focused on facilitating their adjustment process. For Soviet emigre teenagers, this adjustment process is greatly affected by their difficulty accomplishing the necessary developmental tasks of adolescence: separation and individuation. The healthy process of adaptation to life in a new country requires mourning of the losses that resulted from emigration. The inability to go through the mourning process on the family and individual level impedes the process of separation and individuation.*

*I* It is not easy to be an adolescent. It is much more difficult if you are also a refugee from the Soviet Union. You grew up in a totalitarian hostile society, and there are many things you would probably like to forget about your childhood. But you still remember that when you were in kindergarten a girl refused to play with you. She said that she would not play with a Jew....It hurt you a lot and it was impossible to comprehend. You tried not to think about it, but you did not forget it. Then already in elementary school you heard your classmates giggling when they read your nationality out loud from the teacher's log. You grew up tense and worried that it might happen again. Depending upon the circumstances, you could grow to hate yourself or others. Most probably you started avoiding situations in which you could get hurt.

And yet, for the most part, your childhood was secure because your parents were there for you. They worked hard, they got tired, they complained about the injustice and bigotry in the Soviet society. It could also be that on the contrary they did not discuss their problems in your presence, trying to protect you. But still they were there. Now all of a sudden you are in a

foreign country. And you are on your own.

No, actually it is even worse because you find yourself responsible for the misery of your parents who sacrificed everything in order to make you happy. Even if they don't blame you openly, you see that they are miserable and you blame yourself. You see that your parents have changed a lot. Those who are lucky to get a job come home so exhausted that they do not talk to you anymore. Those who do not have a job are even more unhappy. They do not know the language, and they tell you that it is much more difficult for them to master it than for you.

Very soon you find yourself in a position of an adult: you help your parents find an apartment, you take them to a doctor's appointment, you help them fill in applications for public assistance, etc. And you realize that suddenly the world has fallen apart. Your parents can no longer provide security for you. On the contrary you start protecting them. You do not tell them anything upsetting. You do not tell them how scared you are of your high school, how you feel that everybody hates you, and how the students laugh at you when you do not know a proper word in English. You do not tell your parents that your American peers

*ridicule your clothes, but instead you go and get yourself a job, and you buy yourself a leather jacket and a VCR for your family. You think that probably you can protect yourself from the world around you with clothes. You hope you can make it up to your parents by buying things for them. You work hard. You are different from your parents, and you are not ashamed of any job. Eventually it helps, and you do not feel pain anymore.*

*You do not study though, and there are several reasons for that. The Soviet school system is different from the American one. In the former Soviet Union subjects are usually taught continuously from elementary school through high school. Nobody explained to you that it may be different here. Therefore, when you come to the first science class, you get bored because you know the stuff already. On the other hand you do not know the language well enough, and you are not stimulated by the desire to learn since you seem to know the material. You start cutting class. You are constantly exhausted because of your work, and it makes cutting easier. One day when you return to the classroom, after being truant for a month, you suddenly realize that you cannot understand anything. You give up and start thinking about dropping out.*

*There could be a different scenario that may lead to the same sense of hopelessness. You may be placed into a lower-level class because nobody evaluated your skills, and neither you nor your parents were told that you had a right to request an evaluation. By the time you find out about your rights, you are usually told that the period during which you can use them has passed already. You do not know who a guidance counselor is or who a grade advisor is. Such positions did not exist in the Soviet school system. You miss your "classroom" teacher who was responsible for one class of students for five years, who knew your parents, and to whom you could come with your problems. You have nobody in the world to trust. The only thing you keep worrying about is that your parents do not find out*

*that 50 is not a passing grade—you keep telling them that it is 50 percent and that your grades are somewhere in the middle of the class.*

*Most probably your parents never asked you whether you wanted to emigrate or not. You left your friends back there, and with them you left your favorite pastimes, places you liked to go for a walk, movies that cost almost nothing, and the security of your childhood. As a teenager you need an authority figure to defy, and you lost authority figures. You need your parents in order to be able to develop your own identity, but they seem to have lost theirs. Sometimes you wonder whether there may be something wrong with your parents, but most of the time you think there is something wrong with you. Sometimes you even think that you would be better off dead. You would probably kill yourself because nobody really loves you, but who will go with your parents then to the welfare office? You miss a lot, but most of all you miss our parents who are supposed to provide rules for you, parents who always seemed to know what was right and what was wrong, parents who used to love you so much and who have somehow ceased to do so.*

**T**o be a refugee and a parent to an adolescent is almost as difficult as to be an adolescent and a refugee. This article focuses on one reason for this difficulty: the inability of Soviet refugee parents to mourn their losses that resulted from emigration. Going through the mourning process is an important prerequisite for a healthy adjustment to a new country (Howells & Galperin, 1984; Levy-Warren, 1987). Yet, it is extremely difficult for the Soviet refugees to engage in this process because of the defense mechanisms they use to cope with the stresses of emigration (Howells & Galperin, 1984).

One such defense mechanism is splitting, in which the world is seen in black and white, and its components are charac-

terized as either all good or all bad. The totalitarian Soviet society employed splitting, as evidenced by the Communist slogan, "You are either with us or against us." Pluralism is an unknown concept in the former Soviet Union.

Indeed, the use of splitting makes leaving the country much easier. Many Jews who decided to emigrate were not forced out physically, but in fact led quite comfortable lives. Most had jobs, apartments, high status, and a network of friends and resources that provided some security. Yet, they did not have security in their future.

When political controls loosened and emigration became an option, gradually Soviet Jews came to realize that there was a possibility of a better life, one with a sense of dignity and self-fulfillment. They also came to realize that in order to live such a life they needed to emigrate.

Making the decision to leave under such circumstances required doing some psychological work, which consisted of devaluing their life in the former Soviet Union and everything that was part of it. Splitting played a role in this process: everything that was left behind was considered bad, and everything that awaited them in America was considered good. Such internal work made it easier to tolerate the emigration process.

However, life in their new home, the country of their dreams, turned out to be much harder than the emigres expected, and the real difficulties only started after the refugees had gone through a painful decision-making process and had emigrated. Moving to a new country brings with it multiple losses on many levels. Yet, for many, the outside world remains divided into black and white, with no shades of gray in between. They find it almost impossible to acknowledge these losses because to do so would undermine the decision to emigrate. Doing so would complicate their division of the world into two parts, in which all the bad elements belong to the past.

Another commonly used defense mechanism that complicates the mourning process

is denial. It is known that people experiencing losses go through a series of psychological stages, one of which is denial (Kubler-Ross, 1969; Schneidman, 1982; Viorst, 1986). Denial is also a very important part of any immigrant experience.

An emigre has to face too many different tasks and endure too much pressure. A person who has to fight for survival, work two jobs at a time, and master the language simply cannot afford to feel too much pain. In such a situation denial protects the person to a certain degree. There is also another rationale for denial: it provides a way of keeping what is actually lost.

However, it is not possible to obliterate the past, and usually people become prey to the things they are trying to forget. Thus, parents who are trying to deny their losses cannot tolerate the possibility of another loss, which they perceive would occur when their teenage children assert their independence. Therefore they very often behave in such a way that makes it extremely difficult for immigrant adolescents to develop properly. In many cases adolescent children are used by their parents as containers of their pain. And who is a more suitable symbol of a lost object than a child who is about to become an adult and who is beginning to separate? Every move on the child's part evokes painful memories. To acknowledge that a child is separating is almost the same as acknowledging one's own separation from objects that are lost.

Anger is another feeling frequently associated with losses (Viorst, 1986). However it is extremely difficult for Soviet refugees to admit a feeling that is socially quite unacceptable in Russia. Thus, anger is very often repressed. A parent who may have a lot of anger inside about having lost so much may be particularly sensitive to the child's attempts to separate and may redirect that anger at the child. However, to experience anger directly at the child for the child's wish to separate is also quite unacceptable. In such cases the anger may be projected on the outside world and used in order to keep a teenager at home. For ex-

ample, in many cases I have worked with, children have been terrified by their parents' stories about the cruelty and unpredictability of the world outside their homes. I have seen teenagers who believed they could be kidnapped or mugged every day and whose parents walked them to the school building and back even though the school was in a fairly safe neighborhood.

Needless to say, such parental attitudes affect the normal course of adolescent development. Consequently some teenagers become symptomatic and are brought to the attention of counselors. A symptomatic child then brings the parents to treatment. Thus, eventually emigre parents are being helped to deal with their unresolved mourning, which in turn helps their children separate and individuate.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Soviet emigres come to America with a tremendous mistrust of social services and with a negative attitude toward mental health services since they existed in the Soviet Union almost exclusively in the form of abusive and punitive psychiatry. Historically the Russian attitude toward pain has been stoic: people purge themselves through suffering, they should be proud of their pain, and under no circumstances should they seek professional help to alleviate their suffering. Such attitudes need to be taken into account in therapy.

Most of the work during the initial stage of therapy should be focused on the process of engagement, helping clients learn about therapy, and giving them time to establish a safe relationship with the therapist. Even in those cases where it is obvious from the outset that family or marital therapy is necessary, all the family members need to be engaged first. Usually doing so requires additional work on the part of the therapist. Special consideration in the engagement stage needs to be given to men. Soviet refugee men are threatened by the expression of feelings and by the possibility of the loss of control. It is very important to meet with

men individually before family sessions are held and to address these issues. I usually help them verbalize their fears of possible loss of control and exposure. I also recognize these fears and validate them. Then I contract with them, promising that they will not have to do what they do not want to. Usually I ask them to give me a sign when the situation becomes uncomfortable. I also promise that our conversation will be confidential. Confidentiality should be continually emphasized in work with Soviet immigrants. All their insecurity around confidential issues needs to be explored. It is a totally new concept for the refugees, and one needs to be aware of their past history. They come from a country where one utterance overheard by a neighbor could cost a person his or her life.

Engaging Soviet families in treatment almost always requires a multimodal approach. One cannot just recommend family therapy because most probably the family will be too scared by the prospect of exposure of their family life and will not follow through. Yet, it is very difficult to see parents and their adolescents separately. The parents usually deny having any problems and do not want to see a different therapist because they are afraid to separate from their child and lose control. The issues of separation and loss of control are very painful for every emigre and need to be taken into consideration. Therefore, it is more productive to go through stages of treatment with such families. Initially a child should be seen individually, and at the same time the parents should be seen individually and together. In addition, the family should be seen together for the purposes of conducting a family assessment. The very process of the assessment will desensitize the family, help them feel more comfortable about meeting together as a family and deal with the stress of therapy. It will also highlight family or marital issues that might need to be explored later.

After the family is engaged in treatment a decision needs to be made by both the

counselor and the clients about the necessity of family, marital, or individual therapy. At that stage the case could be split between two therapists, with the child staying with the first therapist.

#### **CASE EXAMPLE**

Mila X., a pretty 12-year-old girl, was brought to the Jewish Board by her parents who were very concerned about her low academic performance and constant dissatisfaction with everything. Mila X. came to America in 1988 together with her mother and father, who at the time I saw them were 35 and 39 years old, respectively. Both parents worked. The father had an entry-level position with an engineering company. His position was much lower than his qualifications. The mother had to go for training when they came to the country. By the time the family came for therapy she worked as a bookkeeper. Both parents could speak English. All members of the family were verbal and intelligent. The family lived in a two-bedroom rented apartment in a safe neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Both parents reported complete satisfaction with everything in their lives. They stated that they only worried about their daughter. The father said that he was afraid that they might lose her. He explained further that his friend's daughter committed suicide after the family had spent five years in America. He was concerned that something like that could happen to Mila. The mother could not understand how Mila could be so dissatisfied and upset all the time when they finally came to such a wonderful free country.

Initially I saw Mila X. individually while I also saw her mother and father (together and individually) for the assessment. Mila very soon established contact with me. She complained a lot about her school, her classmates, and teachers. She did not like anybody. Everybody was perceived by her as ugly and stupid. Very soon it became clear that Mila projected onto the world much of the feelings that she had about her-

self. She felt inadequate and lost in a new environment.

In the beginning Mila denied having any problems with her parents, but gradually it became obvious that her life was strictly controlled by her parents. Whenever she stayed at home while her parents were at work, her mother would call her every 30 minutes to check on her. Whenever she brought her friends home, they would be criticized and she would be asked to choose better friends. She would want to wear American clothes, but her parents would get terrified by the idea of a girl wearing make-up or torn jeans. Mila had to spend every weekend under the close supervision of her parents because "they were a family." In other words, any attempt to separate on Mila's part was met with a great deal of resistance by her parents. Being extremely loyal to her parents, Mila projected her anger at her parents on the world around her. By doing so she went along with her parents' unconscious wishes.

Gradually in individual sessions I very carefully supported Mila's attempts to separate. I helped her talk about her wishes to have friends and go to the community center. At the same time I contracted with the parents, asking them to allow Mila to do various activities that appeared fairly safe to them. I introduced the idea of a curfew and different rules, which the family as a whole finally agreed with.

The family sessions, which started both at the request of the parents who wanted to make Mila take responsibility for some chores at home and at Mila's request to help her negotiate her freedom, then began. Family therapy began approximately five weeks after the first session. Almost every family session started with the parents complaining about Mila's problems. Instead of responding to their complaints I started by asking what happened to any of them during the past week. Gradually the parents began to speak in sessions about the difficulties they were facing at work. They revealed feelings of frustration and inad-

equacy that overwhelmed them. They started saying that they felt humiliated all the time because they did not know many simple things about their new country, "things a five-year-old would know." At that point Mila started revealing anger at her parents in individual sessions. She complained about her parents shouting at each other. The worker encouraged her to bring the issue to family sessions. When she discussed this issue, it aggravated the parents a great deal. At that point they no longer blamed Mila, but started actually speaking about their feelings of incompetence and of loss and isolation. They presented many concrete everyday problems that they had failed to solve, such as finding a good medical doctor, obtaining medical or dental insurance, and making friends. We discussed one problem at a time and I asked them what they would have done with every problem if they had been in Moscow, their city of origin. Thus they started discussing their losses in a nonthreatening, almost casual way.

After a while Mila's grades improved considerably. She was also allowed to make independent decisions regarding her clothes and some of her friends. It is important to note that both her friends and her clothes pleased her parents more by this time. The next turning point was when the parents allowed Mila to spend a Sunday afternoon without them while they went to a park. This allowed me to help them start talking about the losses in their relationship.

After that the parents asked to be seen without Mila. They acknowledged their need to deal with their issues as a couple. In an individual session Mila asked the therapist to help her parents. She said her parents almost stopped shouting at each other and did not criticize her anymore. However she noticed that they were very sad. Finally the case was split. The parents started seeing another therapist. This further reinforced Mila's separation. The whole treatment process until the splitting of the case took 15 months.

## CONCLUSION

The healthy process of adaptation to the life in a new country requires mourning of the losses that resulted from emigration. The mourning process is particularly difficult for Soviet immigrants because of their use of splitting as a psychological defense. The parents' inability to acknowledge their losses and go through the mourning process impedes the process of separation and individuation of their adolescent children. The use of a multimodal approach in therapy is recommended with symptomatic Soviet immigrant teenagers. All family members need to be engaged initially, and their insecurities and misconceptions about therapy need to be addressed in treatment. After a prolonged engagement phase a treatment plan may be implemented. It needs to be accepted by the family members, and it may include individual, family, or marital therapy.

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