

EXCERPT FROM

THE
Relationship
HANDBOOK

- ✓ Family
- ✓ Romantic
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How to

**FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS:
7 STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVING HOLIDAY
DINNERS, FAMILY EVENTS, AND OTHER
WAR ZONES**

Relationship
in Your Life

KEVIN B. BURK

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Relationship
HANDBOOK

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How to Understand and Improve Every Relationship in Your Life*
(Serendipity Press, 2004)

THE
Relationship
HANDBOOK

How to Understand
and Improve
Every Relationship
in Your Life

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FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

We often spend most of our time worrying about our romantic relationships, even though our romantic relationships are not necessarily the most challenging relationships in our lives. For many of us, our relationships to our families are the most difficult to experience. In this chapter, we will explore these relationships—the good, the bad, and the holiday dinner. As always, our objective is to cultivate an awareness of our needs, expectations and behavior patterns. We must become aware of our patterns, and own them before we can choose to alter them.

This chapter covers the dynamics of our *equal* family relationships. Everyone in the relationships we will explore in this chapter is an adult (in age, if not in behavior). This chapter does not address ways to relate to our children while they are still our responsibility. The best advice I can offer in that respect is to remember that as parents we are responsible for meeting our children's *needs*, not their *wants*. In particular, we are responsible for helping our children to feel safe by providing them with healthy boundaries, structures and limits. We must accept that the *way* that our children learn how to feel safe is by *testing* these boundaries, structures and limits. They may hate us for saying “no” to them, but being able to say “no” and mean it is one of the most important skill requirements of being a parent.

When our children grow up and become adults, we can use the strategies in this chapter to improve our relationships with them.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS 101: INTRODUCTION TO ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

Over the course of our lives, we grow and evolve. We are different individuals today from who we were ten, twenty, thirty or more years ago. One of the few constants in our lives is our family relationships. Our relationships to our family members are among the longest, most enduring relationships in our lives. Most of the challenges in our family relationships occur because we feel that our families don't appreciate how much we've grown and evolved over the years. We want our families to relate to us as we *are*, not as we *were*. We may not realize, however, that we usually relate to our families as *they* were not as they are.

The first and most important step towards improving our family relationships is to get to know our family members as they actually are, not as we remember them. We must become aware of how our history and our expectations influence how we relate to our family members. We must choose to let go of the past, forgive old grudges, and stay anchored in the present. In some cases, this means we will have to release our old relationship completely and create an entirely new relationship from scratch.

Adult Relationships with our Parents and Children

Our relationship to our parents is one of the most influential relationships in our lives. It is directly related to every one of our relationship blueprints. It forms the basis of our Authority Blueprints; it contributes elements to our Soul Blueprint; the amount of love and attention we received from our parents forms the basis of our Sibling Blueprint; and our experience of our parents' relationship is the basis of our Marriage Blueprint. Because of this, we work out our unresolved issues with our parents through every one of our relationships.

Parent-child relationships are unequal relationships. When we are born, we are entirely dependent on our parents for our survival. While we are growing up, our parents are responsible for us. We are subject to their beliefs, structures and rules. No matter how much we may resent it, we *need* those rules and structures in order to become responsible adults. As adults, however, we can choose to disregard everything our parents taught us. We are able to

make our own choices and establish our own rules. It often escapes us that the reason that we're able to make our own choices as adults is that we had to live by our parents' rules while we grew up.

Once we no longer depend on our parents for survival, our original relationship has ended. By the time we reach the age of 30—and often long before that—we no longer need our parents to play an active role in our lives. If we choose to have a relationship with our parents as adults, we have to alter our Authority Blueprint and modify our checklists for the relationship. If we continue to relate to our parents using our original Authority Blueprint and checklists, we will encounter a host of challenges. The original Authority Blueprint creates the ultimate *unequal* relationship—one in which our parents express love for us by making choices and decisions about our lives. More to the point, when we relate to our parents using our original Authority Blueprint, we still operate from the perspective of a child. If we want our parents to treat us like adults, we have to change our Authority Blueprints so that we can actually behave like adults.

In order to create a healthy adult relationship with our parents we will need to start from scratch. Our original relationship with our parents was all about obligations. Our parents were responsible for meeting our needs, providing guidance, structure and support so that we could discover and explore our individual identity. In exchange for taking responsibility for us, we had to live by our parents' rules. As children, we were completely self-centered. Our parents were the ultimate authority figures in our lives, and on the whole, we took them for granted. We related to them based on how they made us feel at any given time. We did not choose to be in relationship with them, and we may not have felt that we had anything at all in common.

If we want to create a relationship with our parents as adults, we must work from a revised Authority Blueprint. Our parents are still authority figures, and they still deserve our respect. However, they are no longer responsible for us, and we no longer have to live our lives based on their rules. We need to relate to our parents as adult individuals. This can be challenging because few of us know the first thing about our parents as individuals. We have to get to know our parents as *people*, not as *parents*.

This can be quite an eye-opening process. Personally, I'm always amazed to realize that when my father was my age, he was married with two children. When I put myself in his place, I begin to appreciate the things he must have felt. I think about all of the responsibilities he had, and I find it so much easier to forgive him. This is one of the most important benefits of getting to know our parents as people: it's easier to forgive them. If we want to relate to our parents as people, we must forgive them for not being perfect as parents. We must forgive our parents for not being able to meet our needs in the ways that we expected our needs to be met. We must forgive our parents for not making us feel safe enough or loved enough or validated enough. Our parents did the best they could at the time. This is all we can ever expect from anyone. And when we begin to get to know our parents as people, we often find this easier to accept.

As *parents*, we also have to change our blueprints and our expectations when we want to stay in relationships with our adult children. The hardest thing to let go of is the belief that we know what's best for our children. Even if we *do* happen to know what's best, it's no longer our responsibility—or our right—to impose our choices or our beliefs on our children. Once our children have become adults, we have to let them live their own lives. We can't be there to protect them in the same ways that we used to. We must let go of our expectations and get to know our children as unique individuals, rather than extensions of ourselves. We can still offer advice, show support and express concern—but we no longer have the right to expect that our advice will be heeded. Except in life-threatening situations, we have to learn to sit on our hands and let our children make their own choices. Our children have to be able to make their own mistakes, and they have to be able to accept the consequences and responsibilities for those mistakes.

Adult Relationships with our Siblings

Our relationships with our siblings evolve in much the same way that our relationships with our parents do. As children, our relationship to our siblings involves competing for the love and attention of our parents. The rest of the dynamic often involves the younger siblings complaining that they don't have the same privileges and freedom as their older siblings, and the older siblings

complaining that the younger siblings get away with murder. Younger siblings often idolize their older siblings, deferring to them and sometimes treating them like a third (or even second) parent. The greater the age difference, the stronger the parenting dynamic may be in the relationship.

As adults we may continue to relate to our siblings in the same way we did as children. We may revert to our old patterns of competing for our parents' love and attention. If we want to relate to our siblings as adults, we have to let go of the past. We must learn to relate to our siblings as people. Just because we may not have enjoyed our relationship with our siblings while we were growing up doesn't mean that we have to carry that anger and resentment with us into our adult lives. As with our parents, the most important part of creating a new relationship with our siblings is forgiveness. We must release the old patterns and old grudges we carry against our siblings.

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS 201: INTERMEDIATE RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

Accepting that we must get to know our family members as people is relatively easy. Actually getting to know them as people, however, is far more challenging. We have more history with our family members than with any other individuals in our lives. We've known them longer than anyone else—and they've known us our whole lives. On the whole, our families have witnessed more than their fair share of our most embarrassing and uncomfortable moments. If we want to create healthy and supportive relationships with our families, we must let go of the past. Letting go of the past would be a lot easier, however, if our family members would stop bringing it up.

Feeling Like a Child at the Adult's Table

Our families have a strange and almost mystical power over us. In the blink of an eye, they can turn us from the successful, accomplished, enthusiastic, independent individuals that we are into scared, insecure, petulant six-year-olds. We may have recently been awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics, and yet our families won't let us forget that we got fired from our paper route because

we couldn't make change. We may rank in the top 10 of *People Magazine's* 50 Most Beautiful People, and still feel like an overweight, acne-scarred teenager if we actually eat dessert.

The **Universal Law of Relationships** applies to our family relationships: Our families are our mirrors. However, our families are very special mirrors. They have the ability to reflect back to us the parts of ourselves that we have denied or disowned. Everything we worked so hard to outgrow, every aspect of ourselves that we worked so hard to forget, we see reflected back to us through our family relationships. We feel that our family relates to us as if we were still fourteen years old, because we see our fourteen-year-old self reflected in the mirror of our family.

If we want our families to accept us as adults and relate to us as we are now, we first have to accept who we were then. We must be willing to forgive ourselves. We must accept that we did the best that we could based on our circumstances at the time. We must recognize that we would not be the person that we are today, if we had not been the person that we were then. Every experience, every choice, no matter how painful or inelegant it seemed at the time, contributed to who we are. As we forgive ourselves, we reintegrate our past selves into our present self.

Our families will still bring up the past, of course—that's what families do. But we will be able to discuss the past with our families without being drawn into it. We will be able to hear our families talk about things that we did when we were fourteen without experiencing the pain of being fourteen again. The more we're able to accept and forgive ourselves for who we were, the more we'll experience our families accepting us for who we are.

Feeling Like an Adult at the Children's Table

When we first begin to feel like an adult with our families, we often seem to step outside the usual family dynamic. We have a new perspective, and for the first time, we notice how the members of our family interact. And the more we observe the family dynamic, the more we feel like an adult seated at the children's table. We may witness a staggering range of unconscious behavior, as our family members let their inner children out to play (or sulk).

We may, in fact, find ourselves feeling just a *teensy* bit superior to our family members. *We've* evolved as individuals. *They*, on the other hand, have not. In some cases, they seem to have dropped a few rungs down the evolutionary ladder. We have transcended our petty need to seek the approval of our families. We have moved beyond them, and we have our own, more advanced and evolved lessons to explore. Lessons, such as our current one: learning how to disengage our egos.

Our families no longer make us feel like a child fighting our old family battles. Now, we're an *adult* fighting our old family battles. Just because we feel smug and superior to our family doesn't mean we've transcended the family skirmishes. We're still competing in them—we're just using a different strategy. We want our family members to *recognize* that we're being adults. We are taking the high road while *they're* rolling around in the gutter. We want them to finally acknowledge how much better we are than they ever thought we were. And, of course, when they see how much we've evolved, they'll feel just *terrible* about all of the hurtful things they said or did to us in the past. Why, they'll fall to their knees and beg us for forgiveness. And we'll forgive them...eventually. Of course, we'll let them suffer just a *little* bit first, just to make sure that they learn their lessons.

Incredibly attractive as this scenario sounds to many of us, it only serves to rope us back into our old family dynamic. In fact, it's nothing more than an adult version of the fantasy that we had as children. It's the old "One day I'll show *them*, and they'll be *sorry!*" theme. And most of us will have to work our way through this phase.

Our objective is to reach the point where we are able to notice the family dynamic, to observe the varying degrees of childish behavior in our family members, and love them for it. In other words, we want to be able to forgive our family members. We want to reach the point where we truly believe that our family members are perfect exactly the way they are. They are doing the best they can at any given moment, which is all we can ever expect of anyone. We are free to choose a different approach to our family relationships, but our choice is no more or less valid than their choices are. We want to experience unconditional love, acceptance and compassion for our family members.

Always, Ever, Never

If we want to relate to our family members as they are now and not as we remember them being in the past, we must eliminate three words from our vocabulary: *always*, *ever* and *never*. In the lexicon of family “discussions,” *always*, *ever* and *never* are relationship air-raid sirens. They signal that an attack has been launched and it’s time to duck and cover. Specifically, we must avoid some of our favorite statements in our family relationships such as, “You *always* behave this way,” “When have you *ever* supported me?” and “You *never* give me any credit.” If we find ourselves using any of these words in a similar context, it’s a red flag that we’re focused on the past and not on the present. Likewise, when our family members use these words about us, *they’re* relating to us as we were, not as we are.

As soon as we become aware that we are using these words, we must stop. It’s likely that our use of these words has made our family member feel unsafe and invalid. We can apologize for having used one of these words, and acknowledge that we have been unfair. Something about the current discussion has triggered an unpleasant association for us. If appropriate, we can rephrase the statement, keeping it specific to the present.

If we’re on the receiving end of *always*, *ever*, *never* statements, we can choose to respond, rather than to react. In the middle of a family get-together, the wisest choice is often to deflect the statement, perhaps even acknowledge that the statement may have some validity when applied to the past, and then change the subject. If the discussion has uncovered an old wound, the wound will still be there for us to heal at a more appropriate time and in a more appropriate environment.

ADVANCED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: SURVIVING HOLIDAY DINNERS, FAMILY EVENTS AND OTHER WAR ZONES

No matter how well we may have weathered our basic training, nothing can fully prepare us for the front lines of family gatherings. We’re in the thick of it, dodging live ammunition, and fighting the urge to return to

our old, reliable patterns that helped us to survive while we were growing up. We may have mastered our relationship skills in one-on-one relationships. We may have improved our romantic relationships, our professional relationships and our friendships. And we may have even improved our family relationships—one family member at a time. But when we're sitting around the holiday dinner table or socializing at a wedding reception with our entire family, it's an entirely different experience.

For one thing, when we're with our entire family, we have to juggle a number of different relationships at the same time. Our attention is divided at best, and for many of us, our awareness deserts us completely after the first major skirmish. We feel like we're surrounded and have to defend ourselves from sneak attacks. We often feel that retreat is not an option. When we are cornered, we often believe that the only way that we can survive is to fight our way out, new relationship skills be damned.

While most people assume that General Sherman was referring to the Civil War when he stated, "War is hell," in fact, he was referring to a particularly memorable Thanksgiving dinner with his family. This also explains why he could send his troops into battle without a second thought, but that the very mention of cranberry sauce would reduce him to tears.

Bearing this in mind, here are some essential tips for surviving your next family gathering.

Go Easy On Yourself!

The first, and most important survival tip is to remember that navigating and surviving family gatherings takes exceptional skill and often quite a bit of practice. We will not be able to transform our entire family dynamic between the salad course and the pumpkin pie. In fact, we may not be able to change our family dynamic at all—and it's important that we accept that we don't *need* to. It's not our responsibility to help our family members resolve their issues. We're only responsible for resolving our responses to their issues. Our objective is to maintain our own safety and validation accounts, focus our awareness, and survive the family event reasonably unscathed.

However, maintaining our awareness while we're relating to our families takes practice! We must go easy on ourselves. We may react when we would rather respond. We may be drawn into old arguments. Whatever happens, we need to accept that it is perfect. We are doing our best, and that's all we can ever ask of ourselves. And remember that our *awareness* that we're acting out an old pattern is, in itself, a change in that pattern! As we develop our awareness, we will spend less time caught in our old patterns. Over time, our awareness will help us to make lasting and permanent changes in those patterns.

Go Easy On Your Family

This piece of advice is equally as important as going easy on ourselves, but it's often a bit more challenging to follow. Essentially, we must be willing to forgive our relatives for everything. We must be able to accept that they only ever did the best they could at any given time. We need to begin to recognize and relate to our families as *people* instead of as family members. We need to begin to know them for who they are, and not simply for who they are to us.

When we embrace the truth that even our family members are individualized aspects of All That Is, our relationships with our families will shift dramatically. Our family members are some of the most powerful teachers we will ever encounter in our lives. They also tend to be the most accurate and powerful mirrors for us, which, of course, is why we often find it so difficult to love and accept our family members unconditionally. In order to love our family members, we would also need to be able to love and accept ourselves.

Even so, we can love our family members unconditionally and *still* only choose to sit down to eat with them once a year.

Use the Bathroom as a Sanctuary When Needed

In our other relationships, we can usually recognize when we feel unsafe and move to a safe space so we can disengage our egos. Once we restore the balance in our safety account, we can return to the discussion and explore it without feeling threatened—and without threatening our partner in return.

When we feel unsafe in our family relationships, however, many of us feel that we're obligated to stay and fight. This is simply not the case.

When we are *aware* that we feel triggered by a family member, we can simply *choose* to excuse ourselves and visit the bathroom. The bathroom is the one place that we can be assured of our privacy, and we can stay there as long as we need to. We can use the bathroom as a sanctuary where we can regain our composure and gather our strength so that we feel safe enough to return to the battle. If any of our family members are indelicate enough to comment on how much time we seem to be spending in the bathroom, we can always plead an upset stomach or a weak bladder.

Lose the Battle to Win the War

We have to be very clear about our objectives in terms of our family relationships. If our ultimate goal is to improve our family relationships, we have to be willing to stay focused on the big picture. The most difficult lesson for most of us to accept is that in order to win the war, we have to be willing to lose the battle. Our long-term objective is to feel more safe and more validated in our family relationships. To reach this goal, we must help our family members to feel safe and validated. In order to do this, we must be absolutely clear that we are capable of meeting our own safety and validation needs.

We often experience our families as competitive environments. Our old blueprints tell us that there's a limited amount of safety and validation available, and that we must compete with the other members of our family to meet our needs. We insult and snipe at each other because we can only feel safe and validated if the balance in our accounts is greater than the balance in everyone else's accounts. The more we care about earning other people's approval and validation, the more vulnerable we are. When one of our family members makes a comment designed to make us feel less valid, we do not need to defend ourselves. We can recognize that this person is asking to be validated, and we can validate them. Sometimes, this means letting them think that we are less successful, accomplished, and generally wonderful than we truly are.

We must be willing to lose every single family argument we encounter. Letting our family members win the argument allows them to feel safe and validated. As long as we remember that we create our own safety and validation, and we do not need to compete with our family members, we can lose the argument because it will help us to win the war. We must let our family members believe that they are right about whatever the issue is, no matter how blatantly wrong they actually are.

We know the truth. That will have to be enough for us.

Changing Our Scripts: Smarter Answers to Stupid Questions

In the battle strategy of family dynamics, certain questions are the conversational equivalent of a shot across the bow. These are the questions that, in the past, have been reliable incitements to riot. Many of the arguments that have grown from these questions have almost become cherished heirlooms, to be dusted off and shared on special family occasions. If we want to avoid participating in these particular family traditions, we will need to watch out for these questions, and be prepared with new answers to them.

Stupid Question #1: "Why Aren't You Married Yet?"

Family gatherings are often excuses to terrorize unmarried relatives. We won't even consider the inherent rudeness of questions such as, "Why aren't you married yet?" In far too many cases, blood ties seem to be an excuse for bad manners. The reality is that if we happen to be single, we can expect that at least some of our relatives (usually the older, married ones) will ask us point blank why it is that we are still single.

We know from exploring Chapter 8 that the question, "Why am I still single?" can be a very painful one to consider. We also know that the only true answer to this question is that we're single because we do not choose to be in a relationship. This, however, is only the true and appropriate answer when *we* ask this question of *ourselves*. When *other* people ask us this question,

the only true and appropriate answer is, “Mind your own damned business.” Alas, while this answer is true and appropriate, it’s unfortunately not *polite*. Then again, neither is the question itself.

When a family member asks us this question, they’re not interested in the answer. Asking the question is an attack in and of itself. This question is specifically designed to make a deposit in their validation account by making us feel less worthy.

One of the safest answers to this question is some variation of, “I just haven’t met the right man/woman yet, I guess.” If possible, say this in a slightly self-deprecating way, and then notice someone across the room that you simply must greet.

I should point out that if your objective is to survive your family gathering with as little pain and suffering as possible, it’s best to avoid any new, surprising, or potentially controversial revelations. For example, when your Aunt Marge asks you why you haven’t settled down and gotten married, “I just haven’t met the right woman yet,” is a perfectly acceptable response unless you happen to be female. When and how we “come out” to our families is a personal choice, of course. However, we should carefully consider the repercussions of coming out to Aunt Marge over cocktails. I suspect that Miss Manners would consider this answering rudeness with rudeness, although it is an admittedly fine line. When in doubt, the non-gender-specific, “I just haven’t met the right person yet,” is always appropriate.

Stupid Question #2: “Remember That Time When You...?”

Whenever we’re in a group of people, we naturally focus on the things that we have in common. Discussing our shared experiences meets our validation needs on a group level. When we spend time with our families, often the main things that we share in common occurred during our childhood when we actually *lived* with our families. The less we have in common with our relatives as adults, the more likely we will fill the awkward pauses in the conversation by reminiscing about days gone by. Of course, the most entertaining stories are frequently the most embarrassing, at least to the subject of the story.

It's relatively easy to brush off embarrassing family stories when everyone present has already heard them. It can be a bit more challenging when we're accompanied by our significant other, or even by friends, who *haven't* heard the story before. Our response should remain the same, of course. We smile politely, but not enthusiastically, and indulge the family member telling the story. If we maintain our composure and do not react, no matter how embarrassed we may be, it will take all of the fun out of the story, and eventually, the story will remain buried in the past where it belongs. Under no circumstances are we allowed to retaliate with our *own* amusing and embarrassing story.

Of course, it's more difficult to maintain our composure when we're feeling embarrassed in front of someone whose opinion matters to us. When that someone is our significant other, it may help to set some ground rules with them before introducing them to our family traditions. These ground rules might include an agreement not to encourage our family members to tell embarrassing stories about us. Our partners are more likely to agree to this when we remind them that we're having Thanksgiving dinner at *their* family's house next year, and my, won't it be interesting to hear what their family has to say about *them*.

Stupid Question #3: “Have You Heard How Well ____ is Doing These Days?”

This line of questioning is a rather obvious request for validation. When our Aunts and Uncles want to brag about how happy and successful our cousins are, what's the harm in listening for a while? Even if we firmly believe that they're bragging about their children's triumphs in order to make us look bad by comparison, we must recognize that *this is our issue, not theirs*. If we feel that validating our relatives and praising their accomplishments takes away from the recognition that we feel we deserve for *our* accomplishments, then we need to learn how to manage our own validation accounts more efficiently.

As always, the most effective way to get other people to validate us is to meet their validation needs first. When we spend ten minutes or so listening to Aunt Ruth and appearing genuinely appreciative of how Cousin Carol

us. On the other hand, our friends do have to earn the right to be in our lives by supporting us *voluntarily*. Interested though our former partners may be in staying friends, they may not live up to our standards.

Letting go of our old habits and expectations about our former partners takes time. We need distance and perspective so that we can evaluate what kind of relationship we actually have with them.

I have a client, who we'll call Alice. Alice has been married three times. Her second husband, Jim, had two sons, whom she raised, and remained close to even after she ended the relationship with their father. Her third husband, Mike, also had a relationship with her stepsons. In many ways Mike became a surrogate father to them. Alice is still very friendly with Mike and his new wife, and socializes with them whenever they're in town.

Alice recently lost both her mother and a very close friend, both of whom Mike knew well. Alice was somewhat disgruntled that Mike did not make any offers of support to help her through her grieving process. She was also disappointed that Mike did not make any contact with her stepsons when their biological mother passed away. Alice knew that even a phone call from him would have meant so much to them, and yet he didn't even manage that.

I helped Alice to untangle this group of extended family relationships bit by bit. The first thing we addressed was the fact that even though Mike had been a positive role model for her stepsons, he does not have an actual family connection to them. Alice was their stepmother; Mike was only their stepmother's husband. As their former stepmother, Alice's continued relationship with her stepsons is reasonable. While *married* to Mike, it was appropriate for her to foster a connection between him and her stepsons. However the entire basis of that connection is their shared relationship to her. Both of her stepsons are adults now, and both are married. It's a safe bet that they know how to pick up the phone and initiate contact with Mike if they want to maintain a relationship with him on their own.

Next, we looked at Alice's relationship with Mike. Had her mother and friend passed away while she was still married to Mike, she would have been entitled to expect him to provide emotional support to help her through the grieving process. However, now that she's no longer married to him

(and he's married to someone else), she's not entitled to expect emotional support from him. Alice needed to adjust her checklists and her expectations in the relationship. She realized that she could no longer relate to Mike as a romantic partner, or even as someone with whom she shares a committed relationship.

Ultimately, she recognized that while she can still maintain a cordial relationship with Mike, he doesn't meet the criteria she sets for her friends. If he were truly a friend, he would have offered some support to her when she needed it. Since she can't expect him to be there to support her, she needs to adjust her expectations of the relationship. He's not someone on whom she can count for emotional support, and that's perfectly acceptable. Their relationship has evolved. They're still peripherally involved in each other's lives; the nature of the relationship is more of a pleasant friendship (Alice described it as "neighborly"). Once she adjusted her checklists, she was able to let go of the anger she was feeling towards him.

