

## Survival Strategies: A Very Mixed Blessing

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All of us grew up in families that had some problems. Some of the fairly common situations include those, such as an over-protective mother or a father who was obsessed with our achieving well in sports or one or both parents who were alcoholics. Whatever the problems were, as children we tended to develop ways of coping with them that allowed us to get by in the midst of the pressure. These coping mechanisms are often called “survival strategies.”

Survival strategies are ways of behaving that take into account the unusual nature of our parenting and enable us to “make it” in the face of the dysfunctional behavior. Take an example of an over-protective mother. This well-meaning woman is trying to protect her child from harm—as any caring parent would want to do. However, as an over-protective parent, she tends to see danger everywhere and takes measures, sometimes extreme, to keep the child safe. In this case, she might be overly careful regarding the other children her child might play with, or she might require the child to stay unnecessarily close to home.

One adult told me of not being allowed to cross a dead-end street near his house to play with kids on the other side of the street without an adult to supervise the crossing. This was at a time when only a couple of families on the block and a half dead end even had cars. The alternative was the child could walk all the way to the end of the street and walk through a field and back down the other side. No other child in the neighborhood had such a restriction so this little boy was the object of a lot of ridicule. To cope with the ridicule, he disobeyed his mother and when asked where he’d been playing and how he got there, he would lie.

As he learned he could lie about this and avoid her wrath and the ridicule of his playmates, he was developing a survival strategy. Since these “little white lies” did not put him in harm’s way and made his life easier, he did what almost everyone does with such strategies: he generalized them. To generalize means he did not only use lying in situations with his mother, but began to lie at other

times as well. And finally, as an adult, he found he often lied, even when the truth would probably not cause him harm.

To learn to function well in the adult world, we need to become aware of our childhood survival strategies and rid ourselves of them. This two part process is not as easy as it sounds. Developing our awareness of them is difficult enough, but learning alternative behaviors can also be very challenging.

Here are some tips on ferreting out your own survival strategies:

- Remembering your childhood, what kinds of situations did you often find yourself in with your parents that was uncomfortable, for example, never knowing when you came home with a friend if your Dad would be sober or not?
- Identifying several of these situations, try to determine what your common or consistent responses were.
- Are you still using those responses today and do you find that they create problems for you, such as the earlier example of lying to Mom being generalized? As an adult, he often felt as if he were juggling balls with his lies to try to stay out of trouble.
- Once you have identified the pattern of your responses, try to compare yourself to more “normal” people. For example, most “normal” people don’t consistently lie to keep the peace.
- If you’ve made it this far, develop a plan to adopt more normal reactions and practice them, noting the outcome.

The man with the over-protective mother decided he’d risk telling the truth with a new friend in a situation he’d normally lie. He was anxious and afraid his friend would reject him or be critical of him in some way, but it didn’t happen. He tried being honest in other relationships—again not only did nothing bad happen, something good happened. Slowly, over time he gave up his old strategies—not that he never thought about lying again—but he rarely if ever actually lied.

Addressing such things in your relationships can dramatically improve the quality of your life. Take the chance—it can be well worth it.