



# Covid-19 Crisis Can Trigger Depression and PTSD For Adult Replacement Children

By Judy L. Mandel

Anxiety over sickness and death during the pandemic may trigger depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for all of us, and especially for those who identify as Replacement Children. The term replacement child was coined by psychologists Albert & Barbara Cain, in the 1960s. Their 1964 project, which included Holocaust survivors, studied the impact on a small group of children conceived to take the place of a child who had died. They noted a trauma response that may give a child an unconscious mission of filling a hole in the family; to provide solace and comfort for a family stricken by loss and grief. As a result, the child's sense of identity and self-value maybe affected. The term has been expanded to include a child who is already a member of the family, but is carrying the role of a lost or impaired sibling, as well as a child who is adopted to replace a child the parents were unable to conceive.

However, not all children born or raised after a loss are replacement children. This depends on the circumstances and the individual. Were they seen as a replacement child or did they identify as such? Was there an accident or trauma in the family history? Were they recognized as a unique, individual human being or compared with an absent, idealized child?

"Death anxiety has always been with me, for my entire life, probably even in utero. Awareness of where it comes from, i.e. from having been born as a replacement child, makes me no less afraid, but I know now to put that into context," notes Kristina Schellinski, psychoanalyst, author of *Individuation for Adult Replacement Children* and co-founder of Replacement Child Forum.

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Kristina was born to replace her brother, and grew up within view of his grave, and was taken there often. Her mother never got over the loss of her son and Kristina experienced neglect. She experienced many situations in her life, where she feared death, and felt anxiety in dangerous or life-threatening situations.

"Because these situations reminded me of the beginning of my life, in an atmosphere of loss and grief," she recalled, "I became more conscious of both the threat to life and the need to protect life. In this Covid-19 crisis, I do not panic but I am super-concerned to protect life, mine, and that of others," Kristina said. "If I feel down, at times, making the connection with my replacement child condition makes it easier. There is more understanding, more consciousness."

For my part, the danger around Covid-19 manifests in my fears that anything can happen. My own story centers on a plane falling out of the sky into our house and killing my sister, who I was meant to replace. As I read about the rising death toll in New York City, where my son lives, my anxiety reached a peak when I yelled at my husband over the newspaper one morning, "How many people have to die before he'll come home?" I thought if I had my son in my house, I could protect him. Magical thinking at its best.

Rita Battat, co-author of *Replacement Children – the Unconscious Script*, and co-founder of Replacement Child Forum, says:

“COVID-19 with all of its uncertainty, danger, loss of structure and routine, taps heavily into my fear of abandonment. Separation from the familiar and a feeling of being on a wild ride that is out of anyone’s control is unnerving. Especially unnerving is the feeling that my daughter is miles away.

Would I be able to reach her quickly if she needed me there? Will my husband stay healthy? What about other friends and family? I can’t help but worry about them all, maybe a little too much now.

“As these feelings, thoughts, and fears come alive,” Rits explained, “I recognize them all too well as being all-too-familiar from my early childhood. I was born 18 months after my 14-year-old brother died from a genetic heart condition. Eighteen months later, my father suddenly passed away and my mother had to take over his store and become the breadwinner. I was left with a variety of caretakers,” she added. “As an adult, I was able to feel much more in control of my life, but now COVID-19 awakens what has been buried in a variety of different ways for all of us.”



Adults who are born or designated to replace a sibling or another family member may have specific tell-tale symptoms for much of their life – or at least until they become conscious of this condition. Some have difficulties with their identity, feel grief, or survivor’s guilt. Many suffer from a lack of self-esteem. They may have felt lonely and misunderstood growing up. This feeling may come back in this pandemic crisis, leaving them to feel existentially alone.

“I feel isolated, and the pandemic has magnified this isolation; I felt that there was no-one to share it with,” said Alan, a man in his sixties who has just understood that he is a replacement child.

The pandemic has triggered a wave of anxiety among all of us. Here are some of the criteria to assess if you suffer from PTSD, according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-V, issued by the American Psychiatric Association. Have a look to assess if you may be at risk for an activated traumatic response, especially if you are a replacement child.

- Have you had direct or indirect exposure to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence.
- Is the traumatic event persistently re-experienced by recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive memories, nightmares or flashbacks?
- Do you feel a physical reaction after exposure to trauma-related stimuli?
- Or do you find you persistently make an effort to avoid distressing trauma-related stimuli?
- Are you avoiding trauma-related thoughts or feelings or avoiding people, places, objects or situations that could remind you of trauma?
- Are you finding that you have negative beliefs and expectations about yourself or the world (e.g., “I am bad,” “The world is completely dangerous“)?

We can see how in a more dangerous world, due to the pandemic, a disposition to experience the world as hostile may be reinforced. One might feel alienated from others, or find one has diminished interest in significant activities and find it hard to have positive emotion. The DSM-V says that the following may also indicate trauma-related alterations in one’s reactivity (PTSD):

- Irritable, aggressive, or reckless behavior
- Hypervigilance
- Problems in concentration
- Sleep disturbance

If you experience any such symptoms, try and get some counseling or at least talk to your physician about it and ask for help. Adult replacement children can feel more vulnerable in facing the Covid-19 pandemic, they may experience a traumatic response triggered by the crisis. But this crisis can also help replacement children become more aware and astute in observing themselves and to learn to understand themselves, on a deeper level.

“When we face our deepest fears and when we tend to our wounds, we will feel less anxious,” says Kristina Schellinski. “Facing the threat of non-existence could overwhelm us at times like these, but believing in your life force is a fountain of resilience.”