

Emotional Inheritance Discussion Guide

“The people we love and those who raise us live inside us; we experience their emotional pain, we dream their memories, we know what was not explicitly conveyed to us, and these things shape our lives in way that we don’t always understand.” –Galit Atlas, *Emotional Inheritance*

1. What does the term “emotional inheritance” mean to you?
2. The book starts with a quote: “The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” (Jeremiah 31:29). What did you think of this quote before you started the book? Has your view evolved after reading the book?
3. In Chapter 1 (“Life and Death in Love Affairs”) one of the patients, Eve, discusses her affair. What is the real meaning of an affair? Did Eve’s story give you a different perspective on infidelity?
4. Atlas talks about how children often take on the role of “identified patient” (pg. 48). What does this mean for both the child and the entire family unit?
5. In Chapter 3 (“Sex, Suicide, and the Riddle of Grief”) Atlas says, “In breakups, we always lose more than just the person we love.” What does she mean by this?
6. Atlas mentions how therapists need to be careful not to confuse social norms with psychological goals (example from the book is having children, pg. 92). Have there been any social norms or familial expectations that have conflicted with your personal psychological goals?
7. Chapter 4 (“The Radioactivity of Trauma”) explores how the trauma of the Holocaust has been passed down throughout generations, whether it is openly discussed or not. Atlas poses the questions, “Is it better for the next generation of trauma survivors—the inheritors—to know, or not to know? Does it even matter, assuming our ancestors’ trauma finds its way into our minds anyways?” (pg. 95) How would you answer these questions?
8. After reading the book, are any of your childhood memories now better explained through the lens of emotional inheritance?
9. In Chapter 5 (“When Secrets Become Ghosts”), Atlas explores the idea that people are connected to one another beyond the conscious mind and can communicate in nonverbal ways. Do you believe this is true? If so, how do you think it plays out in one’s own life?
10. Atlas closes the book by saying, “In the end, we come to realize that it is the unexamined life of others that we ourselves end up living.” (pg. 262). Do you think there are benefits and/or burdens to living the “unexamined life?” Explain.
11. There can often be healing in reading and identifying with other people’s life stories. Was there one patient’s story that resonated with you the most? Why?
12. Think about emotional inheritance in your own life. What have your parents passed down to you? Your grandparents? How might you heal?

