

## **The Childfree Therapist**

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In the U.S., a woman's worth is devalued if she is childless. For many women, the narrative is that their value is directly tied to having children. As a therapist, I am deeply interested in the narratives women receive from their cultures about their worth. I have first-hand experience receiving unsolicited opinions from others about my personal “failure” to have a child, given that I am a 35-year-old childless woman. In my social circle, more and more women have chosen a child-free lifestyle. These women are community-driven, prosperous, stable, empathic, and love to contribute their strengths to others. Given that I am surrounded by high-functioning childless women, I question why the narrative about child-free women is overwhelmingly negative, in which society perceives childless women as regretful, lonely, and isolated. In seeking answers to why negative stereotypes are so prevalent about chosen childlessness, I looked to psychological contributions from past and present clinical research and practice.

First, I have found that psychology contributes to the generally negative narrative surrounding child-free women. Psychology has advanced narratives that childless women are lonely, disconnected, and living with regrets with a reliance on outdated research. Human development in psychology focuses heavily on the role of reproduction. This is most commonly seen in Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, where his seventh stage of generativity vs. stagnation is marked by parenthood. However, the roots of this narrative developed decades ago from research on a population of women who did not live in the social environments that women navigate today. Women in the U.S. today have more opportunities than ever before to step outside of their expected role as mothers and develop their interests, build careers, and even find forms of fulfillment that do not align with traditional feminine roles. With the evolution of women, we now recognize that all humans have reasons for existing beyond reproduction.

As a therapist, I explore child-free women's challenges in research and treatment. I have many female clients struggling with how to tell their families they have chosen not to have children. They express worries such as disappointing their families, stripping parents of their dreams for grandchildren, or conflicting with partners. These stressors can be consuming for women out of a fear of being unable to meet the expectations of others, which women are societally conditioned into. Child-free women's struggles do not end after they decide to forego children as assumptions about their well-being, functioning, and personality continue.

Therapists and researchers, like the rest of the world, are just as capable of passing judgment and assuming narratives about people's lifestyle choices. Child-free women often face misattributions about their choices or are regarded as not knowing what they want. Recent research, however, shows women are sure of their options and understand the consequences of their actions. For example, Varian (2021) conducted a study that explored the quality of life and

decisional regret in women who chose sterilization. Varian found that sterilization did not negatively impact women's psychological quality of life. Instead, her study found that women reported minimal, or no regrets, and regrets voiced were related to being unable to access sterilization earlier. One participant wrote, "The only thing I regret is that I didn't fight to have the procedure done when I was 25-26. I had to wait until doctors would stop telling me no. I would have done it sooner if I could have (p. 132)."

Child-free women will benefit from further research as an under-researched population, particularly in the context of societal changes as more women have been moving away from their traditional role as mothers. Currently, most of the child-free research is focused on *why* women are child-free rather than *how they feel* about their lives or well-being. Furthermore, research that has focused on the *why* is driven more by unprecedented declines in the population rather than a desire to know more about women and their experiences. Focusing on *why* women choose to be child-free promotes the continuation of challenging women about their choices. In contrast, research that examines well-being supports a more positive narrative that women know themselves and can make decisions for themselves. Additional research to understand the beliefs and experiences of childfree women further would be helpful in knowing how we as a psychology community can assist them in the challenges that come with shifting societal norms as well as what factors contribute to having fulfilling lives outside of the role of mother.