

WHO WE ARE

A Closer Look at The People You May Be Passing on Main Street

The Other Dr. Atkins

BY BARBARA ROSS-INNAMORATI



"What are you going to do to have a meaningful life?" This is the question that Dr. Dale Atkins asks, her green eyes looking at you for an answer. She continues, "You CAN change the map of how you were brought up—every event in your life is an opportunity to examine your life, see who you are, and how you want to go forward."

For Atkins, this is what her life's work has been all about. As a psychologist and author, Dr. Dale (as her friends call her) helps to keep family dynamics open and nurturing. A licensed psychologist and media commentator, Atkins has appeared regularly on the *Today Show*, and has been a familiar face

on such shows as *Montel*, *Good Morning America*, *FOXNEWS*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Donahue*. Atkins has over 30 years as a relationship expert, focused on family interaction and has authored five books, including, *I'm OK, You're My Parents—How to Overcome Guilt, Let Go of Anger, and Create a Relationship that Works*.

This compelling book is a guilt-free guide for adults seeking a more satisfying relationship with their parents. Part of Atkins' inspiration for the book was her close relationship with her own mother and father: "I had been thinking for a long time about the complex relationship between adults and their parents, especially because my mom is now over 80. So many of my patients seem to be mired in issues. Then I stumbled on statistics

about longevity that blew me away. The most amazing one was that the average American will take care of at least one parent for at least 20 years—that's longer than people's childhood. When I realized that many readers, even those in their 50's and 60's will likely have at least one parent around for at least 20 years, it dawned on me that it was crucial for people to take hold of the problems they have with their parents NOW. That way they will have the opportunity to develop and enjoy a balanced relationship as adults, before they assume the inevitable role as caregiver."

Working with Children

Growing up in Wayne, N.J., the young Atkins did not seem necessarily destined for a career as a psychologist. The daughter of an automobile dealer and a homemaker, Dale grew up in a very close-knit Jewish family with strong connections to an extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins. "We loved to dance, we loved music and we loved to travel, which was quite big in our family—it still is," says Atkins. Dale was quite athletic and loved to swim, ride horses and hike. Growing up, she always thought she wanted to work with people, perhaps in a museum, and in fact studied social studies and art history in college. But, as often happens in life, a random event would propel Atkins down a different course.

At 21, Dale, head counselor at a tennis and ski camp in Austria, suffered a bad skiing accident.



DR. DALE ATKINS

Broken-hearted, she returned to the United States to recuperate and begin an extensive physical therapy program. While in physical therapy, she befriended children who were undergoing their own therapy program. Soon, Dale began to volunteer and in the process rediscovered her gift and joy in working with children. Eventually, Atkins decided to pursue a master's in special education at Columbia University, specializing in deafness and thereafter worked at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York.

Off to Israel

In 1973, Dale traveled to Israel to study at the World Union of Jewish Students and work at the Micah Center for Deaf Children. After a few months of study, the Yom Kippur War broke out. Though her parents pleaded with her to come home, Dale stayed. To this day, Dale's time in Israel dramatically affected her life and her commitment to Israel. "Living in Israel at that time cemented my commitment to the country, the people and to the importance of living in peace," comments Atkins.

Dale volunteered for all types of assignments – teaching in a school, cleaning out bomb shelters and participating in a makeshift singing

group that performed for the army.

Sisters ..Family Relationships

Upon her return to the U.S., Dale headed to Los Angeles, where she worked with young deaf children at the John Tracy Clinic. She taught parents of newly diagnosed children and led groups, for family members. It was shortly thereafter that Dale decided to pursue her doctorate in educational psychology at UCLA. She was interested in sibling relationships, particularly those involving children who have extra needs. This was also the time that Atkins began her formal research on siblings. Upon completion of her doctorate, she created and led "SISTERS" seminars. Her book, published in 1984, *Sisters: A Practical Helpful Exploration of the Intimate and Complex Bond between Female Siblings* (1984), was an outgrowth of these workshops.

In 1985, Dale returned to the East Coast to be closer to her father, who at the time was ill. Atkins began to build a practice in New York, working as a psychologist specializing in families and individual counseling. Today, in addition to her practice, Dr. Atkins consults internationally and conducts seminars in the fields of human development, family relationships, parenting, interpersonal communication and stress management. She is known for her warmth, personality and humor. Dale also created and hosts Dr. Dale's Life Issues, a talk show for the Jewish Television Network, which aired on PBS and continues in several national markets. Her other books include *From the Heart: Men and Women Write their Private Thoughts about their Married Lives*, which she co-edited, and *Families and their Hearing Impaired Children*. Her book, *Wedding Sanity Savers* will be out in January 2005.

At Home in Westport

So what does the family expert's own family look like today? Dale is married to Rob Rosen, a business executive. They have lived in Westport for the past 16 years. Rob and Dale have two sons – Jono (Jonathan) and Josh, who are both married. "The guys are very close," Dale adds, "and we always work on creating open lines of communication while nurturing all of the family relationships."

Dale is very close with her sister, Daryl Roth, a Tony-winning theater producer and her family who lives in New York. Her other family relationships remain strong, especially with her mother, who, at the age of 82 designs and sells jewelry. Miles Davis, Atkins' dog, is an important part of her life and a nearly constant companion.

Perhaps the biggest impact on Dale relative to her family has been the death of her father some nine years ago. Says Atkins, "It was very profound, and I still feel it today."

But, living through my father's illness has made me a better person and therapist." She adds, "I never take anything for granted... life is so transient... you have to appreciate every single thing and all the people in your life."

Know a fascinating neighbor? I want to hear about them! E-mail me at: Barbaraross@optonline.net



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Coming Event

Atkins will give a free talk about her book *I'm OK, You're My Parents*, Sunday, May 23 at 7 p.m. at Temple Israel in Westport. Her book will be available for purchase and signing.

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