

*Losing **the** Atmosphere, A Memoir*

A Baffling Disorder, a Search for Help, and the Therapist Who Understood

Vivian Conan

Afterword: Jeffery Smith, MD

[Available](#) in paperback, ebook,
and award-winning audiobook narrated by Cassandra Campbell.

Born in 1940s Brooklyn to a father prone to rages and an emotionally erratic mother, Vivian Conan grew up in two different worlds: Outside and Inside. Outside, she had friends, excelled in school, and was close to her cousins and brother. Inside, she saw faces that weren't hers in her bedroom mirror and was surrounded by an invisible Atmosphere that bathed her in the love and understanding she craved. Moving between these worlds enabled Vivian to survive her childhood but limited her ability to live fully as an adult. To others, her life seemed rich with work, friends, music, and boyfriends. But her mind and soul were filled with chaos and pain. Neither she nor her therapists could figure out why.

***Losing the Atmosphere* is Vivian Conan's riveting account** of her journey toward self-understanding and wholeness; her encounters with a string of more and less helpful therapists; and her unconventional relationship with the therapist who was finally able to guide her through the courageous, messy work healing required.

Told with honesty, humor, and grace, *Losing the Atmosphere* is a never-too-late story about the growth possible for anyone with the guts to pursue it, and a testament to the redemptive power of love: not the perfect kind Vivian experienced in her imaginary world, but the imperfect kind that connects us, flawed human being to flawed human being, in the real world she lives in now.

Vivian would be happy to join your virtual book club discussion. You can contact her at vconan99@gmail.com or through her website: VivianConan.com.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

VIVIAN

V-1)

Vivian's fantasy world, the Atmosphere, is adaptive at first, because it provides the emotional support she isn't getting elsewhere.

When does the Atmosphere become maladaptive?

What are some comparable "devices" other people use to cushion their world?

V-2)

Over the course of many years, Vivian goes from wanting to *feel* better to wanting to *get* better.

What is the difference?

V-3)

Thoughts of suicide allow Vivian to function: As long as she knows she has an out, she can endure what she is going through.

What are other examples of how something generally construed as negative can actually be helpful?

V-4)

What role does forgiveness play in Vivian's emotional healing?

What is the difference between forgiving and forgetting?

V-5)

One of the books Vivian reads, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, has a profound effect on her.

What about the book causes her to react?

If you read *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, what response did it evoke from you?

V-6)

Vivian's experiences may have been extreme, but her life is relatable on many levels.

What aspects of her story are universal?

V-7)

Assuming time-travel was possible, what might the Vivian at the end of the book tell the Vivian at the beginning of the book?

FAMILY

F-1)

Vivian reacts to her father's constraints by escaping to a complex inner world, while outwardly she follows his strict rules. In contrast, her brother sometimes fights back.

One might assume children with the same parents are affected the same way, but in Vivian's case, they aren't. Why do you think this is?

F-2)

Vivian belongs to a large, warm, Greek-Jewish clan that is the antithesis of her nuclear family. In what ways do her nuclear and extended families shape her?

F-3)

Vivian often relies on her mother to shield her from her father.

What is the role of one parent in protecting the child from the other parent?

What are the child's expectations of the protector parent?

F-4)

In the latter part of the book, Vivian's mother becomes increasingly aware of the effect of her parenting and discusses it with Vivian.

Is this helpful for Vivian?

When and how should a parent have this kind of discussion with adult children?

Is it always/usually/sometimes appropriate or helpful?

F-5)

The adult Vivian's relationship with her parents changes as she comes to understand how their histories shaped them.

What prompted Vivian to seek this understanding?

How does the process evolve with her mother? Her father?

THERAPY

T-1)

In therapy, the relationship between therapist and client is part of the healing.

How does this play out for Vivian?

T-2)

What was the process of finding a therapist like in Vivian's time?

What is it like today?

How do you go about finding a therapist when you don't know what's wrong?

T-3)

Vivian sees seven therapists, each for many years. They are helpful (or not) in different ways, but only the last is able to pinpoint the problem and help her overcome it.

Why might Vivian, or anyone, stay with a therapist even if the therapist doesn't "get" them?

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

S-1)

Vivian tells her story chronologically, as it unfolds for her. The reader doesn't know anything before she knows it. There are no observations along the way from an older, wiser Vivian looking back, layering meaning onto what happened.

How did you feel about this structure?

What effect did it have on your involvement with the story?

S-2)

There are no clinical explanations in the body of the memoir. They come at the end, in the Afterword, where Vivian's therapist explains the theories and concepts of attachment and dissociation and shows how they apply to Vivian.

Did you find the explanations helpful?

Would you have wanted them placed elsewhere?

QUESTIONS FOR CLINICIANS

C-1)

How might Vivian's mental health trajectory have been different if she had been born today, when there is more awareness of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), relational trauma (betrayal by people you love, trust, or rely on), and attachment?

C-2)

Dissociation allows Vivian to function well at work, no matter what is going on inside her. In what ways can dissociation be positive? Negative?

C-3)

Dissociation is what differentiates Vivian's internal child parts from the popular concept of "inner child."

What roles do her child parts play in advancing her healing? In holding her back from healing?

C-4)

What role does therapy play in Vivian's healing?

What other factors play a part in her healing?

C-5)

Early attachment trauma caused the adult Vivian to rely more on fantasy Atmosphere people for connection than on real people.

What enabled her to eventually reverse that?

C-6)

Not all therapists are trained/qualified/able to treat all conditions.

After therapy has begun, what is the responsibility of the therapist in evaluating whether it is a good fit?

How can the client determine this?

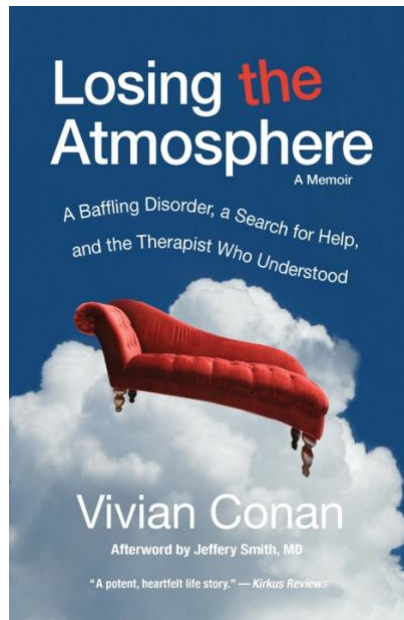
What might either of them do if they feel it isn't working?

C-7)

A trauma-informed therapist is aware of the impact childhood trauma can have on adult clients. A trauma-competent therapist is a trauma-informed therapist who is skilled in treating those clients.

What goes into the making of a trauma-competent therapist?

(Consider the role of experience, training, relational style, comfort level of the therapist with the material, and other factors.)



Vivian Conan is a writer, librarian, and IT systems analyst who lives in Manhattan. Her work has appeared in [The New York Times](#), [New York](#) magazine, [Lilith](#), [Narratively](#), and more. She received a 2007 fellowship in Nonfiction Literature from the New York Foundation for the Arts and a 2019 Simon Rockower Award from the American Jewish Press Association. *Losing the Atmosphere* is her first book. Learn more at [VivianConan.com](#).

Praise for
Losing the Atmosphere

“Vivian Conan has written a real-life medical mystery that is as resonant and profound as an Oliver Sacks case study—but in her case, we see it from the inside. *Losing the Atmosphere* is, at its heart, a book about what it is to be an imperfect human (as we all are) walking through an imperfect world.”

—Dawn Raffel, author of *The Strange Case of Dr. Couney*

“In razor-sharp prose, *Losing the Atmosphere* traces one woman’s lifelong journey to mental wellness. Afflicted by two complex disorders and misdiagnosed time and again, Vivian Conan tells her story with poignancy, determination and fierce intelligence. You will cheer for this survivor.”

—Sally Koslow, author of *Another Side of Paradise*

“A compelling story of a woman struggling to find her identity as she battles a baffling psychological condition that has plagued her since childhood. In this beautifully written memoir, Vivian Conan gives a fascinating account of a woman who, despite having grown up in a close, extended family in Brooklyn, creates a complicated imaginary world to cope with a demanding father and a distant mother. *Losing the Atmosphere* will haunt you well after the last page has been turned.”

—Joy Behar, co-host, *The View*

“Vivian Conan’s *Losing the Atmosphere* gives a powerful, personal account of how recurring childhood trauma can fracture one’s identity and result in a deep loss of self. Conan illustrates the little-understood but very real role multiple identities play for children and adults living with MPD and DID. This beautifully written memoir is a testament to a woman’s intelligence, tenacity and courage to find herself and make peace with a turbulent, oppressive past. In a world in which we increasingly rely solely on biochemical solutions, Conan proves that education, self-advocacy, and hard therapeutic work can lead to self-discovery and true healing.”

—Christina Chiu, author of *Beauty and Troublemaker and Other Saints*

“Vivian Conan’s memoir is what self-help, genuine self-help, feels like. Sensing the problem. Grasping the problem. Grappling with the problem. Overcoming the problem. This is quiet heroism.”

—Mark Goldblatt, author of *Twerp and Finding the Worm*

“*Losing the Atmosphere* is an engrossing and highly informative memoir about how a child faced with an environment that is incomprehensible, sometimes terrifying, and psychologically unmanageable creates an illusory world to sustain her and develops different identities as a way of coping. It is first the compelling story of how this all began, then the uplifting narrative of how Ms. Conan learned to process and integrate experience that had been overwhelming—to mourn, forgive, and finally re-engage with the world as a full person. As a window into the experience of a person who developed dissociative identity disorder and found ways to heal, *Losing the Atmosphere* is a must-read for mental health professionals. It is a remarkable story and a fascinating read for everyone else.”

—Elizabeth F. Howell, PhD, author of *Understanding and Treating Dissociative Identity Disorder and Trauma and Dissociation-Informed Psychotherapy*

“Vivian Conan’s description of dissociative states in *Losing the Atmosphere* is the most lucid characterization of this process I have ever come across. Her gripping account of how she battled and largely managed to overcome this disorder is more gritty than any clinical description. A great read.”

—Theodore Saretsky, Clinical Professor of Psychology, Adelphi Postdoctoral Institute

“*Losing the Atmosphere* is a heartbreaking account of life with a rare psychological disorder and the events that broke a budding mind to pieces.”

—Claire Foster, *Foreword Reviews*

“*Losing the Atmosphere* by Vivian Conan is a very fascinating and at times very disturbing book. I don’t think I can put words to how much it touched me. It’s the kind of memoir that will resonate a long time with readers and show that it is possible to find a road to survival. I’m glad she wrote it, glad I read it.”

—*The Bookish Elf*

“A potent, heartfelt life story.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Highly recommended for personal reading lists as well as community, college, and university library Contemporary American Biography collections as an intensely personal, exceptionally informative, engagingly written, expressly thoughtful and thought-provoking memoir...”

—*Midwest Book Review*

“Vivian’s recovery resonates with the experiences that, for the rest of us, are embedded deep in our preverbal memory. Somewhere in the core of our being we all know the fragility of human connection and instinctively relate to her life-and-death drive to be seen.”

—Jeffery Smith, MD, author of *Psychotherapy: a Practical Guide*