



UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

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Wired to Survival

As children, we rely on our basic instincts to survive and to adapt to our immediate environment. When threatened, our instincts naturally trigger a fight-or-flight reaction. The fight-or-flight protective tools available to this primal level of self are: run away, suppress emotions that are too painful, and aggression. If we are placed under stress and danger repeatedly over a prolonged period of time, such as with a chaotic and abusive childhood, distorted forms of fight-or-flight become a normal way of reacting to our everyday world, making it very difficult to function beyond a limited state of survival, even when there is no longer chaos or abuse.

The Child's Adaptability

A vital capacity of our healthy base instincts is our primal ability to adapt, which is fully switched on at birth. As a newborn baby, our brain already has most of the neurons we need, but the synaptic pathways between those neurons are only beginning to be wired up. From birth up to around seven-years-old, the brain is rapidly developing these synaptic pathways to such an extent that it makes up around 75% of the brains weight once the seventh year is reached.

One of our childhood mind's main survival concerns during this rapid development is to be emotionally/psychologically bonded to an adult carer. If this bond is not established, the child may be

abandoned by the carer and perish. The smell of the baby, the cuteness, and its instinctual tendency to grasp and hold on, are all designed to enhance this initial bond with a carer, especially the mother. The next level of this primal survival instinct, as the child starts to grow and increasingly interacts with those in its immediate community, is to adapt socially. To do this, we as the child, try to emulate anyone who are frequently close. Therefore, even though we have our own unique character, we have to literally become our parents while at the same time trying to somehow be ourselves. Again, this is to ensure that we don't get abandoned, but also so we can quickly learn how to actually exist in this world. At this stage, we have little to no capacity to reason. We can't tell the difference between what is good or bad for us in the long-term. That is why we have parents, to represent Conscious-Awareness for us. This primal level of our mind is just indiscriminately recording/soaking up what it frequently experiences and this information goes directly into the subconscious/unconscious mind.

The Child's Need For Connection

At this stage, we as infants feel more than we can think, and what we mostly feel is about whether or not we are connected to our carer. Being disconnected means danger: I am frightened; I am vulnerable and alone; I could die; I don't exist; I am not important; I am unworthy. Being connected means I am safe; I am loved and important; I exist; I am worthy; I am whole. To ourselves as a young vulnerable child, the bond with our carer is literally life itself. This is the foundation of our conditioning, which colours so many of our perceptions from then on.

The Importance of Conditioning

It is essential that our primal mind has the ability to form habits. There is a huge array of behaviours that we don't want to have to think about, like the simple act of walking, going to the toilet, riding a bike, reading and writing, driving a car and so on. This frees up our Consciousness-Awareness to deal with anything that is new in the moment. These habits almost become hardwired into our brain, so we can do these things without thinking. It is difficult to change these habits for a reason. If such habits could be easily disrupted, we could suddenly forget how to walk. Our lives could be suddenly thrown into disarray, such as when we suffer a stroke. Here our minds are serving our higher awareness by strongly hanging onto these habits. They become like synaptic highways in our brain.

The Results of Our Conditioning

Thoughts also become habit, which makes up our psychological/social conditioning and beliefs. Again, this serves our higher awareness as our environment becomes familiar, making interaction with our environment so much more efficient. For our primal child-minds, the immediate family environment that we grow up in is

our world. This is not a problem so long as our environment was consistently loving and supportive, and those adults around us mentored us in how to constructively interact with our family and community. Here we grow up feeling secure, confident and capable. We can trust our ability to manage our minds and can openly interact with the world. This confidence and openness enables us to continue to adapt, and our view of the world naturally expands as we get older and experience more of the world outside of our childhood environment. To us, the world is an interesting place full of opportunity.

However, if our childhood world was unsupportive, scary, unpredictable and even dangerous, we grow up *unconsciously* assuming the rest of the world is the same, which is unlikely to be the case. Our ongoing stress and anxiety causes our protective fight-or-flight instincts to be on high alert, ready to be activated at the slightest hint of anything that could be dangerous. We react to innocent situations as though they are dangerous and we relive the traumatic environment that we grew up in wherever we go, and perpetuate that environment wherever we go with our reactions. This impedes our ability to adapt, because our primal minds hang onto these thinking habits all the more tightly in order to protect us, not realising that the traumatic environment is now being carried within our own minds. We are not confident and we are not open. We are vulnerable, closed and defensive. This can adversely affect our ability to form relationships, gain a useful education and find and hold down meaningful and gainful employment. *This is not our fault.* As that child, at the time, we had no power over how our environment conditioned us.

Our Power to Heal and Grow

As adults, however, we have access to our own Conscious-Awareness, which enables us to become our own forever parent by accepting our humanness and seeing our fears and insecurities as opportunities to learn how to care for ourselves and reach out for help to do this when needed. As challenging as this journey can be at first, if we persist, we gain an advanced capacity for resilience, empathy and wisdom.

