

# THE OLD WOUNDS OF Youth

*'Inner child wounds' is a term often used in popular psychology, but what exactly are they and how do they affect us as adults?*

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**I**t is easy to forget that we once possessed the mind of a child. But as much as we would like to believe that we have outgrown our childish concerns and fears, that could not be further from the truth. Our personalities are made up of multiple selves, and the 'inner child' buried deep within us plays an essential role in that identity. It is a part of the subconscious that we learnt to repress and ignore as we matured into adulthood.

But who or what is our 'inner child'? To put it simply, our inner child represents the different versions of ourselves throughout our formative and adolescent years, and is the part of us that still acts and behaves like a child. It not only retains the memories, lessons and emotions we had as a kid, but also the very best of the childish qualities within us: innocence, creativity, curiosity, imagination and hope. However, it can just as equally preserve the negative traits associated with immaturity, such as sulkiness, helplessness and mischief.

The concept of the inner child is often affiliated with the psychologist Carl Jung, who proposed the idea of a child archetype to describe the childlike aspects of our personality. Jung believed that this subpersonality, along with our childhood experiences, influences our behaviour as adults. Author and self-help guru John Bradshaw is also credited with bringing the term to the attention of a wider audience, specifically regarding how the wounded inner child can be a representation of the unresolved and lingering effects of a dysfunctional childhood.

## **Early childhood experiences**

Those who were blessed to grow up in a nurturing and attentive household, where their boundaries were respected and they were accepted and loved for who they were, tend to develop a healthy and well-balanced inner child. This can be seen in their ability to assert themselves as well as to advocate for their needs and wants.

Sadly, for some people this does not match up to their own experiences of childhood.

As young children, we are impressionable to the environment around us, and so can easily absorb any negative messages, words or treatment that comes from that. Inner child wounds, also known as attachment wounds, can then develop as a result of exposure to trauma or neglect. If these wounds are not repaired, they can have damaging and long-lasting effects into adulthood - ready to rupture when we're feeling stressed, angry or under pressure.

Incidents that can have a detrimental impact on a child's mental and physical wellbeing are often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The children's mental health charity, Young Minds, refers to ACEs as any 'highly stressful, and potentially traumatic, events or situations that occur during childhood and/or adolescence. They can be a single event, or prolonged threats to, and breaches of, the young person's safety, security, trust or bodily integrity'. This



## “AS CHILDREN, WE CAN EASILY ABSORB ANY NEGATIVE MESSAGE”

can include being subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse as a child; living with a caregiver with substance abuse issues or a mental illness; exposure to domestic violence; or losing a parent through death, divorce or abandonment. According to a 2014 study, 47% of people in the UK have experienced at least one ACE, while 9% of the population have endured four or more ACEs.

Other types of trauma that can have a profound effect on a child's welfare includes being bullied by their peers, suffering from financial poverty or unstable living conditions; witnessing a harrowing event; or experiencing a significant life upheaval.

### ***Different types of abuse and neglect***

If we were to categorise the main classes of maltreatment that can cause inner child wounds, they would fall under three brackets: physical, psychological and emotional.

Children are reliant on their caregivers to provide nourishment, shelter and protection. When those needs are not met, this can have »





## CONNECTING TO OUR INNER CHILD

To begin the healing process, we must engage in reflection, and start addressing our unmet needs. Here are some suggestions for how we can start that journey:

- *Working with a therapist can help to uncover negative behavioural patterns and validate painful emotions originating from childhood. Inner child work can be found in many forms of therapy, including trauma therapy, EMDR therapy and art therapy.*
- Plotting the timeline of our formative years can help to identify the experiences that are particular pain points for us and where we still have work to do.
- *Writing a letter to our inner child (or from our inner child) can create a safe space for us to express and honour the feelings of our younger selves.*
- Learning to re-parent ourselves gives us that which we lacked in childhood. This may involve self-care, making time for activities that nourish us, and showing ourselves compassion.

a huge impact on a child's sense of safety and security. Physical abuse can range from insufficient access to food and warmth, to being a victim of violence. This can result in the affected person developing maladaptive coping methods such as addictions to food, drugs and alcohol, or engaging in intense safety-seeking behaviours, for instance OCD.

Psychological abuse refers to any negative treatment in the form of name-calling, ridicule, gaslighting, yelling, threatening, or

consistently violating a child's boundaries, such as refusing them any privacy. It can also include living in a home where overly high expectations are set, and it is the norm to be regularly punished or mocked for not meeting those standards. Growing up in this kind of environment can foster deep-seated feelings of anger, which can later manifest into problems maintaining healthy relationships, or a psychological or physical illness.

Emotional abuse refers to a lack of interest shown by parents in their child's emotional needs. A failure to show regular love, affection or support can be particularly harmful to a child's self-esteem. Other forms of emotional neglect can include a child not being allowed to safely express their emotions or needs without fear of repercussions. These children then grow up into damaged adults, learning that they must ignore or repress their feelings, or seek validation from others to boost their self-worth.

It is not only major traumatic events that can cause inner child wounds to evolve, though. Any situation where a child may have been made to feel unsafe, rejected or ashamed can lead to issues later on in life. Seemingly insignificant occurrences, such as a throwaway comment made by a family member, being excluded by their peers, or unfavourable comparisons to siblings can leave an irreparable hole in a person's psyche.

Although it is normal to feel bitter towards the adults who let us down in our youth, it is important to remember that, in most cases, they could only do the best with the level of emotional maturity and information they had at the time. It is easy to forget that they are products of their environment and most likely acted the way they did due to their own unresolved inner child wounds. Searching for answers or an apology from our former caregivers can be futile if they do not have the capacity to accept or admit to any wrongdoing on their behalf. Therefore, it is our responsibility, as adults now, to soothe and care for our own inner child.

### Signs of inner child trauma

The first step to healing our inner child is not only to discover what kind of wound we might have but to understand how these injuries show up in our behaviour. The most common types of inner child wounds relate to abandonment, guilt, neglect and trust, and each wound stems from a particular pain point from our past.

An abandonment wound can occur from experiences of being ostracised or rejected as a child. It can also arise from perceived abandonment by emotionally distant parents, or from a loved one dying or leaving the home. As adults, those suffering from this type of wound may fear being left alone and subsequently develop needy or





clinging behaviour. They may also be drawn to co-dependent relationships or to those who are emotionally unavailable in a subconscious attempt to overcome the hurt from their past. Alternatively, others with this wound may instead choose to become hyper-independent or deliberately sabotage relationships to avoid further abandonment or rejection.

Guilt wounds can develop from growing up in a setting where a child was either made to feel repeatedly remorseful over insignificant matters, or was held to extreme standards of 'what was deemed to be good' and 'bad'. They carry around with them a sense of always feeling 'in the wrong', as well as a desire to try to make up for their 'badness', even when they are not at fault. This can be displayed in behaviours such as over apologising, putting others' needs before their own, and struggling to set healthy boundaries, saying no to others, or asking for help. Sometimes, people with this wound can also resort to guilt-tripping themselves in a bid to manipulate others.

Children who often felt ignored or uncared for in their younger years can acquire what is known as a neglect wound. Hurt from not being seen or heard or made to feel important can bottle up over time and express itself in sudden anger outbursts, attention-seeking behaviour or an inability to let things go. A neglect wound may also be reflected in a lack of self-worth or being drawn to relationships or situations where they continue to be underappreciated.

Trust wounds emerge when caregivers either cause harm to a child, fail to protect them from danger or are unable to fulfil their promises. This lack of security can result in difficulty trusting others, avoiding situations where they could get hurt, or relying heavily on external validation and approval. It can also lead to a compulsive urge to always have to be in control to overcompensate for feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. Yet despite this, people with these particular wounds still tend to attract those who either don't make them feel safe or who fail to keep their promises, further continuing the cycle of betrayal and distrust.

It is possible to have several inner child wounds or for a wound to express itself in different ways, such as being a people-pleaser, suffering from 'overachiever syndrome', chasing perfectionism, avoiding conflict, normalising abusive behaviour, or using aggression as a solution to problems.

#### **Acknowledging our inner child**

Everyone can act like a child, especially when hurt, angry or disappointed - but if we are repeatedly regressing to unhealthy patterns that enabled us to survive as children, then we must start treating the festering sores that are infecting our behaviour.

By making the decision to embark on inner child work, we begin to not only establish the sense of safety and security that our younger selves so sorely lacked, but we also start to provide the very things that we needed at the time - love, attention, respect and so forth. So many of the destructive behaviours and problems that we encounter as adults come from making decisions and viewing life through the lens of an injured child. Healing our inner child, therefore, is one of the most profound forms of inner work that we can do, not only for improving our relationship with ourselves and others, but because it also puts a stop to the transference of intergenerational trauma.

When we start to acknowledge and show kindness to our inner child, we can unlock the many unexpected gifts that this part of our personality has to offer, such as our limitless capacity for love and boundless enthusiasm. When we choose to repress or ignore our inner child, however, we remain bored, empty and disconnected from life. ■



“ HEALING OUR INNER CHILD IS ONE OF THE MOST PROFOUND FORMS OF INNER WORK WE CAN DO ”

## HEALING INNER CHILD WOUNDS

Here are a few ways that we can begin to treat specific inner child wounds:

- Healing an abandonment wound requires establishing a sense of safety for ourselves. Try some safe-place visualisations or EFT tapping to release past abandonment hurt.
- *To heal a guilt wound, there needs to be a release from any remorse that the inner child is still holding on to, along with their belief that they must rescue other people. Start setting healthy boundaries and enforcing consequences if those boundaries are violated.*
- Healing a neglect wound requires giving ourselves the space to acknowledge and express any bottled-up emotions that have been stifled, and to let our inner child know that we are there for them.
- *To heal a trust wound, we must build up accountability by following through with any commitments or promises we have made to ourselves. Additionally, try to start surrendering and letting things go more.*

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