# THE Family INHERITANCE

***What we are bequeathed by our parents' legacy can shape and mould us, for better or for worse***

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They say that the apple never falls far from the tree, but how true a statement is this in reality? After all, you may have inherited your father's green eyes or your mother's love for royal history and knack for numbers, but how much of our identities are formed by what our parents pass down to us?

Multiple schools of thought in psychology and behavioural science believe that our personalities are a product of both genetics and interaction with the environment in which we are raised. If this is the case, then the attachments fused between a baby and its primary caregivers must be paramount in the formation of the child's eventual character. But what happens if these key attachments fail to manifest or blossom as they should?

### What are attachment wounds?

The importance of attachment may sound like a modern concept but the idea has been around for far longer than most might expect. British psychologist John Bowlby is often credited as being the 'father of attachment theory' but it was Ronald Fairbairn, a Scottish psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, who first laid the groundwork during the mid-20th century for our eventual understanding of attachment. Fairbairn posited that human beings are inherently relational, and rejected Freud's theory that humans are intrinsically pleasure-seeking. He believed that a human's primary motivation is to form relationships and that our emotional wellbeing is contingent on these connections. Fairbairn also emphasised that a safe and nurturing environment was a crucial aspect of a child's healthy emotional development.

The concept of attachment theory was further developed by Bowlby and developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth to aid our understanding of the significance of the emotional bond between infants and their primary caregivers and the impact this relationship can have throughout one's lifetime. Bonds are formed when a child's physical and emotional needs are met; not just in terms of food, shelter and protection, but also the qualities that nurture and sustain us, such as love and affection. Attachment can be achieved when these needs are consistently met, especially in the early developmental years. When a child's needs are disregarded, however, it can have catastrophic consequences – resulting in what is known as an attachment wound.

Attachment wounds refer to psychological injuries that arise from disruptions in the bonding process between a child and its primary caregiver. The metaphor of the 'inner wound' stems from early psychoanalytic theories, particularly those of Freud, who proposed that emotional scars formed in childhood could manifest as neuroses and other psychological symptoms in later life.

### Mother wound vs father wound

Attachment wounds can emerge in relation to both or either parental figure, known »

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respectively as the 'mother wound' and the 'father wound'. Although not classified as a formal psychiatric diagnosis, both terms have gained recognition in recent years. The idea of parental wounds is well ingrained into our popular cultural narrative – you don't have to look too far to find a *Mommie Dearest* reference somewhere or a joke about somebody having 'serious daddy issues'.

Graeme Galton, an attachment-based psychotherapist, believes that both the mother and the father can have the potential to have gaps, omissions or failures that lead to attachment wounds. "I prefer the term 'attachment injuries' as it sounds accidental rather than deliberate," explains Galton. "Most parents are doing their best, but sometimes their best isn't very good, even if their intentions are well-meaning."

While both the mother and father wounds can share similarities and often stem from a dysfunctional or absent relationship with a parent, they both have their own unique themes and impacts on the child. The mother figure is typically associated with warmth and nurturance and is the provider of emotional safety. Mothers are usually our prototypes for learning how to self-soothe and validate our own emotions. A mother wound often relates to feelings of inadequacy, abandonment or disconnection, and reflects a hunger for acceptance and unconditional love. The father figure, however, is usually associated with guidance, protection and strength. They are a child's model for navigating the world and are the builders of confidence and independence in their offspring. A father wound often relates to feelings of rejection and anger, and reflects issues with identity, self-worth and trust.

Unfortunately, society has fed into these gendered stereotypes of what a mother and father should be, with women often unfairly bearing the brunt. If a mother isn't naturally soft and nurturing, they may feel as if they have failed to fulfil the role expected of them. This can also lead to disappointment and resentment in their children because their mother doesn't fit the cookie-cutter mould of what society says a maternal figure should be. Mothers are often expected to be the primary caregiver and to conduct the majority of the childcare and domestic labour, while also financially providing.

It should be clarified, though, that attachment wounds can be caused by any parental figure who takes on the role of mother or father, such as a grandparent or foster parent. It is important to note that growing up in an 'untraditional' family structure, such as being raised by a single parent or by parents of the same sex, doesn't automatically equate to a child developing an attachment wound for the absent mother or father figure. In many circumstances, attachment wounds can develop within the 'typical' nuclear family set-up where both a biological mother and father are present. What is important is whether the child is being raised in an environment that is conducive to meeting their needs for safety, love and acceptance.

### *What causes attachment wounds?*

Attachment wounds often stem from relational trauma including neglect, abuse or desertion. Although attachment wounds can be caused by a singular event or a multitude of different situations, Galton believes they can all affect the parent's capacity to be emotionally available. This can result in feelings of insecurity due to the parental figure not being attuned to the child's inner world for one reason or another.

One of the biggest causes of attachment wounds is perceived abandonment. This can be in the guise of a parent dying young or leaving the family unit due to divorce. It can also be because of long stints of being separated from their offspring, such as being hospitalised or having to work away from home a lot of the time. "All of these circumstances can be experienced emotionally as abandonment," says Galton. "If you make yourself dependent on another person for safety and security, and that person 'abandons' you for whatever reason, even if it's involuntary, that's experienced by the child as a lesson not to trust or depend on anybody."

Even when a parent is physically present in a child's life, that doesn't necessarily negate attachment injuries from occurring. Attachment wounds can often be caused by neglect – this may be physical neglect such as failing to provide a child with basic essentials such as sufficient food, clothing or medical care, but more often than not it can be emotional neglect. Most parents may be competent in the practicalities of raising a child, but not all of them will be equipped to cater to its emotional needs.

"From the day a child is born, the brain is growing, developing and absorbing information," says Galton. "The baby's understanding of the world and their expectations of how others will react to

them are built up from that first moment. If for whatever reason the parent is unresponsive to the child, the baby is going to receive the message unconsciously that it is not enough to get a smile out of the other person or that they must make a huge fuss to get their parent's attention."

A child needs someone who can connect with and validate their emotions, a process that is otherwise known as emotional attunement. When a parent doesn't respond empathetically to them, the child learns that it is not safe to convey their feelings. This prevents them from developing the necessary skills in communicating and managing their emotions and can foster painful feelings of being unseen and misunderstood. If a child does not receive the necessary comfort and warmth they crave from their caregiver, this may result in a sort of 'emotional hunger' that they will then spend the rest of their lives trying to fulfil.

A caregiver may be unable to offer adequate support if they are dealing with their own emotional turmoil such as a bereavement, mental illness or substance abuse. An unpredictable parent, who is inconsistent or unable to handle their emotions appropriately, can also create an unstable emotional environment for the child. "These types of parents are unpredictable in their responses," explains Galton. "Sometimes they are a source of safety and comfort and at other times they are a source of risk or rejection. So there is no safe, consistent strategy for the baby to adopt; whether to go near the attachment figure or to avoid them altogether."

Sometimes, attachment injuries can be a result of over-involvement on the part of the caregiver. Enmeshment between parent and child can occur when the boundaries between them become blurred, leading to unhealthy levels of dependence. In this instance, the parent may rely excessively »

> "ATTACHMENT WOUNDS OFTEN STEM FROM RELATIONAL TRAUMA – INCLUDING NEGLECT, ABUSE OR DESERTION"

## HOW ATTACHMENT WOUNDS AFFECT PARENTING

Attachment wounds can profoundly shape an individual's approach to parenting. When wounds remain unaddressed, they can lead to replications of unhealthy patterns in the parent-child dynamic and perpetuate a vicious cycle of passing down emotional pain to the next generation. This transference of generational trauma can be seen in many different ways. A wounded adult may struggle to provide emotional support or be responsive to their child's needs, as they themselves were never provided with a sufficient representation of good parenting. They may overcompensate for their own upbringing by being too permissive and struggling to enforce boundaries, or by being overly protective of their children, subsequently smothering them in the process. Some may even harbour resentment and jealousy towards their children, especially if they appear to have a healthier relationship with the grandparents that inflicted the initial wound on the parent.

on the child for emotional support, validation or companionship, often treating the child more like a confidant or, in some cases, expecting the child to take over the role of caregiver themselves. In this dynamic, the child is expected to cater to the feelings and the needs of the adult, rather than the other way around. Enmeshment can also happen if a parent exerts excessive control over a child's life, stifling their independence, autonomy or the development of their own identity.

Not surprisingly, attachment wounds can be caused by an overly critical parent or those who instil high expectations in their brood. Receiving constant negative feedback or only receiving positive reactions on account of achievement or parental approval can foster deep-seated beliefs in a child that they are not good enough or love is conditional on pleasing the caregiver. In extreme cases, attachment wounds can be caused by physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse, deeply fracturing a child's sense of safety and causing them great harm. Attachment injuries can also be a by-product of a child witnessing abuse, such as observing domestic violence in the home. A child can develop an attachment wound concerning both parents if they feel that a parent didn't protect them enough from the other parent's abuse.

It is important to stress, though, that in most instances the caregiver isn't intentionally inflicting trauma or harm on the child. "I think it's very easy to be judgemental of parents," says Galton. "Occasionally some are downright cruel and horrible, but that's only in a tiny number of cases. Sometimes they just don't have the right emotional, financial or practical tools to do better or they are just doing to the child what was done to them."

### *How attachment wounds can influence attachment style*

During her 'Strange Situation' study, Mary Ainsworth observed how infants responded to separations and reunions with their guardians, which revealed indicators of early emotional attachment (or lack of) between a child and their primary caregiver. From this series of experiments, she identified three primary attachment styles: secure, anxious and avoidant attachment. Ainsworth's work was later developed as research into attachment theory expanded beyond infancy into adolescence and adulthood, and psychologists started to examine how someone's attachment style may be unveiled in other relationships. A fourth attachment style, disorganised attachment, was also added later to the framework.

"The main determinant of our attachment style is the family we grew up in and the way we learned to get the best reaction from others in that family," says Galton. "One of the most remarkable things about attachment styles is their consistency through the generations. If a father or a mother has a particular attachment style, there's a high probability that their child will also develop it."

Yet, despite often sharing the same parents and growing up in the same environment, it is common for siblings to develop different attachment styles to one another. "Siblings can have very different relationships with their parents," says Galton. "This can happen for all sorts of

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## HOW TO BREAK THE CYCLE

Preventing the transference of attachment wounds to the next generation requires intentional effort and self-awareness. After all, if you have an attachment injury, then it is likely that your parent(s) had their own unhealed attachment wounds too. Learning about attachment style and how an attachment wound can impact your behaviour and relationships with others is a good start. Reflecting on the kind of parent you want to be and practising effective parenting skills such as demonstrating active listening, consistency and empathy can go a long way towards cultivating a secure attachment with your child. By promoting open communication and effective emotion regulation, you can create a nurturing environment that fosters resilience and robust emotional wellbeing in your children. Instead of passing down a bestowal of unresolved generational trauma, a proactive approach to parenting can enable you to leave behind a lasting legacy for your children and allow future generations to flourish.

reasons. A benign example of this is in the case of 'difficult' and 'easy' babies. If a baby finds it hard to feed, sleep or be comforted by cuddles, they are often called a difficult baby. They are also more likely to get an irritable reaction from the person looking after them because they are going to make the parent feel that they aren't being a good mother or father, so a negative cycle builds up. A smiley baby, however, who eats and sleeps well, is going to be called an easy baby. They make the parent feel competent and good about themselves. That baby is going to receive a different message back from the parents about itself."

Secure attachments typically develop when caregivers are responsive, consistent and nurturing. Children feel safe expressing their needs and can easily seek comfort from their caregivers, leading to a strong sense of security. When attachment wounds are minimal or effectively addressed, individuals tend to develop a secure attachment style. Securely attached adults tend to have a positive view of themselves and others, have healthier relationships, and maintain a good balance between intimacy and autonomy. They are also able to communicate openly and regulate their emotions well. Unresolved attachment wounds can result in a child developing an insecure attachment style – whether that be anxious, avoidant or disorganised.

Anxious attachment is often a result of inconsistent caregiving, where a parent is sometimes responsive and nurturing but, at other times, neglectful or emotionally unavailable. This unpredictability can provoke children to be hyper-vigilant and cling to caregivers for fear of abandonment. Anxiously attached adults may exhibit neediness in relationships, frequently seeking reassurance from their partners or overreacting to perceived signs of rejection. "It's as if their emotional tap is turned on full," says Galton. "In a relationship, they are likely to be experienced as suffocating and never satisfied by the other person."

Avoidant attachment can occur in response to caregivers who are distant, rejecting or overly critical. These children learn to suppress their needs and prioritise self-sufficiency. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style often value independence and may either shun intimacy with others or struggle to connect with them on an emotional level. In times of stress, they might withdraw or shut down instead of seeking support, and may avoid conflict or uncomfortable conversations. Someone with this attachment style probably grew up learning not to make too many emotional demands of the parent," says Galton. "Their emotional tap is turned down low: they minimise their emotional needs, don't make a fuss and are seen as low-key. However, in a relationship, they can seem abandoning or unavailable."

Disorganised attachment often stems from trauma, abuse or chaotic early experiences. Caregivers may have been sources of both comfort and fear, leading to confusion in the child about seeking closeness. Someone with a disorganised attachment style may exhibit anxious and avoidant behaviours and be unpredictable. They swing between seeking intimacy with others and pushing people away; their erratic behaviour can result in emotional turmoil and instability in relationships.

***Do you have an attachment wound?***

Normally, with an attachment wound, it is less about what happened to the child and more about how the parent's behaviour was perceived by them. Seemingly innocuous events such as the birth of a younger sibling can be interpreted by an immature mind as a threat or a rejection, leading them to internalise this 'evidence' as a set of negative beliefs about themselves, others and the world.

Somebody with an attachment wound may hold certain core beliefs, such as:

*'I am unloveable'*

*'I am unworthy'*

*'I am not good enough'*

*'I am too much'*

*'I must be perfect to be loved'*

*'I can't trust anyone'*

*'I can only rely on myself'*

*'I am responsible for other people's emotions'*

*'People will always leave me'*

Other beliefs harboured by someone might include:

*Their parent(s) never loved them*

*Their parent(s) loved their siblings more*

*No matter what they did, they could never please their parent(s)*

*Their parent(s) never approved of them* »

> "SEEMINGLY INNOCUOUS EVENTS CAN BE INTERPRETED BY AN IMMATURE MIND AS A THREAT"

*They were a burden or they were never wanted*

*They were never seen or understood by their parent(s)*

*Their parent(s) never had time for them*

*They always had to walk on eggshells around their parent(s)*

### *Consequences of untreated wounds*

Although attachment wounds are invisible to the eye, they can manifest in very noticeable ways. If left unresolved, they can lead to a wide range of psychological and interpersonal difficulties that persist into adulthood. These include:

*Emotional dysregulation*

*Emotional outbursts*

*Chronic anger and resentment*

*Low self-esteem*

*A negative inner voice*

*A lack of identity*

*Perfectionism and rigid behaviours*

*Dissociation and emotional numbness*

*Self-destructive behaviours*

*Mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and emotionally unstable personality disorder*

Interpersonal challenges caused by attachment wounds can present as:

*Having unstable relationships*

*Repeating negative patterns in relationships*

*Difficulty expressing needs or in asking for help*

*Difficulty in setting and maintaining boundaries*

*Avoiding conflict*

*Having people-pleasing tendencies*

*Being overly clingy or dependent on others*

*A fear of abandonment*

*Avoiding emotional connection with others*

*Hyper-independence*

### *How does the mother wound manifest differently in sons and daughters?*

There can be key differences in how the mother wound affects each gender. One core aspect in men can be difficulties in forming healthy relationships with women. The relationship with a mother figure can shape a man's understanding of – and interaction with – the opposite sex. They may long for a woman's love and approval, seeking out partners to fill this void by placing them on a pedest or adopting a 'Nice Guy' persona and putting others' needs before their ow

On the other hand, a man with a mother wound may struggle to trust women or pick partners who re-create similar dynamics to his relationship with his mother, such as them being emotionall unavailable. Sons with a mother wound ca also struggle with vulnerability, resulting i difficulties articulating their feelings.

With daughters, a mother wound can present as problems in forming healthy relationships with other women. In this case, a difficult relationship with a mother figure can cause a daughter to internalise harmful beliefs about women in general, which may result in them lashing out at or antagonising other women. As a mother wound can induce a deep sense of shame in women, this may provoke feelings of competition, comparison and a need to prove they are more beautiful, successful, wealthy or competent than other females, to be deemed 'worthy'.

As a mother is usually a girl's first introduction to femininity and what it is to be a woman, a fraught mother-daughter relationship can lead to conflicts in identit with some daughters rejecting their mother's version of femininity or strugglin to embrace it altogether. They may also grapple with other elements of their identity, including whether to adopt or spurn their mother's expectations of them

### *How does the father wound manifest differently in sons and daughters?*

For both genders, a father wound can be reflected in needing to pursue approval an validation from men, particularly those in positions of authority. Children with father wounds can also become over-achievers, i a subconscious effort to prove their innate value to their father.

With males specifically, they may crave a father figure to fill the void left by their biological father or develop an intense resentment towards authority figures, which can impact how they conduct themselves in school or at work. Just like mothers and daughters, a father is a boy's introductory model to what a man should be. If he is set a less-than-stellar example, a

on may struggle with his sense of masculinity and look to other male figureheads for guidance. We often see this play out with adolescent boys who turn to street gangs or toxic masculinity mouthpieces for mentorship in what it takes to be deemed an 'alpha male'.

Men with father wounds may also hold themselves to impossible standards, especially if their father constantly criticised them. This can result in a fear of failure, perfectionism or seeking to control every aspect of their lives to overcompensate for a loss of control in childhood.

A daughter's relationship with their father typically forms their expectations of men, and if they are heterosexual, their future romantic partners. If they grew up witnessing a father who modelled less than ideal behaviour towards their mother or other women, they may be more likely to accept this unhealthy conduct in relationships. Women with a father wound may look to men to provide reassurance and a sense of self-worth, as well as safety and protection. They may also struggle to trust men or repeat unhealthy dynamics established in childhood.

### *Moving forward*

Developing an attachment wound may seem inevitable, especially when we have so little control or influence over our early childhood or our family. Even when our parents are doing their best, they can unintentionally inflict painful wounds and we may evolve into scarred adults.

Fortunately, it is possible to heal attachment wounds through therapeutic interventions, self-reflection and supportive environments. It involves revisiting painful memories, but this can offer an opportunity for both sons and daughters to navigate their experiences, redefine their relationships with themselves and others, and ultimately break the cycle of pain. ■

## BALMS FOR TREATING ATTACHMENT WOUNDS

### EDUCATE YOURSELF

Recognising and acknowledging the existence of attachment wounds is a crucial step towards healing. By reading books, watching educational videos or attending workshops or support groups about parental wounds, you can give yourself the vocabulary and insight to understand how your past experiences shape your current beliefs and responses.

### SEEK THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT

Because attachment wounds can be deeply complex and traumatic, it is recommended that you acquire the support of a trained mental health professional while working through any attachment injuries. Therapists can provide tools for working through unresolved trauma as well as providing a safe space and the validation and empathy you may not have received in childhood. Some of the most effective therapies for treating attachment wounds include eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing therapy (EMDR) and cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT).

### PROCESS THE PAST

Engaging in journalling, art or other forms of self-expression can help individuals explore their emotions and construct a new, empowering narrative about their experiences.

### PRACTISE FORGIVENESS

Reflecting on your caregiver's history and why they might have been the way they were can help you to forgive them or, at least, provide some explanation for your parent's behaviour. Forgiveness is not about freeing them from accountability but rather about freeing yourself of any toxicity.

### RE-PARENT YOURSELF

This is about showing up for yourself as your ideal parent and providing your inner child with the love, compassion and understanding that you may have lacked from your parent(s). This can include learning to self-soothe, prioritising any un-met needs and setting healthy boundaries with others.