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# HOW TO DEAL WITH YOUR CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AS AN ADULT

*Experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness: the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood.<sup>11</sup>*

**Jana: Where can adults even begin to examine and get in touch with the story of their childhood? How can you dig deep enough to reach your trauma?**

Violeta: There are various ways. You can begin by discovering your personal history in your current relationships. By being extremely brave, honest and fair to both yourself and others. Risk being vulnerable! Stick through it even if it hurts like hell. Because re-experiencing painful memories that you were forced to suppress as a child is painful. Be gentle towards yourself, you experienced enough violence in the past as it is.

Start off by delving into your relationship towards yourself. You may ask yourself how your inner and outer worlds make you feel. Do you really know yourself? *Do you know who you are?* Do you feel alive or empty? How do you treat yourself? Do you love yourself, respect yourself and

have a high feeling of self-worth? Are you able to be gentle, warm, compassionate towards yourself? Are you creative, do you trust yourself, do you believe in yourself and risk making new experiences?

When these questions are answered, I would recommend that you as the seeker shift from your relationship towards yourself to your relationships with other adults and the conditions you live in. Who do you live with? What kind of relationship do you have with them? Where do you live? In what kind of conditions do you live? Who can you rely on in your everyday life? Who can you rely on if you fall ill? Who can you talk to if you are distressed or upset? Who can provide you emotional and practical help? How do you act towards other people? Your children, partner, parents, colleagues, etc.?

After you ask yourself these questions, reflect on your childhood and pose similar questions by shifting to that period of your life. Think about what it was like to be a child in your primary family. As already mentioned several times above, the key question to be asked at this point is whether you had an adult person who raised you in a safe environment, who was available to you and who provided you the emotional support you needed when you were distressed or upset, a person that you could rely on, that you could talk to, a person that you were not afraid of leaving you.

In addition, you need to reflect on how you experienced the attitude of your parents towards themselves, the relationship between your parents and the attitude of both parents toward you. How were you raised, how were you punished? You may also reflect on whether you lost anyone you

were attached to during your childhood and if you were given the chance to grieve your losses.

Everyone already has all the answers they need within but cannot always find them by themselves. If someone has experienced a really severe trauma, they may have suppressed it deep, deep inside. If that is the case, you are recommended to seek professional help.

**Jana: How interesting! You live your past answers in the present ...**

Violeta: Yes, they are all at your fingertips. You come face to face with them on a daily basis. But, do you dare recognise and acknowledge them?

Childhood pain brings about peculiar *symptoms* that you fail to find a reasonable explanation for and whose origins remain elusive. For example, you may be overwhelmed by intense fear that causes peculiar physical responses.

You may have a low self-esteem and feeling of self-worth. You may be accompanied by a feeling of failure, deep helplessness, shame. You may notice distorted beliefs about yourself, other people and the world. You may feel threatened every step of the way. You may not trust yourself, others and the world. You may feel that the world is a dangerous place. You may often not see any point in anything and fail to understand what is going on with you. Since every individual differs from the other, affected individuals may not experience all of the above.

I am positive that there is an explanation for everything happening to you. The heavy feelings and emotions

mentioned above and other heavy feelings and emotions are a result of a traumatic response to one or more traumatic events in your childhood or trauma in your primary family. Even though trauma deeply changes you, its symptoms can be minimised or even reversed.

Most importantly, you need to make a decision. If you truly want to learn about your past and let it go, you need a strong desire, authenticity and courage to expand upon the view of yourself as a child of your childhood, stricken with pain, with the wisdom and ability of yourself as an adult. You need to decide and commit yourself to continue on this journey no matter what, even if something extremely painful starts to come to the surface, and to dare face the underlying reasons behind your present experiences. You can start to put together your childhood story yourself. However, healing requires a safe relationship with another adult, preferably with your therapist.

**Jana: Even though people love to reminisce, tough and challenging feelings are frequently pushed aside with the justification that wounds of the past should be well left alone. Isn't it perhaps better, as it is readily believed, to live in and enjoy the present?**

Violeta: Unfortunately, living only in the present cannot be done, because your past will not let you do that! I have witnessed too many cases of people who were unable to lead a full meaningful life in the present until they became aware of their painful past, *clear it*, accept it and come to terms with it. If you are truly honest with yourself and are able to experience your inner world,

you know exactly that there is something within you influencing you that you cannot explain. As if you are restricted and held back by a set of invisible forces. This is not *fate* as many people like to say because all heavy feelings in the present are rooted in a painful past. I believe that everyone can clearly feel how their past has a bad and restrictive effect on their present. This feeling needs to be trusted and something needs to be done about it.

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*I was unemployed for years on end. Even though I had the right qualifications, skills and the desire to work, I remained stuck. And, to make matters worse, I did not trust myself, I did not believe that I could be a good father. A good father and a successful worker brings money to the household and provides for their family. During my therapy sessions, I finally started to understand a pattern from my childhood that I had created following my father's sudden death and my inability to help him. A pattern that told me that I was not allowed to succeed, that I was a failure and that I was not allowed to seek help because I was not worthy of receiving any kind of help from anyone.*

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*At the age of 40, my life seemed ideal to an outside onlooker. I was wealthy, had a good relationship with my husband and two wonderful, smart and healthy children, and yet I lacked a real will to live, come to think of it, I believe I was depressed.*

*At first, I pointed fingers at culprits outside of myself, at other people and external circumstances, but my honesty towards myself left me empty-handed. One day, when I felt my distress had me in a corner, a sudden thought flashed through my mind that there was nothing wrong outside of me but that there was an extremely destructive force residing within me. In that moment, I realised that something had to be done.*

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*Even though I was extremely popular with boys, my longest teenage relationship ended within a period of two months. I initiated all break ups as soon as I realised that I was starting to bond with my boyfriend. My first marriage also went down the drain. Today, I understand that the only reason I got married the first time was because I did not love my first husband enough that he could hurt me if something were to go wrong. Today, I also understand that I succumbed to the wrong belief created by the painful loss of my mother in my childhood that by not trusting anyone and loving them deeply, I was safe from the pain and hurt even in the case of rejection.*

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*Today, I know that I am just as able and capable than any other man. Years ago, however, I felt as if I was not there. I felt like a coward and a loser. I did not dare to come forward and stand up for*

*myself. In lieu of me, decisions were made by other people, by my mother, wife, son, daughter, boss, etc., until, one day, I woke up with a rage that was asking: what about me? That is when I sought help. And that is when I realised that I was still carrying the heritage of my father who had committed suicide.*

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You need to dig deep into your past as the entire weight of your unresolved past, everything stored in your subconscious, will sooner or later hit you in the face even stronger, perhaps even in the form of a severe disease. If you choose the path of wisdom, you will start taking the steps of personal growth. Is there anything more that you can bestow yourself with?

When you start putting the pieces of your childhood's story and the childhood stories of your ancestors into a meaningful puzzle, you may end up coming across many things, including concealed truths that you may have only had an inkling of in the past. Perhaps these truths were concealed from you by your parents with good intentions.

However, what you do not know has an even greater hold over you by subconsciously directing your life. People tend to live in the past instead of the present, even though so many try so hard to forget about the wounds of their past. Failing to observe the connections between past and present events in their life.

As painful as it may be, it always makes sense to examine and put into words your childhood story and evaluate it,

address the pain it has brought. As soon as you process and accept your past, it loses its destructive power over you.

**Jana: Should you grieve your childhood losses in your adulthood even if you were not given the chance to do so as a child?**

Violeta: Yes, you deserve the chance to grieve them, even if you did not get the opportunity as a child. As painful as your childhood losses, like parental loss, may be, and as painful as letting go of the past may be, you need to undergo the bereavement process that you had been deprived of as a child for one reason or the other in your adult years. The process will be painful but it will be worth pushing through. Because bereavement is a natural process supported by nature. You need to grieve your losses to be able to accept them, you need to find a way to re-experience the horror that you once felt and move forward, free from the past.

If you fail to grieve your losses and bid farewell to the deceased, if you fail to accept change and adapt, you may end up stuck in your past for the rest of your life and end up throwing it all away. You cannot move forward until the bereavement process is completed. All the energy that was once caught in the past and was used as a *defence mechanism* can now be freely used for the present and future.

Despite being an extremely uncomfortable, painful and suffocating emotion, grief serves a purpose and has a meaning. Frequently, therapists find denied and suppressed grief in their clients, which is the result of a child who was unable to cry for various reasons and who failed to receive compassion

from adults and who has been caught in this emotion since then. Grief is the most deeply suppressed emotion. Suppressed grief results in distress and the development of various symptoms in the present, meaning that you cannot start leading the life you were meant to lead until your loss is grieved.

On your way to become a mature adult, you are most frequently hindered by your inability to accept your denied and suppressed grief from your childhood. I cannot help but sometimes feel that we do not live in a world of mature adults but in a world of wounded children who *play* with their own wound in various ways, yearning for a resolution to their problems.

If you need to grow up in the truest sense of the word, you need to put your childhood and childhood losses, which were so painful, behind you. Only when you become a proper adult you can realise that the greatest injustices were inflicted upon you by the people that used to be the most important to you. Unfortunately, injustices do not end in your childhood. Until you grieve your childhood injustices, they will continue on autopilot throughout your life. You need to become aware of them, process and accept them, to stop the vicious cycle of passing them on to your own children. Injustices need to stop with you.

**Jana: It makes me laugh to think that I *have been growing up* for seventy years. And it makes me cry to remember the pain experienced when I started to *dig* into my childhood story as an adult woman.**

Violeta: Yes, it is hard. The journey to yourself lasts your entire life. Every single moment of your life, you can accept

only as much of it as you are able to at the time. When you are ready and it is safe enough, you take a step forward. However, it is essential to recognise that you are now an adult and are able to handle the pain that was too hard to bear for the child who was left to their own devices. It is important to trust yourself that the pain can now be allowed to *flow* through your body. When you were a child, you were shielded from it by your defence mechanisms because it was too hard to bear, but, as an adult, you are able to accept it and deal with it without them. The mechanisms that served to protect you from another severe pain in your childhood, have since then solidified, expanded and remained within you. They are a shadow part of you that have a detrimental effect on your attitude towards yourself, others and the world in your adulthood.

**Jana: Are you even able to realise as an adult that the present and your present issues actually hold important messages from your childhood?**

Violeta: Too often, the answer is unfortunately: no. Not by yourself. These messages are concealed from you. You have found yourself in an impasse. Are you going to find someone who will help you find a way out? Do you dare ask for help and put what you couldn't, as children, into words? Do you allow yourself as an adult to experience your childhood pain, speak about it and cry it out? Are you even given the chance to give yourself what you were deprived of as a child?

Our society with all the pressures, demands, busyness and extremely fast tempo prevents you from recognising and

resolving your traumatic experiences as a child in your adulthood. You have been actually finding new *distractions* on a daily basis that rob you of the energy and time that you would have otherwise been able to use for what I consider the key activity in your life: your *recovery*. Society also abhors processing of traumatic experiences in the present or grieving present losses. Processing traumatic experiences and grieving losses are processes that can only be triggered and completed under specific conditions: in safe relationships and within a longer time-frame.

**Jana: What is going to happen to society as a whole if individuals remain caught in their traumas?**

Violeta: I have been pondering this a lot. Who and what needs all this insane tension, speed and restlessness that are so hard to remove yourself from? I believe that the behaviours and overall state of our society in the widest sense of the word are indicators of mass trauma and failure to grieve losses, which have also found their way into social institutions and relationships.

The impact of violence left behind by past traumas in families and society as a whole continues according to its inherent laws. It is impossible to expect that society will change for the better out of its own volition because it can't. The only ones who can change are we, individuals, who dare to face our past. Painful and tough experiences from your childhood wound and mark you throughout your life. Your pain wishes to be dug out from the deep recesses of your being, expressed, cried out and honoured. It will never be

released in and of itself. You need to trust in your inner power to overcome your inner restrictions and to adopt a new and good view of life. The more people who dare, the more truth, compassion, authenticity and aliveness will spread in society as a whole. And there will be fewer children and adults who will be ignored in their distress. There will be less silence!

As a family counsellor, I come across various families. In my eyes, the happiest families are aware of their past heritage, dare to face it and acknowledge it. They have decided to find answers, seek help and to learn new things to allow the old to return back to where it belongs. To the past.

I have also come across some families who give the impression of functioning properly and leading a comfortable life, but their underlying relationships are filled with emptiness, insincerity, numbness and a lack of empathy. Children who live in such families have everything they could possibly want and yet feel so very alone. I believe that when they grow up, they actually find themselves in a less favourable position by experiencing heavy emotions whose logical origins cannot be found despite being convinced that everything is *all right* at home. And because they cannot find a meaningful explanation for what they feel, they never seek help.

There are also families who have been carrying the heritage of trauma for several generations and seem to be functioning properly despite having been weakened by the trauma. Some of them, however, are no longer functioning as they should because all the adults in the household have already lost the power and control over the events in their life. These have become stronger than them. Weakened

families of this kind can only resolve their traumas by involving a third party, provided that the family itself gathers the courage to seek help from a licensed therapist who brings a lot of new insights therein, particularly compassion and safety.