

THE WOUNDED CHILD



*What happened in childhood —
big things and small ones —
and how it is still shaping your life today.*

—
For anyone who suspects the roots of
what they struggle with reach further
back than they have yet looked.



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)

BCPA Registered (Canada),

20+ years in private practice

A note from me to you

Before you begin

For a long time, I thought the idea of an “inner child” sounded overly simplistic. It felt easier to believe that adulthood meant moving forward, not looking back. Yet over the years, both in my work and in my own life, I began to notice something harder to ignore, certain emotional reactions don’t belong only to the present moment.

There are times when something is touched inside us and the response feels older than the situation itself, disproportionate, familiar, and difficult to fully explain. And over time, I kept returning to the same conclusion, the past does not stay in the past simply because we want it to.

I want to begin with a simple idea, the child you once were never completely disappears.

They remain present in ways both visible and invisible. They are there in the parts of you that still long to be loved, accepted, understood, and valued. They are there in old hurts that can still be touched decades later. They are there in the fears, insecurities, and protective strategies that were formed long before you had any real choice about them.

Some of these experiences can feel like echoes of something distant, and yet they are often deeply alive in the present moment.

For me it was a raised voice. My mother could be explosive, and what set it off was usually something small, something she had asked me to do that I had forgotten. What came back was that I was lazy. That I was selfish. Those words did not stay outside me. They were planted, and over the years they grew.

Sometimes even now they can arrive. Someone is angry with me, decades later, and the first thing is the hit of fear in my body. Then flight, before I have understood anything at all. And the words in my own head are hers.

In my own experience, I began to notice this most clearly in emotional reactions that felt larger than the present moment could fully explain, moments of self-criticism, sensitivity in relationships, and times where I would question my own responses even when there was no clear reason to doubt myself. At the time, these reactions felt confusing. Over time, I came to understand them as younger parts of me being activated, parts that had learned to adapt in earlier environments where emotional steadiness, clarity, or safety were not always available. Not because anything was wrong with me, but because adaptation had been necessary.

The more I explored this in my work and in myself, the more I realised that many of our struggles in adulthood are not signs that something is wrong with us. They are often signs that something happened to us, or did not happen for us, at a time when we were too young to understand it, and too young to have any real choice about how we responded.

I have also watched this happen in other people, over many years of sitting with them while they did it. That matters to me, because it means what I am describing here is not my own story generalised into advice. I have seen someone meet a younger part of themselves for the first time and understand, in that moment, what had been driving something they had been fighting for years. It rarely looks dramatic. It changes a great deal.

As I began to work more consciously with these younger parts, something gradually shifted. What had once felt automatic or confusing began to feel more understandable, and less overwhelming. There was less of a sense of being at the mercy of these internal reactions, and more capacity to stay with them, listen inwardly, and relate to them with more care.

Over time, this has changed my inner relationship with myself in a very real way. There is now a greater sense of compassion towards these younger parts, and that has not only softened how I relate to pain, but also created more space for aliveness. Moments of playfulness, curiosity, and joy have become more available again, not because life became easier, but because I am no longer as disconnected from those parts of me.

Alongside this, I have also found a deeper connection to my own authenticity, a clearer sense of what feels true for me, what does not, and a greater capacity to live and respond from that place rather than from old patterns of protection or adaptation.

And something else has become increasingly clear along the way.

For a long time, I noticed a quiet paradox, the parts of me that longed for acceptance from others were often the same parts I had not yet fully learned to accept within myself. The more vulnerable, uncertain, and imperfect parts, the parts I once tried to move past or outgrow, were still here, still alive, still asking not to be fixed, but to be met.

Over time, I began to see that these younger parts were not something to leave behind in order to become who I was meant to be. They were already part of me. And what they seemed to need most was not improvement, but relationship.

There was also something humbling in recognising that the more I began to meet these parts of myself with acceptance rather than judgement, the more something subtle began to shift in my experience of life. Not as a formula or guarantee, but as a lived experience, the relationship I was developing inwardly began to be reflected, in quiet ways, in how I experienced connection outside myself.

But the child within us is not only the keeper of our wounds.

They are also the keeper of some of the most life-giving parts of who we are, our joy, curiosity, creativity, wonder, playfulness, and capacity for connection. They live on not only in what still aches, but also in what still feels alive.

This workbook is an invitation to gently turn towards that part of you. Not to fix it, but to begin to understand it and meet it with compassion, recognising that it holds not only your wounds, but also your capacity to feel alive, open, and connected to yourself, to others, and to life.

With warmth,

*Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc Counselling Psychology
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

How to use this workbook

This is a structured workbook with writing space throughout. Work through the sections in order if you can, they build on each other.

A particular note for this workbook, this material can bring up feelings that are stronger than expected. The child self is closer to the surface than we usually realise, and turning towards it, even gently, even with care, can sometimes stir things up before it settles things down.

You may know the feeling of coming in from the cold without gloves. At first, your fingers ache, sometimes more painfully than they did outside, in the cold itself. It can feel, briefly, like something has gone wrong. But what is actually happening is the opposite, feeling is returning to a part of you that had gone numb in order to cope with the cold. The ache is not damage. It is circulation coming back, blood and warmth moving once more into a place that had quietly shut down to protect itself. And then, if you stay with it a little longer, the ache softens, and what is left is simply warmth, your fingers, fully yours again, no longer needing to brace against anything.

Something similar can happen in this work. Feeling worse, briefly, when warmth and attention are first directed towards a part of you that has been numbed or guarded for a long time. It does not mean the warmth is wrong, or that something has gone wrong in you. It often means feeling, and eventually, ease, is returning to a place that had been protected by going quiet.

This might look like feeling more tender or tearful than usual for a day or two. It might look like old memories surfacing unexpectedly, sleep feeling more disrupted, or a kind of rawness that seems to come from nowhere in particular. If this happens, it does not mean something has gone wrong, or that you are not coping well with this work. It is a genuinely common response to turning towards material that has often been left unattended for a long time, and it usually settles with rest, time, and support, rather than more digging.

Please be gentle with yourself throughout. If something feels too large to hold alone, please turn to the final section, which maps the support available to you. There is no requirement to revisit painful material in a way that feels unsafe.

Self-compassion is not optional in this work. It is the condition that makes the work possible.

There are three parts to it. The psychologist Kristin Neff, whose research shaped most of what we now understand about self-compassion, calls them self-kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

Self-kindness is the tone you use with yourself when something has gone wrong. Most of us speak to ourselves at those moments in a way we would never speak to a child.

Common humanity is remembering that you are not the only one. Whatever happened to you, or did not happen for you, a great many other people are carrying something like it. What we were given as children tends to feel private and particular. It rarely is.

Mindfulness, here, means being present with what is actually happening rather than deciding in advance what it is, and not judging what you find while you are still finding it. The breath is usually the quickest way to slow things down enough to look.

****Why this is the foundation****

This is the ground the work stands on, not a kindness laid over the top of it. And the order matters as much as the parts.

Nothing can begin until you are present enough to feel what is actually there. That is what mindfulness is for. Not calm, and not an emptied mind, but the capacity to witness what has arrived without judging it and without pushing against it. Holding what is there rather than being swept along by it. Sitting beside it rather than in it. I am experiencing this. This is part of my experience right now. That sentence does more work than it looks capable of.

Then kindness, because whatever you find has to be met with something, and what it needs is precisely what it did not get. The child in you is entitled to be met kindly. Not once she has been sufficiently understood, and not when she has earned it. That is what she needed at the time and did not reliably receive.

And if this is not actually embodied, something else turns up in its place, because it is what we already know how to do. Distracted. Impatient. Faintly irritated at having to deal with any of this. Which is, more often than not, exactly what we were met with as children. She recognises it instantly. It is the thing she knows best. And it costs you the only thing that matters here, which is her trust in you. That is salt in the wound rather than care of it.

Any wound heals in the right conditions and fails to heal in the wrong ones. That is as true here as anywhere else. You are not applying a technique to her. You are making the conditions in which something can finally close.

And common humanity, because this work is unbearably lonely without it. Not only that other people had difficult childhoods. Something more ordinary than that. Every person you passed today has a child inside them wanting the same kind, present attention yours does. Almost none of them have ever been told so.

Remove any one of the three and it stops working. Without presence there is nothing to meet. Without kindness you meet her the way she was met the first time. Without common humanity you do all of it convinced you are the only one who ever needed to.

Contents

- 01 How childhood shapes the adult
- 02 The things that wound, big and small
- 03 What the child learned, beliefs, strategies, and survival
- 04 How the wounded child shows up in adult life
- 05 What stands between you and her
- 06 Meeting the child you were
- 07 Going forward, building the relationship
- 08 Finding the right level of support

SECTION 1

How childhood shapes the adult

The architecture of the self is built early

You might begin by considering that the person you are today did not form all at once.

Over time, especially in the earliest years of life, something in you was taking shape. Not through conscious choice, but through experience, repetition, and relationship. In those early environments, you were highly dependent, highly receptive, and deeply shaped by the emotional world around you.

The experiences you had during this time did not simply pass through you. They left an imprint. They helped shape the internal architecture through which you now experience yourself, other people, and the world.

In this sense, you may begin to notice that how you respond to stress, how you relate to closeness, how you understand your own feelings, and even how safe or unsafe the world feels to you now, did not arise randomly. These patterns were formed in response to what you experienced early on.

From a developmental perspective, this is not abstract or symbolic. The brain and nervous system are forming rapidly in early life, and they are exquisitely responsive to the emotional environment they are developing within. Over time, your stress response, your attachment patterns, and your capacity to regulate emotion are shaped through lived experience.

A child who grows up in an environment of consistency, warmth, and emotional safety tends to develop a nervous system that expects that kind of world. A child who grows up with unpredictability, emotional mis-attunement, or chronic stress tends to develop a nervous system that adapts to that instead.

The first relationships as a template

You may also begin to notice how much of your inner world was shaped through your earliest relationships.

The ongoing, everyday experience of how you were responded to, how your emotions were met, how your needs were received, how your presence was understood, becomes the foundation for how you come to understand yourself in relation to others.

Through thousands of small, ordinary moments, something forms in you, a sense of whether you are acceptable as you are, whether closeness is safe, and whether other people can be relied upon emotionally.

Over time, these early experiences form an internal template, often outside of awareness, through which later relationships are interpreted and approached.

A glimpse across the stages

This template did not form all at once, and it did not form evenly. Different things were being asked of you at different points along the way, and it can help to glimpse, briefly, what each of those points tends to involve.

In infancy, what was needed most was safety and consistency, to learn, through repetition, that distress would be met and the world would respond. When this was missing or unreliable, it can leave behind a baseline sense that the world is unpredictable, even decades later, even when nothing is currently wrong.

In early childhood, the task was learning to push against limits while still remaining loved, testing the edges of independence without losing connection. When this balance was hard to find, it can show up later as guilt around taking up space, or a swing between defiance and over-compliance, depending on what felt safest at the time.

In middle childhood, the focus shifted towards competence and belonging, discovering what you were capable of, and finding a place among others. Wounding here often becomes perfectionism in adulthood, or a persistent sense of never being quite good enough, no matter what is actually achieved.

In adolescence, the work was identity and individuation, figuring out who you were, separate from your family, and testing that emerging self against the wider world. When this process was disrupted or unsupported, it can leave behind a fragile or borrowed sense of self, or real difficulty knowing your own preferences clearly, even now.

You may recognise yourself most clearly in one of these stages, or find that different ones resonate in different areas of your life. There is no need to map your history precisely. The aim is simply to notice that the years were not all the same, and that whatever formed in you, formed in response to something specific, at a specific time.

The self that arrives in adulthood

By the time you reach adulthood, much of this internal world is already in place.

Not as something fixed or unchangeable, but as something shaped over years of adaptation to your environment.

You may begin to notice that many of the ways you now relate to yourself, to others, and to life are not simply choices made in the present, but long-standing patterns that once made sense in earlier contexts.

This does not mean you are stuck with them. But it can help to see that they were formed, not chosen, and that what was formed can, over time, begin to be understood differently.

The purpose of this workbook is to support that kind of seeing, to help you gently notice the connection between what was learned early on, and what continues to be lived now.

You might pause here for a moment, and see what you notice if you bring your attention gently into your body. Perhaps your shoulders are sitting high and tight near your ears, or your jaw is clenched without you having decided to clench it, or your breath has stayed shallow and high in the chest rather than moving freely into the stomach. None of this needs to mean anything in particular. These are simply signals, ways your nervous system has been communicating with you all along, whether or not you were listening.

There is nothing to fix here, and nothing to get right. It is simply a small, early practice of noticing your body directly, rather than only thinking about it, something worth returning to again and again, since many of us have grown so used to living in our heads that the body's signals stop registering at all. This workbook will keep inviting you back towards this kind of noticing as we go.

Exercise 1 Where you recognise yourself

Reflecting on the stages, and the template that formed - Looking back across the stages described in this section, infancy, early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence, which one do you find yourself most drawn to, or most unsettled by? You don't need to have a clear memory of that time. Sometimes a felt sense, a vague unease, or even a strong pull towards a particular description is enough of a starting point.

Part one, marking the line - Below is a simple timeline of the four stages. Without overthinking it, mark wherever your attention is pulled, it might be one clear point, a stretch that spans two stages, or a faint pull in more than one place. You don't need a memory to justify the mark. A felt sense or a vague unease counts.

For example, someone might place a strong mark over "middle childhood," with a lighter second mark near "adolescence", sensing that a pattern of never feeling quite good enough started earlier, but sharpened again when they were figuring out who they were outside their family.

Part two, putting it into words - As you reflect on this, take a moment to notice what's happening in your body. If you notice nothing at all, that's worth noticing too, it doesn't mean you're doing this wrong. Numbness was often protective, and it is common.

What stands out to you, and why do you think that stage in particular caught your attention?

A gentle reminder - There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Exercise 2 The emotional climate of your childhood

The general feel of it - You might bring to mind the overall emotional atmosphere of the environment you grew up in. Not specific events, but the general feel, the background tone that was there most of the time.

Part one, a starting point - Below are some word pairs. For each one, circle whichever side feels closer to true, or put a mark anywhere in between if it's not a clean either/or. There's no scoring here. This is just a way in, especially if the question feels too big to answer directly.

For example, someone might circle closer to "unpredictable" than "steady," and closer to the middle on "warm / cold", because it depended heavily on which parent was home.

Part two, putting it into words - Looking at where you landed above, was emotional expression welcomed, or did it feel discouraged, dismissed, or uncomfortable for others? Was there ease in being yourself, or did something in you need to be managed or adjusted?

If this is hard to sense directly, you might picture a young child you know growing up in that same atmosphere, and notice what you can feel for them.

A gentle reminder - If nothing comes, that's not failure, some of the most protected material is protected precisely because it worked. There's no deadline on remembering.

SECTION 2

The things that wound

Big and small

The word trauma has a gravitational pull towards the dramatic, towards the events that are obviously terrible, obviously significant.

But one of the most important things I can offer in this workbook is an insistence that the things that wound children are not only the big, obvious things.

They are equally, and in some ways more pervasively, the small, ordinary, repeated things that nobody around them recognised as harmful, because they were so ordinary.

What trauma actually is

Before going further into what wounds a child, the word itself is worth pinning down, because the definition that matters here is not the everyday one.

Trauma is not defined by what happened. It is defined by what happened inside you as a result. When an experience overwhelmed your ability to cope, and left you carrying feelings, fears, or stress that your nervous system could not process at the time.

Two things follow from that, and both matter here.

The first is that the same event can be traumatic for one child and not for another, and that is not a question of resilience or character. It depends very largely on what happened next. A child who is frightened and then comforted by a steady adult has had a completely different experience from a child who is frightened and has to manage it alone. The fear was the same. What differed was whether anyone helped to carry it.

The second is that children are far more exposed to this than adults, because they have neither the capacity to process large feelings on their own nor the option of leaving. They depend on the adults around them to help them make sense of what happened and to help the body settle afterwards. When that does not happen, the experience does not get finished. It gets stored.

What gets stored, and where

Not as a memory, in the way we usually mean the word.

Trauma affects the nervous system, and the nervous system adapts in order to survive. Some of us come out of childhood chronically alert, watchful, scanning, as though something could go wrong at any moment. Others learn to shut down, to go quiet, to numb, because feeling less was the only relief available. A great many of us move between the two.

None of that is a flaw in you. It is a system that learned exactly what it needed to learn. The difficulty is that it does not switch itself off when the danger passes, so decades later the watchfulness, or the shutting down, is still running in situations that no longer call for it.

Frozen at the age it happened

This is also why these reactions can feel so out of proportion to the life you are actually living.

When something overwhelms a child and there is no help to process it, that part of them stops developing at the pace of the rest. It stays where it was. The rest of you grew up, learned things, gained perspective, gathered decades of evidence about the world. That part did not. It is still five, or nine, or fourteen, holding exactly what it was holding then.

Which is why the reactions can feel childish. I use that word as a description of their age rather than as a criticism. When you find yourself sulking at forty-three, or wanting to hide, or hit by a wave of shame that belongs to a playground rather than a meeting room, you have not regressed. You have met a part of you that never left.

What forms over the wound

The wound itself is only half of it. What matters as much is what grows over the top.

A wound that goes untended does not stay open. It closes and it scars, and scar tissue is harder than what it replaced. Less flexible. Less able to feel. That is protective, and it works, and the cost is that the hardening is not selective. You do not get to numb only the part that hurts.

And afterwards, a great deal of what you do comes from the wound rather than from you. Pain makes decisions. Fear makes decisions. They come out looking like preferences, or personality, or simply how you are. The reluctance to ask for anything. The need to be liked. Leaving before you can be left. None of it feels like a response to something from decades ago. It feels like character.

The choice no child should have to make

Underneath all of it is something that explains why children give themselves up so readily.

A child has two needs and neither is negotiable. One is attachment, staying connected to the people they depend on, because a child cannot survive without it. The other is authenticity, staying in contact with what they actually feel and need, because that is how any of us knows how to look after ourselves.

In a good enough environment those two never collide. But in a home where certain feelings are not welcome, or where a parent cannot tolerate a child's anger, or need, or sadness, the child faces a choice that is not really a choice at all. Be yourself and risk the connection, or keep the connection and put yourself away.

Every child chooses attachment. Every single time. That is not weakness, it is arithmetic.

So the feelings go underground. The needs go quiet. And a version of you develops that is easier to be around, more acceptable, less trouble, and that version usually works rather well. It often looks a great deal like success.

Where she comes from

Which is the reason any of this belongs in a book about the wounded child.

She is not a metaphor, and she is not a way of speaking about the past. She is what remains when something was too much for a small person and there was nobody available to help her through it. The feelings had nowhere to go, so they stayed, at the age they arrived, still holding what could not be processed at the time.

The wounded child is also what was put away in order to make the acceptable version possible. She is not only carrying the pain. She is carrying the part of you that was true.

That is why she is the age she is. It is why she does not respond to reasoning, or to how long ago it was, or to everything you have achieved since. None of it has reached her. She is still holding it, and still waiting for what she needed then, which was for someone to see it, take it seriously, and stay.

If you cannot reach her, or do not want to

You may not feel anything for this child. Or what you feel may be closer to contempt. Impatience with her neediness. Embarrassment that she still exists. A wish that she would be quiet and let you get on with your life. Some of us find we actively dislike her.

If that is you, nothing has gone wrong and you are not unusual. It makes complete sense.

She is the part that was hurt. She is the evidence that you were once small and frightened and needed things you did not get. If you survived by becoming capable, or by never needing anyone, then she is everything you had to stop being in order to manage. Of course you do not want to look at her. Disliking her is often the clearest sign of how hard something has worked to keep her out of sight.

And this is the point where the work can go wrong, so the risk is worth naming. Those of us who feel nothing tend to decide this is not for us and stop. Those of us who feel contempt tend to carry on and turn the whole thing into another opportunity to be hard on ourselves. Both leave her where she was, and the second adds to the injury. It becomes one more experience of being met by someone who found her a nuisance.

Another way in

Do not try to feel something you do not feel. This way may come more easily.

Picture a child you actually know. A niece, a nephew, a friend's daughter, a child in your family. Six or seven. Now put them in your childhood, exactly as it was, and let them live it.

Ask what you would want for them. What you would hope somebody would do. And this is the question that matters most: ask what they would slowly come to believe about themselves if that went on for years.

If picturing a child is difficult, use a friend you love and imagine them at that age instead.

Whatever comes back is about you. Compassion almost always flows outwards more easily than inwards, and there is nothing dishonest about reaching yourself that way. Most of us have to.

And stay curious

If there is one stance to hold through all of this, it is curiosity.

Not analysis, which is the mind's way of staying in charge, and not pity. Curiosity is simpler than either. It is genuinely wanting to know. What is this. How old does it feel. What was she frightened of. What did she decide about herself that day.

This is not dwelling on the past. Dwelling is going round something. Curiosity goes into it and comes out with something you did not have before. It is the difference between rehearsing your childhood and learning from it, and what you learn is mostly about now. Why this particular thing gets to you. Why that person's tone empties you out. Why you keep arriving at the same place.

It is also what makes healing possible at all, because nothing changes while it is still being avoided.

And it gives back more than clarity. Curiosity is one of the most alive things about being a person. It sits alongside wonder, exploration, creativity, and play, which are the very things that tend to go quiet when a childhood requires vigilance instead. Getting curious about yourself brings those back too. That is what the freedom is. Not that the past is resolved, but that you are no longer managing yourself, and you get to find out who you are when you stop.

One more thing about curiosity, which is why it is worth holding onto when nothing else is available. You do not have to feel warm towards her to be curious about her. Warmth is not available on demand. Curiosity usually is. And you cannot be curious and contemptuous at the same time, so the moment you genuinely want to know why a child came to believe she was too much, you have already stopped despising her for it.

The big things

Sexual, physical, or emotional abuse. Severe or chronic neglect. Exposure to domestic violence. Growing up with a parent whose addiction, severe mental illness, or profound emotional unavailability made them unable to consistently provide what the child needed. The death of a parent. Serious illness or medical trauma. Profound poverty or chronic instability.

These experiences are recognisable as harmful. Their effects are measurable, documented, and well understood.

If any of these are part of your history, they matter, they are real, their effects are real, and they deserve the professional attention the final section describes.

The small things

You may remember times when your emotional expression was met with discomfort, irritation, or a sense of turning away. Not always in obvious or harmful ways, but in ways that made something quietly clear over time, your inner world was not always easy for others to receive.

You may also recognise a family where certain emotions simply weren't part of the everyday fabric. Perhaps sadness wasn't something that was shown, named, or made room for, not forbidden exactly, just absent, as though it belonged somewhere else. Perhaps asking how someone was doing, and really meaning it, wasn't part of daily life either. Connection happened through other things, through tasks, through humour, through being in the same room, but not always through being asked, or asking, what was actually going on underneath.

And so, without needing to be told, you learned to hold certain feelings inside. They mattered plenty. They just didn't always lead to feeling understood or met, so keeping them close came to seem like the safer bet.

You may also recognise what it was like to be loved, and to know you were loved, while sensing that some parts of you were more easily received than others. The capable, agreeable, impressive parts were welcomed more readily. The uncertain, angry, needy, or overwhelmed parts often felt harder to bring forward.

Over time, this can create a quiet internal split between the self that is shown and the self that is held back.

There may be a familiarity in how you learned to attune to others, noticing mood shifts, adjusting yourself, becoming careful or helpful in order to maintain connection. It wasn't a rule anyone stated. It was simply how closeness got sustained, and you learned it the way children learn most things, by watching what worked. In that process, your own needs may have gradually moved into the background.

You may also recognise the subtle experience of comparison, to siblings, peers, or ideals, where small comments or repeated signals about who you were becoming accumulated into a felt sense of being too much, not enough, too sensitive, or not quite right.

And beneath this, a quieter experience, not of being overtly harmed, but of not always feeling fully seen in your inner world, not consistently known, or deeply met.

None of these experiences are dramatic. And yet they can shape, in quiet and enduring ways, how you come to expect to be seen, understood, accepted, and loved, by others, and by yourself.

Looking back at my own childhood, I can't point to a single moment. There isn't a scene I can describe. That is the thing about the small things. They don't leave you with a story you can tell. They leave you with a climate.

What I know is that both my parents worked, and that whatever was going on for me, I was mostly on my own with it. Nobody was unkind about it. There simply wasn't room, and I learned not to expect any.

And when I did bring something to my mother, it had a way of coming back at me later, used as evidence about who I was. When that upset me, what I was told was that I was too sensitive. So I learned to be careful about what I handed over.

Too sensitive followed me out of the house as well. At school. With certain friends. It became a thing that was known about me, and eventually a thing I knew about myself.

None of that would look like much written down. It was still enough to teach me what to do with my feelings, which was to keep them to myself.

And about your parents

Something usually surfaces around here, and it is worth meeting directly rather than letting it work away underneath.

Most people, at the point of naming what was missing, feel disloyal. There is often a rush to add that they were doing their best, that others had it far worse, that this is unfair to people who loved you.

They probably were doing their best. That is very likely true. A parent can generally only offer what they themselves received, or what they managed to find another way towards, and they were looking out through a lens of their own, clouded by what they carried from their own childhoods. Whatever was not attended to in them tends to arrive, unasked, in how they raised you. Very little of it was chosen.

But notice what happens if you let that thought arrive too quickly. It closes the subject. And the person it closes it on is not your mother or your father. It is the child who is finally about to be heard.

She has already had the experience of being told it was not that bad. That is the thing she knows best. What she needs from you now is the opposite, which is to be believed about what it was like.

I hold both of these about my own childhood. What happened to me was wrong, and it left me believing things about myself that were not true. And my parents were carrying wounds of their own, which shaped how they were with me and which they had chosen no more than I chose mine. Both are true. Neither makes the other smaller. So both things are held at once. Your parents did what they could with what they had, and you were a child who needed something you did not reliably get. Neither of those cancels the other. Understanding where it came from is not the same as deciding it did not matter, and you do not have to choose between loving them and telling the truth about your own childhood.

Letting the body answer too

As you read through these small, ordinary things, you may notice something happening in your body before your mind has fully caught up, a tightening, a heaviness, a subtle bracing, even a wave of sadness that seems to arrive from nowhere.

This is worth pausing for, rather than moving past. Right now, you might ask yourself, as I read this, what is happening in my body? Not what do I think about it, but what do I feel, and where? You do not need an explanation for what you find. The body often responds to what is true before the mind has organised it into words, and that response is, in itself, a kind of confirmation.

Exercise 3 Your own wounding

With honesty and self-compassion - This exercise invites you to gently turn towards your own childhood experiences, with as much self-compassion as feels possible. You might begin by noticing anything that feels as though it has left a mark in you over time. For example, you might remember a time you brought a difficult feeling to someone, only to be met with quick reassurance, told not to worry, or gently steered towards moving on, sometimes even hearing that you were “too sensitive,” or that it “wasn’t that bad”, rather than having someone simply stay with you in the feeling. This may include more obvious or clearly painful experiences, if they are present for you, being shouted at often, being compared unfavourably to a sibling, or growing up in a home where conflict between parents was frequent and frightening. But it may also include quieter ones, a repeated pattern, like always being the one who apologised first to keep the peace. An absence, like never being asked what you wanted to do, only ever where you were needed. The emotional tone of a particular relationship, like a parent who was present in the room but rarely emotionally available in conversation. Or a subtler sense of not fully being met, being told you were “too much” when you got excited, or learning to make yourself smaller so as not to be a bother.

As you reflect on this, notice what’s happening in your body as much as what’s happening in your thoughts.

If reflecting on this directly feels hard to access, you might try picturing a young child you know, six or seven, or whatever age comes to mind, living through the same things, and noticing what becomes clearer from there.

A gentle reminder - There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn’t, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

Exercise 4 What was missing

Turning towards absence - Sometimes what shapes us most is not what happened, but what did not happen. You might gently turn towards a sense of absence in your childhood, times you came home from school carrying something with you, or sat quietly upset or preoccupied, with no one really noticing, checking in, or asking how you were in any steady or consistent way. This may include attunement that was missing, feelings that went unnoticed or unreflected, or parts of you that were never fully met or responded to.

Part one, naming what wasn't there - Below is an example of how this might look, followed by space for your own. You don't need full sentences, a fragment or a single word is enough.

Part two, coming back to it - Once you've filled in the left column as much as feels possible today, go back and, for each line, ask yourself, is this actually true, or is it something I learned because of what was missing, not because it was accurate?

Using the example above, the right-hand column might eventually read, "It was true that bringing it to someone often didn't help, growing up. It isn't true that I have to handle everything alone now, some people can actually hold it with me."

Write in your own right-hand column only what you're ready to write. Some rows may stay blank a long time. That's fine.

What did I need in that environment that I didn't receive in a steady, reliable way? What kind of response, presence, or care would have helped me feel more seen, safe, or understood?

A gentle reminder - Grief for what didn't happen can be harder to locate than grief for what did. Let it be vague if it's vague. Vague is still real.

SECTION 3

What the child learned

Beliefs, strategies, and survival

You may not have experienced your childhood as something you were analysing at the time. You were inside it.

And from inside it, you made sense of things the only way a child can, by drawing conclusions that helped you understand what was happening, and how to stay safe, connected, or accepted.

Over time, those conclusions didn't stay in childhood. They became the quiet assumptions underneath adult life, shaping how you see yourself, other people, and the world.

The beliefs the child forms

You may recognise that, in small and repeated ways, a child begins to form beliefs about themselves. Not as abstract ideas, but as felt truths.

I am lovable.

I am too much.

I am not enough.

My feelings matter.

My needs get in the way.

I am only okay when I am useful, or easy.

These beliefs aren't something a child chooses. They form the way a scar forms, through how you were met when you were emotional, how you were responded to when you needed something, how much space there was for the full range of who you were.

And once they form, they don't feel like beliefs. They feel like reality.

They are rarely fixed or one-dimensional. They form in response to a world that is sometimes experienced as safe and attuned, and at other times as confusing, absent, or difficult to read.

You may also recognise how this extends outward, what you learned about other people, whether they could be trusted, whether closeness was safe, whether people stayed or withdrew, and what you learned about the world itself, whether it felt safe enough to relax into, or something that required constant vigilance.

They're not abstractions sitting in the back of your mind. They're often quietly steering how you react, interpret, and anticipate right now.

Mine has a moment attached to it, and I can still find it easily. I was five. My father had friends over and I had wandered into the room, pleased to be there. He asked me to tell them the time. I looked at the clock and could not do it.

What I remember is not him, and I do not think anyone in that room thought anything of it at all. What I remember is what happened in my body. The heat coming up my neck and into my face. The room going very loud and very far away at the same time. Wanting to be anywhere else and not being able to move. And then the words arriving to explain it. You are stupid.

Nobody said that out loud. I was five years old, and I supplied it myself.

What happened afterwards is the part I find more interesting now. My father was an investment advisor and very good with numbers, so I would take my homework to him. He would get frustrated with how slowly I was understanding it, and end up doing it himself. I handed in work that was excellent and wasn't mine.

Then I would sit an exam on my own, and fail.

I couldn't see the mechanism. All I could see was the pattern. Good marks when he helped, bad marks when it was only me, which looked like the clearest possible evidence that the problem was me. Eventually my marks were poor enough that my mother arranged a tutor.

That is how a belief stops feeling like a belief. It doesn't just form once. It keeps finding evidence, and the evidence is often perfectly real. I really did fail those exams.

You might try this with a belief you recognise in yourself. Bring to mind a recent moment when it was triggered, perhaps a small mistake, and the immediate inner verdict, I'm so stupid.

Rather than just thinking the words, try saying them out loud, quietly, the way you actually say them to yourself in that moment. Notice what happens as the words land. Where do you feel it? A drop in the stomach? A flush of heat in the face? A tightening in the chest or throat? Speaking the belief, rather than only thinking it, often makes its physical weight more obvious, the body tends to respond to spoken words with more immediacy than to passing thoughts.

These beliefs rarely arrive as calm, neutral sentences. They arrive as a felt jolt, and the words come quickly afterwards to explain what the body has already registered. Noticing this connection, belief and bodily reaction, arriving almost together, can make the belief easier to catch in the moment it happens, rather than only in hindsight.

The strategies the child develops

Alongside these beliefs, you may recognise how you adapted.

If it felt safer not to show emotion, you may have learned to keep things inside, a strategy of suppression, becoming someone who appears composed, but who may struggle to fully know or express what they feel.

If approval came through achievement or being good, you may have learned to push yourself, a strategy of over-achieving, becoming someone who finds it difficult to rest, soften, or feel that what they have done is enough.

If you needed to stay emotionally attuned to others in order to feel safe, you may have learned to monitor, adjust, and anticipate, a strategy of hypervigilance to others, becoming highly sensitive to others, but less certain of your own internal signals.

If unpredictability or emotional intensity was part of your environment, you may have learned to manage life through control, becoming someone who finds uncertainty uncomfortable, or even threatening.

You may also recognise other strategies unique to your experience, shaped by what you needed in order to cope, belong, or stay emotionally safe.

None of these were mistakes. They were intelligent ways of adapting to what was happening around you at the time. And they likely worked, in the environment you were in.

But what once helped you adapt can, over time, begin to shape the limits of how freely you can live.

I ran with it. It stopped being something I thought about myself and became the lens I looked out from, and it shaped how I moved through everything.

I was frightened of handing work in. Anything that came back with a mark on it was a risk. I found ways to scrape through.

That wasn't laziness, though it would have looked like it. It was a way of not finding out.

The violin was different. I had been playing since I was three, and demanding as it was, it steadied me. It was one place where I had something. Even there it wasn't clean. I got into trouble with my teachers for not practising enough, so the same thing followed me in.

What changed was university, where I worked harder than I ever had, and it paid off. That was the first real evidence against the belief, and it had taken until then to get any.

It also taught me something that took a great deal longer to unlearn. If I worked hard enough, I could stay ahead of it. For a good part of my early and middle adulthood I was a perfectionist. It worked, until it didn't work anymore.

Exercise 5 The beliefs you are still carrying

Noticing their shape - You might gently notice the beliefs that feel most active in your inner world today, about yourself, about other people, about the world. Rather than thinking of these in abstract terms, notice how they specifically show up for you, the moments they become most present, the situations that activate them, the kinds of evidence your mind tends to gather to support them. For example, you might notice a belief like "I'm not enough" showing up in specific moments, perhaps when you make a mistake, when you feel uncertain in a relationship, or when you compare yourself to others. In those moments, your attention may shift quickly towards what went wrong, what it means about you, or how it confirms a familiar sense of not quite measuring up. You might also notice how you tend to experience your own worth, what you expect from others in relationships, and what feels fundamentally safe or unsafe in the world.

If a belief feels present right now, try saying it out loud, quietly, the way you actually say it to yourself, and notice where it lands in your body. A drop in the stomach? A tightening in the chest or throat?

If it is hard to spot these beliefs in yourself, you might imagine a young child you care about forming the same belief, and notice what you would want them to know instead.

A gentle reminder - If this stirs up some defensiveness on the critic's behalf, that's worth noticing too, it means you're close to something it's trying to protect.

Exercise 6 The strategies you are still running

Where they come online - You may start to see the ways you still manage, cope, or protect yourself in daily life. From the strategies described earlier, suppression, over-achieving, hypervigilance to others, control, or any others you recognise, which feel most familiar or active? These often become easiest to notice in real situations, moments of stress, conflict, uncertainty, closeness, or pressure, where survival strategies tend to quietly come online. For example, you might notice a tendency towards hypervigilance, becoming very tuned in to other people's tone, mood, or reactions, and adjusting yourself in response in order to stay connected or avoid disconnection. This might show up as carefully reading between the lines, noticing small shifts in energy, or feeling unsettled when something about someone feels slightly "off." For each one you recognise, Where does this seem to come from? What might it have originally been protecting you from feeling? And what does it seem to cost you now, in your life, your relationships, your sense of ease?

As you reflect on this, notice what's happening in your body as well as your thoughts.

A gentle reminder - There are no right answers here, and nothing to finish in one sitting. Stay with what feels useful, leave what doesn't, and be as gentle with yourself as you would be with someone you love.

SECTION 4

How the wounded child shows up in adult life

The patterns that have not yet been connected to their source

The wounded child doesn't disappear when you grow up, and it doesn't stay neatly filed away in the past. Instead, it moves inward, into the nervous system, the body, and the automatic responses that often arise before conscious awareness has a chance to catch up.

And it shows up, again and again, in the patterns of adult life that feel most confusing or difficult to change, patterns that feel out of proportion to the present moment, and that carry an emotional intensity that often points to something older than what is happening now.

In the relationship with self

This is often reflected most directly in the way you relate to yourself.

You may notice a voice that feels harsher than you would ever use with another person. A persistent sense of not being enough, even when things are going well. An inability to rest without guilt. A struggle to receive kindness without questioning it. A sense that your worth must be earned through effort, productivity, or self-control.

These are not fixed traits. They are the internal echo of earlier environments where unconditional worth could not be taken for granted, where love, attention, or approval had to be earned, managed, or maintained.

The voice itself is worth a closer look

The parts of us that criticise, push, or demand more are not enemies, and they are not evidence that something is wrong with you. Each one is doing a job. Its whole purpose is to keep a more vulnerable part of you, often the wounded child themselves, from being hurt again in the way they once were.

The critical voice frequently borrows its tone from somewhere specific, a parent, a teacher, an early authority whose disapproval once carried real weight. It adopted that voice because it was the most available material at hand, and because, at the time, pre-empting criticism may have felt safer than risking it landing unexpectedly. If you could criticise yourself first, faster, more harshly than anyone else might, perhaps you could stay one step ahead of being hurt.

This means the critic is not working against you. It is working, however clumsily, on your behalf, trying to protect the same child it sounds like it is attacking. We will return to this later, since reaching that child usually means getting to know the parts standing in front of them first.

Over time, these experiences can become woven into the way we see ourselves and move through the world. We learn to monitor ourselves closely, to anticipate criticism before it comes, to push harder when we are already exhausted, or to judge ourselves for needs and emotions that are simply part of being human. Many of us spend our lives asking other people how they are, offering empathy, patience, understanding, and support, yet we rarely extend the same curiosity towards ourselves. We may sense

that something feels wrong, but instead of pausing to ask, “What is happening for me right now?” we push on, criticise ourselves for struggling, or try to make the feeling go away.

In no other important relationship would we expect connection without listening. The inner child is rarely asking to be fixed. More often, it is asking to be noticed, heard, and met with the same compassion we so readily offer others.

The result is a relationship with self based on performance rather than compassion, achievement rather than inherent worth, one in which acceptance still feels like something to be earned, rather than something that was always deserved.

Notice, too, where this voice tends to land physically, a clenching in the stomach, a tightness in the chest, a bracing through the shoulders. The harshness is rarely only verbal. It usually has a felt, physical signature as well.

In intimate relationships

You may also recognise how these patterns become activated in close relationships.

If love once felt inconsistent or unpredictable, you may find yourself becoming highly sensitive to shifts in tone, distance, or availability, scanning for signs of withdrawal and experiencing uncertainty as emotionally charged or unsafe.

If closeness once felt overwhelming, intrusive, or conditional, you may notice yourself pulling back when relationships begin to feel too intimate, vulnerable, or emotionally demanding.

These responses are not conscious choices. They are the nervous system doing what it learned was necessary in order to stay safe in connection.

As children, we do not simply learn how to relate. We learn what love is.

We learn it from how our parents or caregivers relate to us. We learn it from how they relate to each other. We learn it from how they speak to themselves, manage conflict, express affection, respond to distress, and navigate emotional closeness. Long before we can understand what is happening, these experiences begin shaping our expectations of relationships and quietly informing our definition of love.

If love was warm and consistent, we may come to expect connection to feel safe and reliable. If love was unpredictable, critical, emotionally unavailable, or something that needed to be earned, these experiences can become woven into our understanding of what love is supposed to feel like.

For many of us, love can become quietly intertwined with uncertainty, self-sacrifice, emotional intensity, criticism, or longing. Not in obvious ways, but in subtle patterns that begin to feel familiar. And what is familiar often comes to feel normal.

As adults, we often find ourselves drawn towards relationships that carry this familiar emotional shape. Not necessarily because they are healthy or fulfilling, but because they fit the template that was formed early in life. The nervous system tends to prefer the known over the unknown, even when the known has caused pain.

This can create a strange paradox. When we encounter a relationship that is genuinely loving, accepting, emotionally available, and consistent, it may not immediately feel comfortable. In fact, it can feel

unfamiliar or disorienting. We may not know what to do with a love that does not need to be earned, managed, anticipated, or worked for.

Part of us may find ourselves questioning it, mistrusting it, or feeling unexpectedly uncomfortable in its presence. Not because there is something wrong with the relationship, but because it does not fit the emotional template we learned early in life. The unfamiliarity can feel unsettling, even when the relationship itself is safe.

Sometimes we unconsciously distance ourselves from this kind of relationship. At other times, we may find ourselves recreating familiar dynamics within it. Not because we want them, but because some part of us is still trying to make sense of love through the lens of what was learned long ago.

And so the patterns repeat. Different people. Different circumstances. Yet underneath, a familiar emotional experience.

Often it is only later, sometimes after many repetitions, that there is a moment of recognition, that what we were moving towards was not necessarily healthy love, but love that felt familiar.

Healing begins when we become aware of these patterns and recognise that familiar and healthy are not always the same thing.

You may also notice this physically before you notice it in thought, a tightening in the chest when someone goes quiet, a held breath while waiting to see if they will pull away. The body often signals the old pattern before the mind has named what is happening.

When I was younger I met a guy who accepted me completely, with no condition attached to it. At the beginning it was wonderful.

Then something in me began to push against it. I had no idea how to be in a relationship with no conflict in it and nothing to manage. It felt wrong in a way I couldn't have explained at the time. The question underneath it, which I only found much later, was how could anyone love me this much.

I couldn't take it in. In the end it ended.

It took therapy and a good deal of inner work to see what had been happening. Love, as I understood it, meant being alone and being judged. That was the lens I was looking out from, and it was going to keep choosing for me until I did something about the wound underneath it.

And knowing that did not stop it happening again. Some time later, well into the work, I was drawn into a relationship with the same shape as the one I had with my mother. All of it was there. Not good enough. Selfish. Not caring. The same words, arriving from someone new. There was love in it too, which is what makes these relationships so difficult to leave. It was comfortable and it was painful at once.

That one turned out to be the turning point, though not because it was good for me. By then I could see what I was doing while I was doing it. I knew what the work was, and I knew it was not finished.

In parenting

You may find yourself in moments where your reactions feel stronger than the situation itself, where something in you responds in ways that feel surprising, automatic, or difficult to understand in the moment.

Perhaps it is irritation that rises quickly. Perhaps anxiety that feels out of proportion to what is happening. Perhaps hearing yourself use a tone that feels familiar in an uncomfortable way, as though something older is speaking through you.

In these moments, it can be easy to move into self-judgement or to ask, “What is wrong with me?” Yet these responses are not signs of failure. They are signals of activation, moments where something in the present has touched something unprocessed from the past.

Parenting often brings us into contact with our own early experiences, not only what we were told, but what we absorbed from how emotion, stress, conflict, and repair were modelled in our environment.

Without conscious intention, these patterns can reappear. Not because we are choosing them, but because under stress the nervous system often returns to what is most familiar.

In these moments, there can also be a sense of internal role confusion. We may find ourselves reacting not only from our present self, but from a younger, more activated part that once had to adapt or protect itself.

From this place, there may be additional difficulty, alongside self-blame, there can sometimes be misdirected frustration towards the child. Not because the child is doing anything wrong, but because a younger part of you as the parent has been activated and feels overwhelmed by what is happening.

This is not about blame. It is about awareness.

So much of parenting is shaped by what was once modelled for us, often outside awareness and without choice. And yet what becomes conscious can begin to shift. The moment we notice these patterns with curiosity rather than judgement, something new becomes possible, space to respond rather than react, and space for a different relationship to emerge, both with our child and with ourselves.

From here, the invitation is often to begin turning towards these younger parts within ourselves, not to analyse or correct them, but to begin relating to them with the same curiosity and compassion we are learning to bring into our parenting.

In the body

This is not only psychological, it is also physical.

A tendency to hold tension in certain places, the shoulders, the jaw, the stomach. A sense of being slightly braced, even in moments that are objectively safe. Difficulty fully relaxing or settling.

These are not imagined experiences. They are the body carrying patterns of protection that were formed earlier in life and have remained active over time.

As children, we adapt not only psychologically but physiologically. If parts of our experience felt overwhelming, unsafe, or unsupported, the body often learns to stay prepared. Muscles tighten. Breathing becomes shallow. The nervous system becomes organised around vigilance, protection, or self-suppression.

Over time, these responses can become so familiar that we stop noticing them. We may assume that feeling tense, rushing, overthinking, holding our breath, or staying constantly busy is simply part of who

we are. Yet often these are not personality traits but adaptations, ways the body learned to navigate experiences that once felt difficult to bear.

What my body holds is the fear of being found out.

Not about anything in particular. Just the standing expectation that at some point someone will see that being me isn't good enough, and that will be that.

It shows up as tension I carry without registering it. As breath I'm not taking. As a pull towards being invisible in rooms I have every right to be in.

For a long time I took all of that to be my temperament. It isn't. It is a five-year-old's conclusion, still being defended by a body that was never told the danger had passed.

What the body might be telling you

The body registers things before you have consciously worked them out, and that is worth taking seriously rather than dismissing as imagination.

Something shifts in a friend's tone, or there is a pause where there usually is not one, and before you have thought about it at all, something in your chest has tightened. The body got there first. It picked up a change and responded to it.

What happens next is where it gets complicated, because something arrives to explain what the body has flagged, and the explanation is rarely neutral.

For me, two things arrive, and they arrive together.

One goes straight to damage control. They are annoyed with you. You said the wrong thing. You should apologise. You have done it again.

The other wants out. Leave. Go quiet. Make yourself scarce for a few days and let it blow over.

They sound like opposites and they are not. One is trying to fix the danger and the other is trying to escape it, and both are working from the same assumption, which is that something has gone badly wrong and I am the reason for it.

None of that is information. It sounds like analysis and it is not. It is a much older response to a much older situation.

The signal was real. The story attached to it usually is not, or at least not yet.

Which gives you something to do that is neither believing it nor arguing with it. Separate the two. Something in my chest has tightened. That is true and worth noticing. Everything after it is a theory, and I do not have to act on a theory. Then the more useful question becomes available, which is not who is angry with me, but what just got touched.

From this perspective, symptoms are not signs that something is wrong with you. They may be signs that something within you is asking to be noticed.

The body often carries what the mind has learned to move away from. Feelings that could not be safely expressed. Needs that could not be fully met. Protective responses that were necessary at the time but remain active long after the original circumstances have passed.

Rather than asking, “How do I get rid of this feeling?” we can begin to ask a different question.

What might my body be trying to tell me?

When approached with curiosity rather than judgement, the body often reveals itself not as the problem, but as an important source of information about our history, our needs, and the parts of ourselves that are still seeking care and attention.

In recurring patterns that feel hard to explain

You may begin to notice patterns that repeat across your life, often in ways that are difficult to fully put into words.

Similar relational dynamics. Similar emotional roles. Similar endings or turning points that seem to reappear, giving more than you receive, withdrawing when things feel safe, or noticing difficulty emerging just as life begins to settle.

You may also see how the beliefs you carry about yourself, I am not enough, I am too much, I am only lovable when I am useful or easy, are not separate from these experiences, but woven into them. They form part of the same internal system, reinforcing one another over time and shaping what feels familiar, expected, even inevitable.

None of this unfolds consciously. It develops quietly, as an extension of earlier ways of making sense of connection, safety, and self-worth.

And yet what once made sense in an earlier environment can, over time, begin to shape the limits of how freely life can be lived.

These patterns often carry a recognisable physical signature too, perhaps a particular kind of tiredness, a tightness that returns at certain points in a relationship or season of life. The body sometimes recognises the pattern before the mind does.

What this section is pointing towards

None of these patterns are signs of failure. They are the continuation of adaptations that once made sense in the environments you were in. And they often remain active long after those environments have changed.

What begins as understanding these patterns can, over time, become something more important, the possibility of seeing them as learned, and therefore, potentially changeable.

Exercise 7 The pattern in your relationships

Noticing what is happening in the moment - Think of a recent situation where you noticed a strong emotional response arising, in your thoughts, feelings, or behaviour. It does not need to be a major event. It may have been something small that stayed with you longer than expected. Describe what happened, as simply as you can. For example, you might think of a recent moment where you sent a message and didn't receive a reply for a while, and noticed yourself becoming anxious, distracted, or preoccupied with what it might mean.

The felt sense of the moment - Now gently turn your attention inward. As you remember it, notice what happens in your body. You do not need to interpret or change anything.

Is there any tightening, heaviness, or tension anywhere? Any sense of activation, urgency, withdrawal, or collapse? Does anything shift, even slightly, as you recall the moment? Stay with this a little longer than feels necessary.

A gentle reminder - If nothing comes, that's not failure, some of the most protected material is protected precisely because it worked. There's no deadline on remembering.

Exercise 8 The reaction that is bigger than the moment

When the response is larger than the event - Think of a recent situation in which you reacted, emotionally or behaviourally, in a way that felt larger than what was happening at the time. Describe the situation, and your response.

As you stay with it, gently ask yourself, When have I felt something like this before? Where does this feeling seem familiar in my life, or my history? What might this moment be touching in me that feels older than the present situation?

Notice, too, what's happening in your body as you bring this moment back to mind.

A gentle reminder - If this stirs up some defensiveness on the critic's behalf, that's worth noticing too, it means you're close to something it's trying to protect.

Exercise 9 The belief underneath the reaction

What this may be connected to in you - Looking at the situation from the previous exercise, stay close to your experience rather than trying to analyse it.

What did this moment seem to say about you? What might you have started to believe about yourself in it? What felt most sensitive, tender, or activated?

You may notice certain beliefs appear, feeling not enough, too much, responsible, unseen, or only okay when useful or easy.

If appropriate, you might also ask, when I am inside this belief, how does it shape what happens next? Does it influence the decisions I make, how I show up in a relationship, how I see myself, or how safe the world feels? Beliefs like these rarely stay contained to one moment, they tend to quietly colour everything seen through them.

As these beliefs surface, notice what's happening in your body as well as your thoughts.

Optional deeper noticing - If it feels accessible, What did I need in that moment that I did not receive? What felt most important to me, underneath the reaction?

If this is hard to reach directly, you might picture a young child you have warmth for in that same moment, and notice what you can see clearly for them.

A gentle reminder - Beliefs like this rarely arrive quietly. If naming it stirs something up, that's the belief showing you how much weight it's been carrying.

SECTION 5

What stands between you and her

Getting to know the parts that formed to keep her safe

Everything in this workbook has been moving towards this point.

Not because it contains the answers, but because it invites a different kind of shift.

A shift from relating to the younger parts of you as something to fix, manage, or move past, towards something else entirely. Something closer to what those parts of you may have always needed, genuine, compassionate attention.

That shift is a real one, and it changes what you are being asked to do.

The sections up to here have mostly asked you to understand. To recognise the patterns, name the beliefs, see the strategies you have been running since you were small. That work was necessary and it had to come first. You cannot meet a child you have not yet located, and understanding is how you find her.

What follows asks something different. Not to work it out, but to feel it. This is the point where thinking about her stops being enough, and the contact has to happen somewhere other than in your head.

That is why you have been asked, at various points along the way, to notice what was happening in your body while you read or wrote. Those moments were not incidental. They were practice for this.

And if you have spent the last four sections firmly in your thinking, nothing has gone wrong. That is what they were for. It is only that the thinking has now taken you as far as it can.

You may begin to notice that there are younger parts of you still present in your inner world. Not as memories alone, but as living emotional states, holding feelings, expectations, and ways of responding that were formed long ago and remain active in certain moments.

This might look like a sudden wave of shame after a small mistake, a strong urge to withdraw when you feel criticised, or a deep need to over-explain yourself when you feel misunderstood. These moments can often feel younger than the situation you are in.

Who is driving

There is an image that may make the rest of this easier to hold.

Think of yourself as driving. When you are present, steady, and in contact with what is actually happening, you are the one at the wheel. But when something touches an old place, you are often no longer driving at all. The child has taken the wheel, or one of the parts that formed to keep her safe has taken it, and the car goes where it has always gone.

This usually happens without any announcement. You notice it afterwards, if at all, in a reaction that was bigger than the moment, or a decision that does not look like yours.

The work is not to throw anyone out of the car. It is to become present enough to get back behind the wheel, and then to turn round and meet whoever has been driving in your place.

Sometimes it is the child. Sometimes it is one of the parts that formed to keep her safe. They need different things from you, and the next two parts of this section take them one at a time, starting with the parts, because they are usually who you meet first.

Getting to know what has been guarding the door

Before this child can be met directly, it often helps to get to know who has been standing in front of them.

The critic, the over-achiever, the part that withdraws, the part that stays busy, the part that needs everything to be controlled or perfect, these are not obstacles between you and the child. They are standing guard. Each one formed for a reason, usually because the child beneath them was hurt, frightened, or overwhelmed at some point, and something in you decided that could not be allowed to happen again.

And rarely just one. Most of us have several, and they often arrive together, sometimes pulling in opposite directions. One wants to fix it immediately, another wants to leave the room. That can feel like being at war with yourself. It is not. It is two guards with different training responding to the same alarm.

Wakeful sleep

There is a way of losing this relationship that has nothing to do with being triggered, and it happens far more often than the dramatic kind.

You do not lose her in a moment. You drift. Days go by, then weeks, and you are living entirely in your head with no awareness of your inner world at all. Awake, functioning, getting things done, and not actually present anywhere.

It is like sitting with a close friend and hearing every word they say while being somewhere else the whole time.

When you are not driving, something else is. Mine is a part I call autopilot. It makes the decisions, keeps everything moving, and gets through the day perfectly competently. You will know the feeling from driving to work and arriving with no memory of the journey.

Thinking is not the problem. You need your mind. It plans, solves, remembers, works things out, and there is nothing defensive about any of that.

But the same mind can be put to a second use, which is keeping you away from something you do not want to feel. That version has a particular quality. It is busy without going anywhere. It explains a feeling instead of feeling it. It minimises. It decides something is not worth attention. It puts the problem onto someone else, or turns it into a judgement about you.

The difference is not how much you are thinking. It is whether the thinking is taking you somewhere or keeping you somewhere.

Most of us learned the second use early. If the home you grew up in had no room for a child's emotional world, or if there was enough going on between the adults that your feelings would have been one thing too many, those feelings had to go somewhere. Going up into the mind was one of the few places available, and it worked. That is why, decades later, being in your head can still feel like the normal place to be.

I met this very directly in my own therapy in my early twenties. As soon as I became present enough to start feeling any pain, my mind pulled me straight out. Every time. It took me a while to see that this was not a failure of concentration. It was a part doing its job with great efficiency, and no amount of trying harder was going to get past it. What was needed was the same as everywhere else in this book. I had to earn its trust before it would let me through to her.

And she does not stay quiet while this is going on.

The signals escalate. She starts softly. A feeling of being stuck. Irritability. A short fuse. Sometimes getting ill. If none of that is attended to, it gets louder, and something arrives that is harder to ignore. And if that is missed too, eventually there will be something you have no choice but to stop for. It can come from inside you or it can arrive in your circumstances.

None of that is punishment. It is what happens when something has been trying to reach you for a long time and has not been able to.

So the work here is the same as everywhere else, only earlier. Notice the quiet signals while they are still quiet. Irritability that does not belong to anything. Flatness. Not being able to sit with yourself for five minutes. Those are not moods to push through. They are her, starting gently.

These parts are rarely gentle, and they are not always likeable. But they are, almost without exception, trying to help, guarding a vulnerability they believe is still as unsafe as it once was.

This means the relationship cannot simply skip past them to reach the child underneath. If you arrive at one of these parts with frustration, trying to push it aside, it tends to do what it has always done, and guard harder. But if you can approach it instead with curiosity, what are you afraid would happen if you stepped back? what have you been trying to prevent?, something different becomes possible. It begins to trust that you are not a threat to its job, and it can soften, even briefly, enough to let you closer to what it has been guarding.

Building a relationship with the child, in other words, often runs through building a relationship with these parts first. This is not a detour. It is usually the way in.

Befriending the one you have been fighting

There is a step here that sounds strange until you have done it, and then it stops sounding strange. You end up on good terms with the part you have spent years hating.

The critic is the usual example, because it is the one most of us would remove if we could. It is cruel, it is relentless, and it appears to be working against you. But nothing in you is working against you. However destructive it looks from the outside, it cares about one thing only, which is the child underneath, and everything it does is an attempt to stop her being hurt again. The methods are frequently terrible. The intention never is.

Mine took me a long time to see clearly. When I finally asked what it was actually doing, the answer was fairly plain. It was trying to push me forward so that I would not fail. And it was calling me out before anybody else could, because being caught by someone else would hurt far more than catching myself first.

That is not cruelty. That is a child who was humiliated once, arranging never to be humiliated again.

Once I understood that, something shifted that I had not expected. What I felt towards it changed from hatred into something closer to friendship. It sounds odd written down. It works.

And it works for a practical reason rather than a sentimental one. A part that is being attacked defends itself, and a critic under attack criticises harder. A part that is genuinely understood has less to defend. You cannot talk it down and you cannot overrule it, but you can get to know it well enough that it no longer has to shout.

Then the trust. These parts do not hand over the wheel to someone they have no reason to trust, and no amount of insight substitutes for turning up more than once. What you are saying to it, again and again, is that you can see what it has been protecting, that you are not going to leave her, and that it does not have to do this alone any more.

That is the offer. Not you are fired. You can rest, I have got her.

Mine is the one that wants to run.

It arrives in my body before there are any words, and then the words come, and they are always the same. Get as far away from this as you can. It does not distinguish much between physical, emotional and mental exits. Any of them will do.

It has cost me things. Friendships that ended because leaving was easier than staying through something difficult. Opportunities I did not take, because underneath was the certainty that I would fail at them, or get into trouble.

And it has never once been trying to harm me. It formed around a child who had good reason to believe that staying put was dangerous, and it has been doing that job at full strength ever since, long after the danger.

What changed was not getting rid of it. It was learning to recognise it while it is happening, and to slow down enough that my nervous system can settle rather than obey. From there I can turn to the one it is standing in front of, and let her know I can see she is frightened. That I am staying. That she is safe with me, and we do not have to run.

Exercise 10 Meeting one of the guards

Curiosity, not interrogation

Choose one part you can recognise in yourself. The critic. The one that goes quiet. The one that stays busy. The one that needs everything correct. Take whichever is loudest at the moment.

Start by describing what it actually does, in ordinary language. What it says, when it turns up, what it makes you do.

Then ask it three things, and give each one long enough for an answer to arrive rather than deciding what it would say.

What are you trying to protect me from? What are you afraid would happen if you stopped? How old were you when you started doing this?

Now the part that matters most. Whatever answer came back, ask yourself whether you can see the sense in it. Not whether you like the method. Whether you can understand what it was trying to do.

If nothing comes, that is worth noticing rather than pushing at. A part that has never been asked anything may take more than one attempt before it answers.

SECTION 6

Meeting the child you were

What she needs, and how to begin

What the younger parts of you may need

There may be parts of you that simply need to be seen. Not analysed. Not improved. Not pushed away. Just seen, without judgement, impatience, or the need to change what is there.

You might find it feels unfamiliar to stay with your own inner experience in this way, even briefly. This might look like noticing sadness without immediately distracting yourself, or staying with anxiety in the body rather than trying to push it away, actually locating it (the chest, the stomach, the throat) and letting it be there for a few breaths, rather than only acknowledging it in passing.

There may also be parts of you that need to be believed.

When something in you says this hurt, or this was too much, or this didn't feel safe, you may notice an old tendency to override or minimise it, telling yourself "it wasn't that bad" or "I should be over this by now." And yet another part of you may recognise that what you felt then was real, even if it was not fully seen or understood at the time.

There may be parts of you that need to know they are not alone with what they carry.

So much of what shaped you may have been held quietly, without enough support, reflection, or emotional presence from others. And some of those parts may still be carrying things as if they are alone with them, for example, still bracing for criticism in relationships where none is coming, or still expecting to be left emotionally unsupported even in safe connections.

You might notice a gentle sense that things are different now. The ways you once learned to manage through protection, withdrawal, achievement, or control do not need to define how you relate to what is happening now.

This might look like pausing before reacting, rather than immediately shutting down in a conversation, or noticing that you can stay present with discomfort without needing to escape it straight away.

This does not happen all at once. It unfolds slowly, through repeated experiences of meeting yourself in a different way.

Why understanding is not enough

Being seen, heard, and properly understood is what she needs. But understanding on its own does not move anything, and this is the part that took me longest to learn.

She needs proof.

Not a promise that you will be there. Evidence, gathered in the only place it can be gathered, which is in the moments when it actually matters.

Here is what that looks like. I make a mistake. That is the trigger and it always has been. Instead of what would have happened before, I stop and take a breath. Then I name it. I have been triggered. This is the old one, the being stupid one. And then I turn to her and tell her what is true. That she is not stupid. That she never was. That I am here.

What happens next is the point. The moment goes somewhere different from where it has always gone. No spiral, no hours of it, no evening lost. Something that would once have taken a whole day takes four minutes.

That is one piece of proof.

And two things are watching it happen. She is, and she begins to believe, very slowly, that she is not on her own with this any more. And so is the critic. It sees that the mistake was handled, that nothing terrible followed, and that this can be done another way. Which is the only argument it has ever accepted. It does not respond to reasoning. It responds to evidence that its job is being covered.

That is when they start to relax, both of them. Not because they were persuaded, but because they were shown.

It takes a great many of these, and each one is small, and none of them feels like much at the time. They accumulate anyway.

Making room for the child in you to be met

And alongside this, you may begin to notice something else.

The younger parts of you are not only the parts that carry pain.

They are also the parts that hold aliveness.

You might notice traces of this in yourself, moments of curiosity, spontaneity, imagination, humour, or a kind of openness that asks for nothing other than to be experienced.

This might look like laughing more easily than usual, feeling drawn to something playful or creative without a clear purpose, or noticing a brief moment of lightness that doesn't need to be justified.

Meeting these parts is not about returning to childhood, but about allowing space for what may have become quieter over time.

It might be as simple as allowing yourself a moment of lightness. A moment of not being productive or purposeful. A moment where nothing needs to be solved.

Or it might be something more internal, a softening in how you relate to yourself, a shift in tone, a small easing of how tightly things are being held.

There is nothing you need to force here. It is enough to begin noticing what is still alive in you.

If something bigger arrives

Most of the time, turning towards her is uncomfortable and manageable. Sometimes it is not. Something can arrive that is much larger than you expected, and it helps to know what that looks like beforehand rather than while it is happening.

It might be that you go blank. That the room goes slightly unreal, or you find yourself watching from somewhere outside it. It might be tears that do not stop when you expect them to. Sudden fear with nothing attached to it. A body that floods. Or the opposite, a complete absence of feeling that arrives the moment you get close to something.

None of that is failure, and none of it means you have done this wrong. It is your nervous system doing exactly what it learned to do when this was too much the first time. Old protection, arriving on time.

Telling the difference

Uncomfortable and overwhelming are not the same thing, and knowing which one you are in is the most useful thing you can learn here.

Uncomfortable is heavy, or sad, or tender. It is difficult and you are still there. You can feel it and think at the same time. That is the work, and staying with it is how it changes.

Overwhelming is different. You are not really present any more. You have gone blank, or floated off, or the feeling has taken you over completely, or you cannot find yourself in it anywhere. Nothing useful happens in that state. Staying in it does not build anything, it repeats something.

If you are in the second one, stop. Not later. Then.

What to do

Push through is the instruction most of us were given, and it is precisely the wrong one here. Pushing through is the old pattern, and using it now would teach her that reaching for you costs her something.

So come back to the room instead. Feet flat on the floor, and feel the floor. Look around and name what you can see, out loud if that helps. Let the out-breath be longer than the in-breath. Cold water on your hands or your face. Stand up and move.

Then stop for the day. Not as a defeat. She has waited a very long time and she can wait until Thursday.

And say something to her before you go, because leaving without a word is the thing she already knows. Something as plain as, that was a lot, I am not going anywhere, we will come back to it.

When it keeps happening

If this happens repeatedly, or what arrives is too big to settle, or you find yourself unable to return to ordinary life afterwards, that is not a sign to try harder on your own. It is information, and what it is telling you is that this material needs company.

The final section describes what that looks like and how to find it. There is no version of this work where doing it alone is braver.

How I do this

There are different ways in, and none of them are complicated.

The intentional one takes very little time and I do it most days. I sit somewhere quiet and take a few deep breaths, enough to arrive in the present and set everything else down for a moment. When I'm aware of my breathing rather than my day, I let an image of her come to mind.

If no image comes, that is very common, and it does not mean this will not work for you. You might picture a small child in your mind's eye without needing it to be recognisably you. Or you might sit with a photograph of yourself at that age and let that do the work instead. It takes time and practice, and often several attempts before anything arrives at all.

Then I talk to her. The tone matters more than the words. Kindly, the way you would speak to a child you loved.

The image is only the door. Everything past it happens in the body rather than the mind, and this is the easiest part of the whole thing to get wrong.

If you stay up in your thinking, what you will get is a conversation with yourself about a child. That is a different thing entirely, and it does not go anywhere. You can think your way to an accurate description of her and still never make contact. The contact is physical, or it has not happened.

When I ask her how she is, I'm not expecting a sentence back. What comes is physical. For me it is usually a clenching or a squeezing in my chest, or something moving in my diaphragm, and there is an emotion attached to it. My part then is to make room for whatever has arrived and not move it anywhere. No judgement about it. No resistance to it.

There's a simpler version for days when that feels like too much. I ask myself, with real sincerity, how I actually am. Then I refuse the first answers, because the first answers are always fine, or I don't know, or some version of not now. I wait. Something truer comes if I give it long enough.

The other way in isn't chosen. It arrives.

When something gets to me more than the moment warranted, that's her. It's the signal that something wants attention and won't be talked out of it. There are two ways I've learned to get this wrong. One is to distract myself until it passes, which it does, and then it returns. The other is to go into it and stay there, which isn't meeting it. That's drowning.

What works is holding it. If there's sadness, I let it be sad. I acknowledge it's there, I don't argue with it, and I let it stay as long as it needs to.

Then I ask what would comfort her. It's usually reassurance. Telling her she matters.

What still surprises me is how physical the answer is. Sometimes my body simply lets go. Sometimes it hurts instead, and I've come to take the hurt as information. It means the gap has been a long one. Years of turning away, so that being attended to now is not yet something she can easily accept.

The answers have to be allowed to emerge. If I decide in advance what she needs, I've answered from my head, and it will be tidy and wrong.

What may begin to change

Over time, you may find that your relationship with these younger parts of you begins to change.

Not in a dramatic way. Not through effort or force. But in small moments where you are able to stay with yourself a little longer than before. Where you are able to notice what is happening inside without immediately turning away from it.

What I have seen, again and again, is that this does not arrive as transformation. It arrives as a small change in what is possible. The same pattern, still recognisable, but no longer in charge. And with it, usually, something the person had not expected. A different way of being with themselves that was simply not available before, because the thing underneath had never been attended to.

And slowly, something may begin to feel different.

Not because the past is gone, but because you are no longer relating to it in the same way.

Exercise 11 A letter to your younger self

Optional, only if it feels right - You may choose to use this only if it feels right, and only go as far as feels emotionally safe. You might begin by bringing to mind an age that feels significant, a time where something important was happening internally, or where a particular wound feels especially present.

Before you begin writing, you might pause for a moment and notice what's happening in your body as that age comes to mind.

When you feel ready, you might write a short letter to yourself at that age. This is not a letter of pity, and it is not about rescuing or fixing what happened. It is a letter of acknowledgement.

You might begin with something like, I see what was happening for you. I understand why you felt the way you felt. I understand why you learned what you learned in order to get through it.

You might gently remind that younger part, You were not wrong to feel what you felt. You were not broken for struggling. And you were not alone in what you are still carrying.

A gentle reminder - This one asks more of you than most. If you stopped partway, that's not incomplete, it's exactly as far as felt right today.

Exercise 12 What you needed then that you can provide now

From recognition to small action - When you think back to the child you were, there may be things you can now recognise they needed, forms of care, attention, protection, permission, or acknowledgement that were not consistently present at the time.

Some of these needs can only ever be met through other people, through relationships, or through deeper therapeutic work. But some can also begin, slowly and imperfectly, to be offered to yourself now.

You might begin by asking, What did I need then that I did not reliably receive? It might be permission to rest, kindness when things go wrong, space to feel without judgement, or the right to exist without constantly earning your place. Try to name just one thing that feels most present.

Notice, too, what's happening in your body as that need becomes clear to you.

Then gently ask, What would it actually look like to begin offering this to myself now, in small, realistic, everyday ways?

And as you imagine actually receiving this, even briefly, even just in your mind, notice what changes. Does anything in your body soften, settle, or feel a little different? Does anything in your sense of yourself shift, even slightly?

In moments like this, it can help to remember, this is not only you taking care of yourself. It is you taking care of the most precious part of you, the child who has been waiting, all along, to be looked after this way.

A gentle reminder - Small and imperfect counts. This isn't a habit you need to get right immediately, it's a relationship you're building slowly.

SECTION 7

Going forward, building the relationship

A note on how she might show up for you

There is no single “right” way for this relationship to feel, and you don’t need to wait until you’ve found the right one to begin.

For some of us, the child is something seen, a clear image in the mind’s eye, almost like watching a memory. For others, she is felt rather than seen, a sensation in the body, a quiet knowing, a shift in mood that arrives before any picture does. Some of us speak to her out loud, or internally, the way you might speak to anyone else, and over time, with enough practice, her voice can start to feel distinct from your own, with its own tone, its own way of saying things. All of these are equally real, and equally valid ways of being in relationship with this part of you.

If you find it hard to connect to a felt sense, an inner image, or a voice of her own, it can sometimes help to use an actual photograph of yourself at that age. Keep it somewhere you’ll see it, on your phone, by your bed, and let it become the face you picture when you check in, offer comfort, or ask how she is doing.

There is no need to force a particular kind of experience. Simply notice what is actually happening for you, in whichever form it takes.

The work in this workbook is not something you finish. It is the beginning of an ongoing relationship, one you build the same way any relationship is built, through small, repeated moments of attention, over time.

This is, in part, reparenting

Part of building this relationship is becoming, now, the parent you wished you had.

Which is not the same as deciding your parents failed. Love does not automatically come with the steadiness, safety, or attunement a child needs, and a great many of us were loved by someone who could not reliably provide those things.

What you can do now is become that steady presence for the child in you, not to rewrite the past, but to finally offer that child something they needed and didn’t reliably receive.

This heals two things at once, what happened then, and what you are still carrying now. Because the part of you still waiting for that steadiness was never only a memory. It has been present, waiting, all along.

Here is what it actually looks like.

I was about to give an online workshop. I had prepared thoroughly and felt good about it. Twenty minutes before it started, a wave of fear came over me, and what I could hear was I can’t do this, they won’t like me, I’m going to screw up.

I knew who that was. She was terrified.

It would have been easy to be taken over by it. She was already at the wheel. What I did first was breathe, enough to steady myself and take it back, because I was no use to her from inside the panic. Then I turned towards her.

I feel you. Of course you are scared, you have every right to be. I am here with you. What do you need from me?

Please tell me we are going to be okay.

We are.

Then I asked her whether this was important to do. The answer did not come from my head. It came from further in, and it was true. Yes, there was fear. And there was also the fact that this mattered, and that we were not going to run from the wound. So I said, let us do it together. Hold my hand. We will be okay. You are not on your own.

My whole nervous system settled. The workshop went well.

None of that is a technique. It is what the relationship looks like once it exists. It is the same thing you would do for a frightened child standing in front of you, which is stay, listen, and not leave.

Here are some simple ways to keep that relationship alive in daily life.

A few minutes, just for her or him

Set aside a few quiet minutes, in the car, before bed, on a walk. Ask, gently, How are you doing? What do you need right now? Let the answer come without rushing it, even if it's just a feeling rather than words.

Inviting them into the ordinary moments of your day

Pause before something small and ask, as if speaking to them directly, Want to come to the park with me? or Want to pick what we have for dinner? It doesn't need to be significant. The invitation itself is the point, being included, being thought of, without having to ask.

A soft self-hug

Cross your arms gently over yourself, or place a hand on your chest or arm. Let it be slow rather than brisk. This is one of the simplest ways to offer comfort directly to the body, without needing any words at all.

Writing with your non-dominant hand

When you want to hear from the child in you more directly, try writing your question with your dominant hand, then answering it with your non-dominant hand. The shift in handwriting often brings a different, less guarded voice, sometimes younger, sometimes more honest than you expected.

A phrase that becomes a check-in

Choose a short, warm phrase, I'm here, or You're not in trouble, or I've got you, and use it like a check-in throughout the day, especially in moments of stress. Over time, it can start to function less like a sentence and more like a hand on the shoulder.

Letting them choose

Every so often, hand over a small, low-stakes decision entirely, which route to walk, which mug to use, which song to play, and let the choice stand, without override. Small as it is, it's a repeated message, your preference matters here.

Curiosity and play

Ask what they'd find fun, or what they're curious about, and follow it, even briefly, even if it feels a little silly. Play and curiosity are not a detour from this work. They are very often where the child in you feels most able to come forward.

Letting them help choose the outfit

When you're getting dressed, pause and ask, what would feel good to wear today? Let yourself actually follow the answer sometimes, the colour that feels right, the comfortable thing over the "appropriate" thing. It is a small, visible way of letting their preference shape your day, not just your inner world.

Noticing how you feel when you connect with her

After any of these moments, a check-in, a small kindness, a minute of play, pause and notice what's there. Does something in you feel a little calmer, lighter, more at ease? Or does it feel hollow, distant, like nothing landed? There is no right answer, and it won't be the same every time. But over time, this noticing becomes its own quiet guide, showing you which kinds of connection actually reach her, and which ones are just going through the motions.

None of these need to happen every day, and none of them need to be done perfectly. What matters is that they happen again and again, in small ways, over a long time, the same way trust is built with any person you love.

Something owed to yourself

This one gets skipped, because it sounds like self-congratulation. It is not.

This work is difficult and almost entirely invisible. Nobody sees you doing it. There is no one to tell, mostly, and the people around you have no idea that you sat down on a Tuesday evening and turned towards something you spent thirty years avoiding. No acknowledgement is coming from outside, because none of it shows.

So it has to come from you, and it should. Not as a reward, and not as encouragement to keep going. Simply because it is accurate. Turning towards what you were taught to turn away from is genuinely hard, and you did it.

Many of us find this the most difficult thing in the book. We can extend gratitude outwards all day. Towards ourselves it feels like showing off, or like tempting fate, or like something we would have to have earned more thoroughly first.

Notice that this is the same reflex the rest of the book is about. The child who learned not to take up room grows into an adult who cannot receive anything, including from herself.

In practice it is a moment rather than a ritual. When you finish, before you get up and go back to the evening, stop for long enough to register what you just did. Not how well it went. Just that you turned up.

And she notices. A child watching an adult treat effort as worth acknowledging is learning something she may never have seen at home. That the work counts. That she counts. It is the same lesson from a different angle.

Closing reflection, coming back to yourself

If you have moved through this workbook from beginning to end, you may notice that nothing here has been about fixing yourself.

Instead, it has been about seeing, perhaps more clearly than before, how early experience can continue to live inside adult life in subtle, patterned, and often misunderstood ways.

You may also begin to see that what you have called your reactions, your difficulties, or your patterns are not separate from you in the way they may once have seemed. They are part of a system that formed in response to what you lived through, and what you did not receive, at a time when you had very little choice but to adapt.

And alongside this, you may begin to notice something equally important.

That within you there is not only what was shaped by difficulty, but also what has always remained alive. The parts of you that still respond to connection. The parts that still long for ease, understanding, and closeness. The parts that are still capable of curiosity, softness, and moments of unexpected lightness.

Nothing in you needs to be rejected in order for something new to emerge.

Perhaps what changes most over time is not that the past disappears, but that your relationship to it begins to shift. Slowly, gently, in ways that are often almost unnoticeable at first.

A little more space inside.

A little less turning away from what you feel.

A little more capacity to stay with yourself as you are.

And from there, something begins to become possible that cannot be forced, only met.

A different kind of relationship with yourself.

SECTION 8

Finding the right level of support

Understanding your options

In the area of childhood wounding, it feels important to name that there are limits to what can be worked through alone.

The wounds formed in relationship tend to heal most reliably in relationship.

The beliefs, the strategies, and the nervous system patterns laid down in early relational experience are not primarily cognitive constructs that can be revised simply by understanding them. They were formed through experience, and experience, specifically the experience of being related to differently, over time, in a safe and attuned relationship, is what most reliably revises them.

What you can do on your own

Self-directed work contributes meaningfully to the healing of childhood wounds in several ways.

Developing awareness, the capacity to see the patterns, to name the beliefs, to recognise the wounded child in the moments when they are most active, is real and important work. Awareness does not by itself change deeply embedded patterns, but it is the necessary precondition for change.

Practising self-compassion deliberately and regularly, particularly when the inner critic is loudest, is both a self-directed practice and, over time, a corrective emotional experience.

And reading and understanding the material, about attachment, childhood development, and the relationship between early experience and adult difficulty, can be genuinely illuminating. Writers like Gabor Maté, Bessel van der Kolk, Peter Levine, John Bowlby, and Dan Siegel have produced accessible, clinically grounded work that helps many of us understand our own experience in ways that are both clarifying and relieving.

When therapy can help

Therapy is where the healing of significant childhood wounds most reliably and most deeply happens.

The therapeutic relationship, when it is safe and attuned, provides the child part of the self with something it may never have had, a consistent, non-judgemental, genuinely interested adult presence that meets what arises with steadiness and care.

Over time, this relational experience becomes corrective, it begins to revise the internal working model, to update the template formed in the original attachment relationship, to teach the nervous system that safety is possible in a way that words alone cannot.

Some of the most effective approaches available for this work are built around exactly this way of relating to the parts of us. Their goal is not to heal the wounded child by getting rid of it, but by finally giving it what it needed, to be genuinely seen, believed, and accompanied by a caring adult presence, which, in the work, is the person's own adult self, guided by the therapist.

Others work at the level of the body and the felt sense as much as the level of narrative, which matters, given how much of this material is held somatically rather than in explicit memory.

For childhood wounds that include specific traumatic events, abuse, significant neglect, loss, trauma-informed approaches including EMDR, somatic experiencing, and other body-based methods are often necessary alongside talk-based approaches. The body holds traumatic experience with a tenacity that talking about it does not always resolve.

When more support may be needed

Childhood wounding does not usually require psychiatric care directly. But when the adult consequences include significant depression, significant anxiety, post-traumatic stress symptoms, or significant difficulties with emotional regulation that are substantially impairing daily life, psychiatric assessment is appropriate.

A psychiatrist can assess whether medication has a role to play in stabilising things sufficiently for the psychological work to be possible.

A simple way to think about it

Begin with self-directed work, the exercises here, reading, journalling, and the practice of self-compassion, as a meaningful starting point, and as a complement to whatever professional support you engage with.

Consider therapy if the patterns identified in this workbook are causing significant difficulty in adult life. If self-awareness is present but the patterns are not shifting. If significant shame, self-worth difficulties, or relational wounds are present. Or if recognising the wounded child has brought up feelings that feel too large to hold alone.

Seek trauma-informed approaches specifically if your history includes significant adverse experiences that have produced post-traumatic symptoms, intrusive memories, significant emotional dysregulation, bodily activation states that are difficult to manage.

Seek psychiatric assessment if significant depression, anxiety, or emotional dysregulation is impairing daily functioning.

The child you were deserved more than any child deserves, which is simply this, to be loved without condition, to be seen without judgement, to be accompanied through difficulty by adults who were capable of doing so.

If that was not fully what you received, that is a loss worth acknowledging.

It is not, however, the end of the story.

The adult self has capacities the child did not, including, most importantly, the capacity to choose how to relate to the past, how to relate to the wounded child within, and whether to seek the kind of support that allows the healing to go deeper than this workbook alone can reach.

The thing that stands out, after years of this, is that she feels safe enough to tell me how she is. She does it through how I feel inside.

What that looks like is small. I can say I'm fine. But if I sit down and actually ask, and then wait, what comes back is often something else entirely, and that is where the truth is. Once I have it, I can do something about it.

I don't take that lightly. Being able to signal that something is wrong and have someone take it seriously is exactly what I did not have growing up. She has it now.

She also wakes me up. There are stretches where I go through the days without much awareness of my inner world, which is where she lives. A kind of wakeful sleep. What I notice first is never her. It's that I feel stuck, or irritable, or my fuse is short, or I can't sit with myself for five minutes. That's her, getting my attention.

And when something triggers me and one of the parts that protects her steps in, the shutting down, the wanting to leave, that's the same message in a different form. Someone else has the wheel. My job is to wake up and take it back.

Then there is the part I did not expect.

As the wounds have had attention, what has come back is the playfulness. I see her cheekiness. Her mischief. How much she loves to banter. All of that was in there the whole time, underneath everything that was guarding it.

I feel more whole than I have. There is a place now where I can simply be myself and find that acceptable, which doesn't sound like much written down. It is freedom.

And she is not the only one in there.

Behind her, usually, is someone older. Thirteen, fifteen, whatever the age was. Carrying a different set of things, and considerably less willing to be approached about them. What I have found is that once the child trusts you, the adolescent tends to make herself known. She has her own reasons for having gone quiet.

That is not a new project. It is the same work, with someone else who has been waiting.

All of it takes ongoing work.

It's easy to get pulled out. There's a great deal going on out there and no shortage of ways to be knocked off centre. I don't get this right all the time, and I never will. It took me a while to understand that this wasn't the point. It isn't a goal to be reached. It's a path I've chosen for the rest of my life.

Some of it is genuinely hard. Confusing. Discouraging. Being human is not a straightforward business. What has changed isn't that the difficulty stopped, but that I know what to do now. I know how to reconnect. And I know when she needs me to take care of her, in the way she always wanted someone to.

There will be moments when you want to give up. It usually happens when you've been triggered, and it feels as though everything you built has gone and you're back at the beginning.

You're not. And that moment, the one where it feels most pointless, is exactly when the child in you needs to hear it. That they are not alone in this. That you are still here, holding their hand.

This is the most important relationship you will ever have. It's the only one that runs from the moment you arrive in this world to the moment you leave it.

All you have to do is choose it.

This workbook is for personal use only. All content © Shelagh MacFarlane.

Not for redistribution or commercial use.

About Shelagh MacFarlane, MSc

Shelagh MacFarlane is a Canadian-British counselling psychologist with more than 20 years in private practice. She has lived in Southeast Asia for 26 years and works with clients across the world via Zoom. Before retraining as a psychologist, Shelagh had a career as a professional orchestral violinist, an experience that shaped her understanding of performance, perfectionism, and the psychological cost of maintaining a composed exterior when the interior is anything but.

Her approach

Shelagh works integratively, drawing on Internal Family Systems (IFS), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Compassionate Inquiry (developed by Dr Gabor Maté), inner-child work, Gestalt techniques, and mindfulness-based approaches. She does not apply a single model to every person. The work is shaped by who you are, where you are, and what you need. She works with individuals, couples, and families. Her particular areas of focus include anxiety, burnout, life transitions, relationship difficulties, identity questions, expat mental health, and the long-term psychological effects of growing up or living between cultures.

Qualifications and background

- MSc Counselling Psychology — United Kingdom
- Counselling Diploma — Canada
- Registered member, British Columbia Psychological Association (BCPA)
- Certified Executive Coach
- Member, International Practitioners of Holistic Medicine (IPHM)
- Trained in Compassionate Inquiry (Dr Gabor Maté)
- Former crisis line counsellor, Befrienders Malaysia
- Volunteer counselling: Malaysian Cancer Society, All Women's Action Society, UNHCR (supporting Afghan and Myanmar refugees)
- Communications and life-skills training across Asia, Africa, and the United States

Get in touch

Shelagh offers a free 15-minute initial consultation by WhatsApp or video call, with no obligation and no pressure. This is a chance to ask questions, to get a sense of whether the fit feels right, and to understand what working together might look like. Sessions are held by video call at times that work across time zones. Every enquiry is handled personally by Shelagh, and treated with complete discretion.

Free discovery call 15 min · No obligation · shelagh-psychologist.com

WhatsApp +60 17-358 2563

Online sessions Asia · Worldwide · All time zones welcome

Specialties Anxiety · Burnout · Life transitions · Relationships · Expat mental health · Identity

Credentials MSc Counselling Psychology (UK) · BCPA Registered · Certified Executive Coach · IPHM Member

THE SERIES

More in this collection

This workbook is part of a growing series of gentle, practical guides for the difficult parts of being human — each written to be worked through at your own pace, and to meet you where you are.

01 Anxiety

When worry has become the background hum of your life.

02 The Relationship with Yourself

The most important relationship you will ever have — the one with you.

03 Living with Depression

When the colour has drained out, and effort no longer seems to reach.

04 Grief That Doesn't Have a Name

For the losses that come without a funeral, and are grieved alone.

05 Navigating a Life Transition

For the in-between — when one chapter has ended and the next has not begun.

06 The Burnout Workbook

When you are exhausted in a way that sleep no longer fixes.

07 Relationships That Hurt

Understanding the patterns that draw us into painful relationships.

08 Stuckness

When you don't know what's wrong — only that something is.

09 The Addiction Workbook

When the thing that helps has become the thing that hurts.

10 When Someone Dies

A map for grief that has a name, but looks nothing like we expect.

11 The Wounded Child

How what happened in childhood is still shaping your life today.

12 The Anger Workbook

For the person who carries anger — and the person who lives with theirs.

If this workbook has been helpful, you may find others in the series speak to something you are carrying too.

Explore the full collection at shelagh-psychologist.com

*The child you once were never
completely disappears.
They live on in the places that still ache —
and in the places that still delight.*



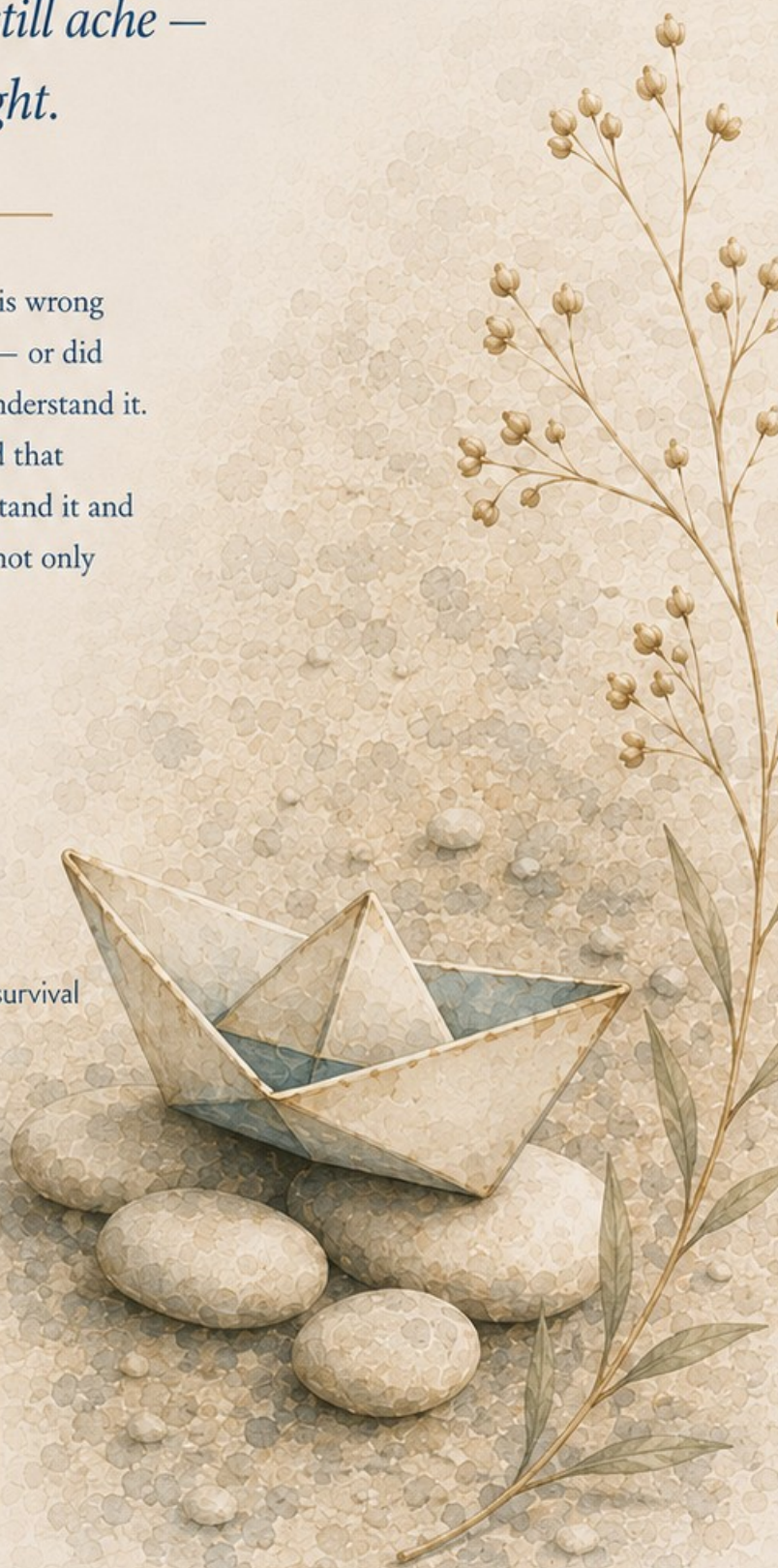
Many adult struggles are not signs that something is wrong with us, but signs that something happened to us — or did not happen for us — when we were too young to understand it. This workbook is a gentle invitation to turn toward that younger part of yourself: not to fix it, but to understand it and meet it with compassion, recognising that it holds not only your wounds but your capacity to feel alive.

INSIDE YOU'LL FIND:

-  How childhood shapes the adult
-  The things that wound — big and small
-  What the child learned — beliefs, strategies, and survival
-  How the wounded child shows up in adult life
-  Meeting the child you were
-  How to find the right level of support

*Self-compassion is not optional in this work.
It is the condition that makes the work possible.*

— Shelagh MacFarlane



Shelagh MacFarlane

MSc Counselling Psychology (UK)
BCPA Registered (Canada)

20+ years in private practice



Shelagh is a counselling psychologist with over 20 years of experience helping adults navigate trauma, identity, and life's challenges with compassion, curiosity, and clarity.

www.shelagh-psychologist.com

ISBN 978-1-999999-00-0



9 781999 999000 >