

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.



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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.

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.

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 toward 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 toward 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,

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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 toward 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, sometimes called “backdraft” in self-compassion research — the experience of feeling worse, briefly, when warmth and attention are first directed toward 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 toward 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.

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

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 toward 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 toward 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 toward a particular description is enough of a starting point.

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.

Your reflections

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.

Was emotional expression welcomed, or did it feel discouraged, dismissed, or uncomfortable for others? Did the atmosphere feel warm and steady, or more unpredictable, tense, or changeable? Was there ease in being yourself, or did something in you need to be managed or adjusted?

As you sit with this, take a moment to notice what's happening in your body right now — and if you notice nothing at all, that's worth noticing too.

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

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.

Your reflections

SECTION 2

The things that wound

Big and small

The word trauma has a gravitational pull toward the dramatic — toward 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.

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 you learned, without needing to be told, to hold certain feelings inside — not because they didn't matter, but because they did not always lead to feeling understood or met.

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. Not because it was asked of you, but because this was how closeness was sustained. And 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.

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 toward 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 toward 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.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 4

What was missing

Turning toward absence

Sometimes what shapes us most is not what happened, but what did not happen. You might gently turn toward 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. 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?

As you sit with this, notice what's happening in your body as you do.

If this feels hard to access directly, you might picture a young child you have warmth for, in that same kind of absence, and notice what you would have wanted for them.

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.

Your reflections

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 are not chosen. They are learned through experience — 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.

These are not distant psychological ideas. They are often still active in how you react, interpret, and anticipate in your present life.

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 afterward 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.

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 toward 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

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.

Your reflections

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 toward 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.

Your reflections

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 does not disappear when you grow up. It does not remain in the past as something separate or finished.

It moves inward — into the nervous system, the body, and the automatic responses that often arise before there is conscious awareness.

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

In Internal Family Systems, the parts of us that criticise, push, or demand more are understood as protectors — not as enemies, and not as evidence that something is wrong with you. A protector's entire purpose is to prevent 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 in Section 5, since building a relationship with that child often means building a relationship with its protectors 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 toward 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 people, 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 toward 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 toward 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.

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 from a Compassionate Inquiry perspective, 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 toward 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 toward 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.

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 toward

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

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.

Your reflections

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

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.

Your reflections

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

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.

Your reflections

SECTION 5

Meeting the child you were

The beginning of a different kind of relationship

Everything in this workbook has been moving toward this point.

Not because it contains the answers — healing is not something that happens through understanding alone — 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, toward something else entirely. Something closer to what those parts of you may have always needed: genuine, compassionate attention.

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.

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 protectors. 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.

Protectors 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 a protector with frustration, trying to push it aside, it tends to do what it has always done: protect 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. The protector 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 its protectors first. This is not a detour. It is usually the way in.

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.

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.

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.

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 10

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

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.

Your reflections

EXERCISE 11

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

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.

Your reflections

SECTION 6

Going forward — building the relationship

A note on how she might show up for you

Before we go any further, it's worth saying: 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 people, 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 people 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.

This is not about blame. Your parents may have loved you deeply — and still have been shaped by their own histories in ways that limited what they could give you. Love does not automatically come with the steadiness, safety, or attunement a child needs. Often, a parent can only offer what they themselves received, or learned to find another way toward.

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 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.

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 7

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 people understand their 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 is not merely supportive. It is 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.

Internal Family Systems is, in my view, one of the most effective approaches available for this work. Its 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.

Compassionate Inquiry, developed by Dr Gabor Maté, works 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.

That capacity for choice is yours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 — no obligation, no pressure. Sessions are conducted by video call at times that work across time zones. All enquiries are handled personally and treated with complete discretion.

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*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

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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.



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