# BREAKING GENERATIONAL TRAUMA PATTERNS

An Evidence-Based Guide to Understanding Family Patterns, Healing Inherited Wounds, and Building a Freer Future

**Hanz Yiglix**



Tryhard Publishing

## Dedication

*For everyone who inherited more than they asked for,*
*and decided to hand down something lighter.*

## Legal Disclaimer

This book is intended for **educational and informational purposes only**. It does not replace professional psychological, therapeutic, or medical advice, and it is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any mental health condition.

Every person's experience is different, and readers are encouraged to seek guidance from a qualified mental health professional when facing ongoing distress. If you are experiencing severe emotional distress, thoughts of self-harm, or concerns about your immediate safety, contact a crisis service or local emergency services right away.

The people and stories in this book are fictional composites created for illustration. Any resemblance to real persons is coincidental.

The author, Hanz Yiglix, and Tryhard Publishing expressly disclaim any responsibility or liability for any adverse effects, losses, or consequences, direct or indirect, that may result from the use, application, or interpretation of the information contained in this book, and make no guarantees regarding specific outcomes.

© 2026 Tryhard Publishing. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

A Note to the Reader ..... 13
How to Use This Book ..... 15
INTRODUCTION ..... 17
The Pattern at the Kitchen Table ..... 17
What Generational Trauma Is, and What It Is Not ..... 18
Why This Is Not About Blame ..... 19
Meeting the Companions on This Journey ..... 19
What This Book Will Ask of You ..... 20
A Promise Before We Begin ..... 20
PART I: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS ..... 22
What Generational Trauma Really Is ..... 22
The Question Behind the Question ..... 23
Defining the Concept ..... 24
How Experience Travels: A First Look ..... 24
What Trauma Actually Is ..... 25
The ACE Study and What It Taught Us ..... 26
The Question of Biology ..... 27
Inheritance Is Not Destiny ..... 28
Strengths Travel, Too ..... 28
A Note on Language ..... 29
Healing Practice: The Three-Column Pattern Check ..... 29
Reflection Prompts ..... 30
What to Remember ..... 31
Sam's Thread ..... 31

Change ..... 32
How Patterns Travel ..... 33
Four Pathways ..... 34
Pathway One: Learning by Watching ..... 34
Pathway Two: Attachment and Caregiving ..... 35
Pathway Three: The Body ..... 37
Pathway Four: The World Around the Family ..... 38
The Power of Silence ..... 39
Healing Practice: Tracing a Pattern Through the Four Pathways ..... 40
Reflection Prompts ..... 41
What to Remember ..... 41
Nora's Thread ..... 41
Mapping Your Family Story ..... 43
Why Your Family Story Matters ..... 44
The Genogram: A Map of Patterns ..... 45
The Unwritten Rules ..... 46
Roles in the Family System ..... 47
Reading the Silences ..... 48
Culture, History, and the Wider Frame ..... 48
Gathering Information Gently ..... 49
Holding Two Truths ..... 50
Healing Practice: The One-Page Family Map ..... 50
Reflection Prompts ..... 51
What to Remember ..... 51
Walt's Thread ..... 52

PART II: RECOGNIZING THE PATTERNS ..... 53
The Beliefs You Inherited ..... 53
Beliefs Beneath the Behavior ..... 54
How Beliefs Are Passed On ..... 55
The Belief Is Not the Whole You ..... 55
Common Inherited Beliefs ..... 56
Why Positive Thinking Does Not Work ..... 57
Examining the Evidence ..... 58
From Belief to Behavior ..... 58
Healing Practice: The Belief Detective ..... 59
Reflection Prompts ..... 59
What to Remember ..... 60
Elena's Thread ..... 60
The Emotional Rules of Your Family ..... 62
Every Family Has an Emotional Climate ..... 63
The Emotions Families Struggle With Most ..... 64
What Happens When Feelings Are Not Welcome ..... 64
The Power of Naming ..... 65
Shame: The Hidden Rule-Keeper ..... 66
Three Common Emotional Styles ..... 67
Emotions in the Body ..... 67
Healing Practice: The Emotional Rules Inventory ..... 68
Reflection Prompts ..... 69
What to Remember ..... 69
Sam's Thread ..... 69
Roles, Masks, and Survival Responses ..... 71

What Children Do to Survive ....72
The Four Survival Responses....72
The Body Takes the Lead ....73
From Responses to Roles....74
The Masks We Wear....75
The Mask Is Not the Enemy....76
Signs Your Old Response Is Running....76
The Gap Between Trigger and Response ....77
Healing Practice: Mapping Your Mask and Your Response ....77
Reflection Prompts ....78
What to Remember....78
Nora's Thread ....79
How the Past Walks Into Your Relationships ....80
The Relationship Is Where It Shows ....81
Attachment in Adulthood ....82
Your Style Has a History ....83
The Dance That Two People Do ....83
Why We Choose What We Know ....84
Repair: The Skill That Changes Everything....85
Earned Security....85
Healing Practice: The Relationship Pattern Map ....86
Reflection Prompts ....87
What to Remember....87
Elena's Thread....88
PART III: THE HEALING PATH....89
Safety First: Calming the Body ....89

Why We Begin With the Body ..... 90
The Window of Tolerance ..... 91
Recognizing Where You Are ..... 91
Tools for Coming Back ..... 92
What Works Above the Window, and What Works Below ..... 93
A Word About Not Fixing Things in the Heat ..... 94
Widening the Window Over Time ..... 94
Safety Is Not Only Internal ..... 95
When to Seek Extra Support ..... 95
Healing Practice: Build Your Calm Plan ..... 96
Reflection Prompts ..... 97
What to Remember ..... 97
Sam's Thread ..... 98
Grieving What Was Missing and Reparenting Yourself ..... 99
The Needs That Went Unmet ..... 100
Understanding Without Excusing, and Without Blaming ..... 101
The Shape of Grief ..... 102
The Child Within ..... 103
What Reparenting Means ..... 103
The Role of Writing ..... 104
Pacing and Safety ..... 105
Healing Practice: A Letter to My Younger Self ..... 105
Reflection Prompts ..... 106
What to Remember ..... 106
Nora's Thread ..... 107
Rewriting the Story: Self-Talk and Self-Compassion ..... 108

The Voice in Your Head ..... 109
Accountability Is Not Contempt ..... 110
What Self-Compassion Actually Is ..... 110
What Self-Compassion Is Not ..... 111
What the Research Suggests ..... 111
Changing the Way You Talk to Yourself ..... 112
Rewriting the Story ..... 113
Healing Practice: The Compassionate Reply ..... 113
Reflection Prompts ..... 114
What to Remember ..... 115
Walt's Thread ..... 115
PART IV: CHANGING THE CYCLE ..... 117
Boundaries, Hard Conversations, and When Family Cannot Change ..... 117
Boundaries: What They Are and What They Are Not ..... 118
Why Boundaries Are So Hard in Families ..... 119
Writing a Boundary ..... 120
Difficult Conversations ..... 121
A Structure for Honest Communication ..... 121
When Family Cannot or Will Not Change ..... 122
Grieving the Family You Needed ..... 123
Building Chosen Family ..... 123
Healing Practice: One Boundary, One Conversation ..... 124
Reflection Prompts ..... 125
What to Remember ..... 125
Walt's Thread ..... 125

Breaking the Cycle as a Parent ..... 127
Why Parenting Wakes the Past ..... 128
What Children Need ..... 129
The Swing to the Other Extreme ..... 130
When the Ghost Arrives ..... 130
Co-Regulation: Lending Calm ..... 131
Rupture and Repair ..... 132
Helping Children With Feelings ..... 133
Wondering About Your Child's Mind ..... 133
Telling Children About Your Family ..... 134
Being Gentle With Yourself ..... 134
Healing Practice: The Pause and Repair Plan ..... 135
Reflection Prompts ..... 136
What to Remember ..... 136
Sam's Thread ..... 137
Finding Support and Building a Legacy ..... 138
You Were Never Meant to Do This Alone ..... 139
Forms of Support ..... 139
Understanding Therapy ..... 140
Finding the Right Person ..... 141
Barriers, and Ways Through Them ..... 142
Daily Foundations ..... 143
When Old Patterns Return ..... 143
The Wider Circle ..... 144
Building a Legacy ..... 144
Healing Practice: Your Support Map and Legacy Statement . 145

Reflection Prompts ..... 146
What to Remember ..... 146
Elena's Thread ..... 146
CONCLUSION ..... 148
The Chain Has a New Link ..... 148
The Characters, One Year Later ..... 148
What You Have Done ..... 149
Healing Is Not a Finish Line ..... 150
The Next Generation Starts With You ..... 150
A Final Word ..... 151
APPENDIX A: CALM CARDS ..... 152
APPENDIX B: CONVERSATION SCRIPTS ..... 154
Setting a Boundary ..... 154
Asking for Help ..... 154
Taking a Break in Conflict ..... 154
Apologizing and Repairing ..... 154
Responding to Criticism or Pressure ..... 155
Repairing With a Child ..... 155
Ending a Difficult Conversation ..... 155
APPENDIX C: THE 30-DAY PRACTICE PLAN ..... 156
Week 1: Notice ..... 156
Week 2: Understand ..... 156
Week 3: Heal ..... 157
Week 4: Change ..... 157
APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY ..... 158
APPENDIX E: RESOURCES ..... 160

Support and Crisis Resources ..... 160
For Further Reading ..... 160
BIBLIOGRAPHY & SELECTED WORKS ..... 161
Attachment and Child Development ..... 161
Trauma, Stress, and the Body ..... 162
Family Systems, History, and Culture ..... 162
Beliefs, Emotions, and Self-Compassion ..... 163
Learning, Resilience, Relationships, and Parenting ..... 164
About the Sources ..... 165
ABOUT THE AUTHOR ..... 166

## A NOTE TO THE READER

You do not need a dramatic story to be holding this book.

You do not need a diagnosis, a clear memory of the moment something went wrong, or a family that anyone else would call broken. Many people who pick up a book like this one are functioning, often successful, and quietly puzzled. They love their families. They also notice that certain reactions, certain fears, and certain ways of loving seem to arrive from somewhere older than themselves.

Maybe you apologize before anyone has accused you of anything. Maybe you go silent when voices rise, or you raise your own voice and hear someone else's tone coming out of your mouth. Maybe you cannot rest without guilt, cannot ask for help without shame, or cannot believe that care will last. Maybe you watch yourself with your own children and think, *I promised I would never do this.*

This book is about that "somewhere older." It is about the habits, beliefs, and survival strategies that move through families, and about the real possibility that you can be the person in your family who sees them clearly and chooses something different.

I want to be honest about what this book is and is not. It is not a book about blaming your parents. Most people raise children with the tools they were given, and many were given very few. It is also not a substitute for therapy. It is a guide, built on research in psychology, attachment science, and trauma studies, that will help you understand what happened, what you learned from it, and what you want to keep, change, or leave behind.

The work is not always comfortable. Some pages will ask something real of you. Go slowly. Put the book down when you need to. Come back to the sections that move you, and skip ahead when you are ready. There is no correct pace for this, only yours.

And your pace is enough.

Hanz Yiglix

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is not meant to be rushed.

Patterns that took years, sometimes generations, to form do not dissolve in a weekend. You may read a chapter in an evening and need a week for it to settle. That is not a sign that you are doing it wrong. It is what understanding looks like when it is allowed to sink in.

Here are a few suggestions to help you get the most from these pages.

**Keep a journal nearby.** Every chapter ends with a healing practice, reflection prompts, and a short summary called "What to Remember." Writing your answers, even a few lines, helps move insight from your head into your lived experience. Research on expressive writing suggests that putting difficult experiences into words can reduce their emotional weight over time (Pennebaker, 1997).

**Read in order, at least the first time.** The book has four parts. Part I explains what generational trauma is and how it travels. Part II helps you recognize the patterns in your own beliefs, emotions, roles, and relationships. Part III offers a healing path, beginning with safety and moving through grief, reparenting, and self-compassion. Part IV turns outward, toward boundaries, difficult conversations, parenting, support, and legacy. Each part builds on the one before it.

**Meet the companions.** Four fictional people, Elena, Sam, Nora, and Walt, appear throughout the book. They are composites created for illustration, and their stories show how the ideas play out in ordinary lives. You will see them in the first pages of many chapters, and you will meet them again, a year later, in the conclusion.

**Notice your body as you read.** Family history is not only a set of ideas. It lives in the chest, the stomach, the jaw, and the breath. If you feel tightness, heat, sadness, or an urge to close the book, pause. Take a slow breath. Put both feet on the floor. These reactions are not failures.

They are information, and every time you notice them you practice something this book is trying to teach.

**Go gently with the practices.** Some will feel awkward at first, especially those that ask you to speak kindly to yourself or to someone in your family. Resistance is normal. You do not have to feel the words yet. You only have to be willing to try them.

**Use the tools at the back.** The appendices include calm cards for hard moments, conversation scripts, a thirty-day practice plan, and a glossary. If you are not sure where to begin, start with the thirty-day plan and read the chapters alongside it.

If the material brings up memories or feelings that feel too heavy to hold alone, please consider working with a trauma-informed therapist or another qualified mental health professional. Seeking support is not a sign that the work is failing. It is often what allows the work to continue.

And remember: you picked up a book about breaking a pattern. That took courage. The pattern would prefer you look away. You chose to look closer.

# INTRODUCTION



## THE PATTERN AT THE KITCHEN TABLE

Elena Ruiz was standing at her kitchen counter on a Sunday evening, slicing an onion, when her husband asked a simple question.

"Did you call the plumber?"

It was not an accusation. He was reaching for the salt. But Elena felt her shoulders rise toward her ears, and a sentence formed before she could stop it: "I was going to, I'm sorry, I've just had so much going on, I'll do it first thing tomorrow, I'm really sorry."

Her husband looked up, puzzled. "It's fine. I was just asking."

Elena kept slicing. Her heart was beating hard, her face felt warm, and underneath the embarrassment was something older and harder to name, a sense that she had been caught, and that being caught was dangerous.

Elena is thirty-six. She manages a team of nine people, pays her bills early, and remembers everyone's birthday. She is also a woman who apologizes eleven times before lunch, who rehearses conversations in the shower, and who goes quiet, almost vanishing, whenever someone raises their voice.

Later that night, in bed, she thought of her mother. Her mother had crossed a border at nineteen, worked two jobs for most of Elena's childhood, and never once, in Elena's memory, talked about what she had left behind. In that house, silence was how you stayed safe. You did not make trouble. You did not need things. You did not ask questions about the past.

Elena had never decided to live that way. She had simply learned it, the way you learn a language by growing up inside it.

If some part of Elena's evening feels familiar to you, you are in the right place.

## WHAT GENERATIONAL TRAUMA IS, AND WHAT IT IS NOT

The phrase *generational trauma* is used in many ways, and it helps to start with a clear and careful definition.

In this book, generational trauma means the ways in which overwhelming or chronically stressful experiences, such as war, displacement, abuse, neglect, poverty, discrimination, addiction, or loss, can shape the emotional lives, beliefs, behaviors, and relationships of the people who experienced them, and, through those people, the lives of those who come after.

Notice what this definition does not say. It does not say that trauma is a curse, or that children are doomed to repeat what their parents suffered. It does not say that every difficult family is a traumatized family, or that every strong reaction is a sign of inherited pain. It does not say that parents are villains. Most of the time, the opposite is true: people pass on what they themselves were never helped to resolve.

It also helps to separate three things that are often blended together:

- **What happened**: the events and conditions a family lived through.
- **What was learned**: the beliefs, rules, and survival strategies that grew out of those events.
- **What was passed on**: the ways those lessons shaped how children were raised, spoken to, comforted, or left alone.

This distinction matters because the third category is where change becomes possible. We cannot undo what happened. But what was learned and what was passed on can be examined, and what can be examined can be revised.

## WHY THIS IS NOT ABOUT BLAME

Almost everyone who begins this kind of work worries about the same thing: *Am I blaming my parents?*

The worry is understandable, and it deserves a direct answer. Understanding a pattern is not the same as accusing a person. A parent who never learned to talk about feelings was not choosing to withhold. A grandfather who survived a war by never speaking of it was not choosing to leave his grandchildren with silence. Each generation adapted to its circumstances, and the adaptations were often intelligent.

At the same time, understanding does not require pretending that nothing hurt. You can hold two truths at once: *They did what they could*, and *I still needed something I did not receive.* Much of the work in this book happens in the space between those two sentences.

## MEETING THE COMPANIONS ON THIS JOURNEY

Throughout this book you will meet four people. They are fictional composites, drawn from patterns that are common in family life, and they are not based on any real individual.

**Elena Ruiz**, thirty-six, grew up in a household where silence was safety. She is a conscientious manager and a chronic apologizer, and she is learning that her fear of being "caught" has a long history.

**Sam Okafor**, forty-one, is a father of two young children and a warehouse supervisor. He grew up with a father whose temper filled the house. Sam has promised himself he will never raise his voice at his own children, and he is frightened by how often he nearly does.

**Nora Whitfield**, twenty-nine, is the oldest of four siblings. From the age of ten she helped raise her brothers and sisters while her mother worked nights. Nora is dependable and accomplished, and she cannot remember the last time she rested without guilt.

**Walt Brennan**, fifty-eight, has not spoken to his younger sister in six years, since an argument about the care of their mother. Walt grew up in a family that treated feelings as weaknesses, and he is wondering whether it is too late to do anything differently.

You will not agree with everything they do, and they will not always agree with themselves. That is part of why they are useful. They are not examples of perfect healing. They are examples of what it looks like to try.

## WHAT THIS BOOK WILL ASK OF YOU

This book will ask for some things that are not always easy to give.

It will ask for **curiosity** where you may be used to judgment. When you notice a reaction, the invitation is to ask, *Where did I learn this, and what was it protecting?* instead of *What is wrong with me?*

It will ask for **patience**. Patterns have momentum. A new response practiced for a week will not replace a response practiced for thirty years, but it can begin to loosen it.

It will ask for **honesty**, including about the strengths in your family, which are real, and about the costs of some of its habits, which are also real.

And it will ask you to **take your own pace seriously**. If a practice feels like too much, make it smaller. If a memory feels too heavy, stop and seek support. Healing that overwhelms you is not working.

## A PROMISE BEFORE WE BEGIN

I cannot promise that this book will fix your family, or that every relationship will change. I can promise something smaller and, I think, more important.

If you read with openness and practice with patience, you will understand yourself better than you did before. You will have language for things that once had no name. You will have tools for the

moments when the old pattern starts up, and you will have a clearer sense of what you want to hand down to the people who come after you.

You may also discover something that surprises you. The pattern you have been fighting is not the whole story of your family. Alongside it, running through the same generations, there is also resilience, humor, loyalty, and love. This book is not about throwing out the past. It is about choosing, carefully and with compassion, what to carry forward.

Let us begin.

# PART I: UNDERSTANDING THE ROOTS

## CHAPTER 1
## WHAT GENERATIONAL TRAUMA REALLY IS



Sam Okafor had been looking forward to dinner all day.

It was Tuesday, the night he cooked, and his daughter Maya, five years old, had helped him stir the pasta. Then, reaching for her cup, she knocked it over. Milk crossed the table, dripped over the edge, and landed on the laptop bag Sam had left on the chair.

"Maya!"

The word came out louder than he meant it to. His voice had a flat, hard edge he did not recognize as his own, and then, a second later, he

did. It was his father's voice, the one that used to come up the stairs in the evening and make the whole house hold its breath.

Maya froze. Her hands went into her lap. She did not cry, which was somehow worse. She just looked at him with wide eyes and waited to find out what would happen next.

Sam took a breath. "It's okay," he said. "It's just milk. I'm sorry I yelled."

But he could feel his heart pounding, and later, when the kids were asleep and the kitchen was clean, he stood at the sink for a long time with a single thought repeating in his mind: *I swore I would never be him.*

Sam is forty-one. He has never hit anyone. He pays attention, he reads bedtime stories, and he coaches his son's soccer team. And yet, two or three times a month, a sound comes out of him that feels like it belongs to someone else.

## THE QUESTION BEHIND THE QUESTION

When people like Sam ask, *Why did I do that?* they are usually asking a deeper question: *Where does this come from, and why does it feel so hard to stop?*

Most of us were taught to look for answers in the present. We look for the trigger, the stressful day, the lack of sleep. These things matter. But they rarely explain why one person reacts to spilled milk with a flash of fear and another reacts with a shrug. The difference often lies in what each person learned, long before the milk, about what spills mean, what anger does, and what happens to people who make mistakes.

This chapter begins with the largest version of that question: how do experiences that happened to one generation come to shape the lives of the next? The answer is not a single mechanism. It is a set of overlapping pathways, some social, some relational, and some

biological, and understanding them is the first step toward changing them.

## DEFINING THE CONCEPT

Researchers and clinicians use several terms for the same broad phenomenon: *intergenerational trauma*, *multigenerational trauma*, *transgenerational transmission*, and *historical trauma*. The details differ, but the core idea is shared. Experiences of overwhelming stress, loss, or harm do not always end with the people who lived through them. They can influence how those people think, feel, parent, and relate, and in that way they can shape the people who grow up in their care.

The clinical literature has described this for decades. In the 1970s, the psychoanalyst Selma Fraiberg and her colleagues wrote about "ghosts in the nursery," the unacknowledged, unresolved experiences of a parent's own childhood that enter the room whenever the parent holds a baby (Fraiberg, Adelson, & Shapiro, 1975). Researchers who worked with the children of Holocaust survivors, and later with families affected by war, forced migration, colonization, and slavery, described similar echoes (Kellermann, 2001; Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

It is important to say clearly what the idea does *not* mean. It does not mean that trauma is contagious. It does not mean that every child of a difficult childhood will suffer, or that suffering is inevitable. In fact, one of the most consistent findings in this field is that outcomes vary enormously, and that much of the variation depends on what happened *after* the original harm: whether it was acknowledged, whether people had support, and whether someone, eventually, made sense of it.

## HOW EXPERIENCE TRAVELS: A FIRST LOOK

In the next chapter we will examine the pathways in detail. For now, it is enough to hold three of them in mind.

**Learned patterns.** Children watch how adults handle stress, conflict, disappointment, and closeness, and they absorb the lessons, usually without anyone intending to teach them. A child who sees problems met with shouting learns something about problems. A child who sees feelings met with silence learns something about feelings. These are not abstract lessons. They become habits, and then they become the child's sense of how the world works.

**Relational patterns.** The way a child is held, soothed, ignored, or frightened in the earliest years shapes expectations about closeness that can last a lifetime. A caregiver who is overwhelmed by unresolved pain may find it hard to be steady and responsive, and a child adapts to that environment, not because the child is flawed but because adapting is what children do.

**Bodily and biological patterns.** Chronic stress changes how the body responds to threat. Children growing up in tense or unpredictable homes may develop nervous systems that are quick to alarm. There is also growing, though still preliminary, research on whether severe stress might leave molecular marks that influence how later generations respond to stress. We will look at that research honestly, including what it can and cannot tell us.

## WHAT TRAUMA ACTUALLY IS

The word *trauma* is used so freely in everyday language that it has begun to lose its edges. People describe a long meeting as traumatic, or say they were traumatized by a movie. In clinical use, the word is narrower and heavier.

A useful working definition is this: trauma is an experience, or a pattern of experiences, that overwhelms a person's ability to cope, especially when support is missing, and that leaves lasting effects on how the mind and body respond to the world. Notice the two parts. Overwhelm is one. Isolation, the sense of facing it alone, is the other. Many researchers have observed that it is often the lack of safe

support, more than the event itself, that determines whether an experience becomes a lasting wound.

Trauma also comes in more than one form. Some experiences are things that *happened*: violence, accidents, abuse, sudden loss. Others are things that *did not happen*: comfort that never came, attention that was never given, a child's feelings that were never noticed. This second kind is sometimes called neglect, and it can be harder to see because there is no single moment to point to. A child can grow up in a home with no shouting at all and still carry a deep, unexplained loneliness.

Finally, trauma does not need to be dramatic to matter. Chronic stress such as poverty, discrimination, a parent's untreated illness, or constant tension at home can wear on a child's developing systems in ways that add up over time. Pediatric researchers call the prolonged activation of the body's stress response without adequate adult buffering *toxic stress* (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

## THE ACE STUDY AND WHAT IT TAUGHT US

One of the most influential studies in this field began in the 1990s. Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and their colleagues surveyed thousands of adults in a large health plan in California about ten kinds of adverse childhood experiences, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, parental separation, household substance abuse, mental illness, and a family member in prison (Felitti et al., 1998).

The findings surprised many people. Adverse childhood experiences were far more common than anyone had expected, and they tended to occur together. More striking, the number of such experiences a person reported was associated with a wide range of later difficulties, including depression, substance use, relationship problems, and several physical health conditions. The relationship followed a "dose-response" pattern: as the number of adverse experiences rose, so did the likelihood of later difficulties.

It is worth being careful about what this study does and does not show. It describes statistical associations across large groups, not the destiny of any individual. Many people with high ACE scores do well, and the scoring system leaves out important things, including the protective relationships that make a difference. But the study changed how we think about childhood. It showed that what happens in a family, behind closed doors, is not just a private matter. It is a public health matter, and it shapes lives for decades.

## THE QUESTION OF BIOLOGY

You may have heard that trauma can be "inherited in the DNA." The truth is more interesting, and more careful, than the headlines.

Epigenetics is the study of how experience can influence which genes are active without changing the genetic code itself. In animal research, some striking findings have emerged. In one well-known study, mice trained to fear a particular odor passed on a heightened sensitivity to that odor to their offspring and even to the following generation (Dias & Ressler, 2014).

In humans, the evidence is much more limited and more debated. Rachel Yehuda and her colleagues have studied the children of Holocaust survivors and of women who were pregnant during the attacks of September 11, 2001. They found differences in stress hormone patterns and in the chemical tagging of a stress-related gene in the children of people with trauma exposure (Yehuda et al., 2005; Yehuda et al., 2016). These findings are intriguing. They are also based on small samples, the mechanisms are not fully understood, and researchers disagree about how to interpret them.

So what should a thoughtful reader take from this? That biology may play a role, and that research continues. But it is not necessary to settle that question to begin this work. The patterns that you can observe in your own life, how your family handled anger, mistakes, sadness, or love, are *learned*. They are shaped by relationships. And what is learned can be questioned, unlearned, and replaced.

## INHERITANCE IS NOT DESTINY

If this chapter has been heavy, this section is meant to lighten it.

Decades of research on resilience have found that many children raised in difficult conditions go on to lead healthy, productive, loving lives. The psychologist Ann Masten called this "ordinary magic," meaning that resilience usually does not come from rare, extraordinary traits. It comes from ordinary protective systems: a caring adult, a capable mind, a supportive community, a sense of purpose (Masten, 2001). The classic longitudinal study of children on the island of Kauai, led by Emmy Werner and Ruth Smith, found that among children facing serious risk, a substantial portion grew into competent, caring adults, and that having at least one stable, caring relationship was among the most important protective factors (Werner & Smith, 1992).

Attachment researchers have found something similar in adults. Some people who began with difficult early relationships develop what is called *earned security*, a secure way of relating that is built later, through steady relationships, reflection, and sometimes therapy. In some studies, people with earned security look very similar, in their adult relationships, to people who were securely attached from the start (Roisman, Padron, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002).

The lesson is simple, and it is the foundation of this book: *The past shapes you, but it does not finish you.*

## STRENGTHS TRAVEL, TOO

Families pass on more than wounds. They also pass on humor, recipes, songs, work ethic, faith, loyalty, stories, and an ability to endure. The same grandmother who never spoke about the war may have taught her grandchildren how to make something from nothing. The same father who found it hard to say "I love you" may have shown it, every day, by showing up at six in the morning to drive someone to work.

Looking honestly at family patterns means looking at both. The aim is not to throw away the past, but to sort it: to say, *This I want to keep. This I want to change. This I want to understand better.* That is a more accurate way of seeing, and it is also a kinder one.

## A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

You will notice that this book uses words like *pattern*, *adaptation*, and *survival response* more often than words like *damage* or *disorder*. This is intentional. It is not meant to minimize real suffering. It is meant to describe accurately how people behave: most of what feels like a flaw in adulthood began as a sensible response to a real situation.

This book also does not diagnose. If you recognize symptoms such as persistent nightmares, flashbacks, severe anxiety, thoughts of self-harm, or episodes where you feel disconnected from yourself, please consider speaking with a mental health professional. These are common human responses to hard experiences, and they respond well to appropriate support.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE THREE-COLUMN PATTERN CHECK

This first practice is simple, and it is one you will return to throughout the book. Its purpose is to help you see a reaction without judging yourself for it. You will need a notebook and a pen.

**Step 1: Choose one recent moment.** Pick a time when you reacted more strongly than the situation seemed to call for. Choose something mild to moderate. We are building a skill, and skills are best practiced on smaller things first.

**Step 2: Draw three columns.** Label them *What happened*, *What I believed in that moment*, and *Where I may have learned that*.

**Step 3: Fill in the first column like a camera.** Write only what a camera would have recorded. "Maya spilled her milk. I raised my voice." Leave out interpretations and judgments.

**Step 4: Fill in the second column.** Ask what thought or fear rose up. It might be a sentence ("I'm losing control"), a feeling ("danger"), or an image. Write it down as honestly as you can.

**Step 5: Fill in the third column.** Ask who in your family responded in a similar way, and what was said or done in situations like this. Do not worry about being accurate or complete. Your first guess is enough.

**Step 6: Finish with one sentence.** Complete this sentence: *This pattern once helped me by...* There is always an answer, even if it takes time to find. The goal is to see that your reaction made sense for a younger version of you, and to begin separating the old protection from the present moment.

If the exercise stirs strong feelings, pause. Put your feet flat on the floor and take a few slow breaths. You can return to it tomorrow.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

Take a few minutes with the following questions. Write whatever comes, without editing.

1. Before reading this chapter, how did you explain the patterns in your family? Did anything in the chapter change that explanation?
2. What do you know about the hardest things your family went through? What do you *not* know, and what might that silence be protecting?
3. Which of the three pathways, learned patterns, relational patterns, or bodily patterns, feels most familiar in your own life?
4. What strengths came down to you through your family? Name at least three.
5. What would it mean to you if a pattern could be both understandable and changeable?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Trauma is not only what happened. It is also what overwhelmed us and what we faced without support.

Patterns travel through learning, through relationships, and perhaps through the body, but the patterns you can see in daily life are learned, and they can be changed.

Understanding a pattern is not blame. It is the first step toward choosing differently.

The past shapes you. It does not finish you.

*In the next chapter, we will follow these pathways in more detail, and see how the way you were held, spoken to, and taught about feelings became part of who you are.*

## SAM'S THREAD

Sam did not sleep well that night. At some point after midnight, he got up and wrote a list on the back of an envelope. At the top he put the words: *What happened.* Under it he wrote, *Maya spilled milk. I yelled.*

Beneath that he wrote, *What I believed.* It took him a long time. Finally he wrote: *If I don't come down hard, everything falls apart.*

He sat looking at the sentence. It did not sound like a belief he had chosen. It sounded like a rule he had been handed, a long time ago, by someone who was frightened.

Under *Where I learned it*, he wrote a single word: *Dad.*

He did not feel better, exactly. But for the first time he felt something he could only describe as room. The reaction that had seemed like a flaw in his character looked, written down, more like a lesson that he had never been given a chance to question.

## CHANGE

When people first understand how patterns travel, they sometimes feel overwhelmed. If so much is inherited through so many pathways, what can one person do?

## THE ANSWER IS THAT EACH PATHWAY ALSO
## CHAPTER 2
# HOW PATTERNS TRAVEL



Nora Whitfield arrived at her youngest brother's graduation forty minutes early.

She had a folder in her bag with printed parking directions, a list of restaurants within walking distance, and a backup plan in case the weather turned. Her mother was fine. Her siblings were fine. Nobody had asked her for any of it.

"I don't know what we'd do without you," her mother said, squeezing her arm in the parking lot.

It was meant as a compliment, and Nora smiled. But something tightened behind her ribs, because the sentence had a familiar weight

to it. She had heard some version of it since she was ten years old, the year her mother started working nights and Nora began packing lunches, signing permission slips, and sitting on the edge of her brothers' beds when they were afraid of the dark.

At twenty-nine, Nora is a successful operations analyst. She is the person her colleagues call when something is on fire. She is also a woman who has not taken a full day off in a year, who feels a rush of dread when she is not useful, and who cannot sit through a movie without checking her phone for problems she might fix.

Nobody sat her down and told her to become the family's caretaker. It happened through a thousand small moments, a thousand small sentences, a thousand small rewards for being the one who held everything together.

That is how most patterns travel. Not through speeches, but through ordinary days.

## FOUR PATHWAYS

In the last chapter we named three broad ways that experience travels: through learning, through relationships, and through the body. Here we look at them more closely, and we add a fourth: the circumstances that surround a family. No single pathway explains everything, and most families involve all four at once.

As you read, you may find it useful to ask: *Which pathway feels most alive in my own story?* There is no right answer. The goal is to widen your lens, so that patterns that once looked like personal flaws begin to look like what they usually are, learned responses to real situations.

## PATHWAY ONE: LEARNING BY WATCHING

Long before children can understand language, they are watching. They watch faces, voices, hands, and the spaces between words. They learn what a person does when they are angry, what happens when

someone cries, who gets to speak at the table, and what is never mentioned.

The psychologist Albert Bandura demonstrated this in a series of studies that became foundational in social learning theory. Children who watched an adult behave aggressively toward a doll were more likely to behave aggressively themselves, even without being instructed to do so (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). The broader point has been confirmed many times over: people, especially young people, learn not only from what they are told but from what they see.

This is why family rules are so powerful, and why they are so rarely spoken. Consider a few that many people recognize:

- *We don't talk about that.*
- *Be strong.*
- *Don't make a scene.*
- *Don't trust anyone outside the family.*
- *Family comes first, no matter what.*
- *If you can't say something nice, say nothing.*

Few of these were ever announced. They were enforced through a raised eyebrow, a changed subject, a long silence, or a look. A child who is hushed once may not notice. A child who is hushed a hundred times learns something about what is acceptable to feel.

Some rules are protective. Some are outdated. Many are both. The first step is simply to see them.

## PATHWAY TWO: ATTACHMENT AND CAREGIVING

The second pathway runs through the earliest relationships of life. John Bowlby, the British psychiatrist who developed attachment theory, argued that human infants are born with a built-in drive to seek closeness with caregivers, and that the quality of that early relationship shapes expectations about closeness for years to come (Bowlby, 1969). Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues later developed methods to observe differences in how infants respond to caregivers,

identifying patterns that have been studied for decades (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978).

For our purposes, the key finding is this: when caregivers are generally responsive, children tend to develop a sense that others can be relied on and that they themselves are worth responding to. When care is unpredictable, distant, or frightening, children adapt. Some become watchful and clingy. Some learn to need less. Some alternate between the two, or become confused, wanting closeness and fearing it at once.

What does this have to do with generations? A great deal. Researchers who interview parents about their own childhoods have found that the way a parent makes sense of their early experience is one of the strongest predictors of how their child will attach. A meta-analysis of studies across many samples found a strong association between parents' attachment representations and their infants' attachment patterns (van IJzendoorn, 1995).

What matters most is not how difficult a parent's childhood was, but how well it has been understood. Mary Main and Erik Hesse found that parents with unresolved experiences of loss or trauma, those who showed lapses in reasoning when discussing it, were more likely to have infants with disorganized attachment, the pattern in which a child seems to be both drawn to and frightened of the caregiver (Main & Hesse, 1990). The parent is not trying to frighten the child. A moment of unprocessed fear or grief can simply flash across the parent's face or voice, and for a baby that is alarming.

This is the nursery ghost that Fraiberg described. The ghost is not malicious. It is only unfinished business, arriving in the room when a parent is tired, overwhelmed, or reminded.

**Rupture and repair.** There is also good news here, and it is important. Studies of caregivers and infants led by Edward Tronick and others have found that even in healthy relationships, caregiver and baby are often out of sync, and that moments of mismatch are

common (Tronick, 1989). What distinguishes secure relationships is not the absence of mismatch but the presence of repair: the caregiver notices, returns, and reconnects. We will return to this idea many times, because it is as true for adults and for parents as it is for infants.

## PATHWAY THREE: THE BODY

The third pathway runs through the nervous system. When a child grows up in an environment that is frightening, tense, or unpredictable, the body adapts. It learns to scan for danger, to react quickly, or to shut down when things become too much. These responses are automatic, and they can persist long after the environment has changed.

The physician Bessel van der Kolk and many others have described how the body can carry stress reactions that the conscious mind has long since set aside (van der Kolk, 2014). A raised voice may bring a flash of heat to the face. A slammed door may produce a startle that seems out of proportion. A moment of closeness may be accompanied by a sudden urge to pull away. These reactions are not signs of weakness. They are the body's old protective patterns, still on duty.

The study of *toxic stress* has added to this picture. Pediatric researchers have shown that prolonged activation of the stress response in early childhood, without the buffering presence of supportive adults, can affect the developing brain and body (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Notice the phrase *without the buffering presence of supportive adults*. Once again, the presence or absence of safe relationships makes the difference.

What about the genes? As discussed in the last chapter, animal research suggests that stress can influence gene activity in ways that carry across generations, and studies of survivors and their children suggest intriguing possibilities in humans (Dias & Ressler, 2014; Yehuda et al., 2016). But the research is early, and no one can yet say how much of a given person's reactions come from this route. It is wise to hold the idea with curiosity and caution.

One more note: the nervous system also changes in healing. The same adaptability that allowed a child to adjust to a stressful home allows an adult to learn safety. We will explore this in Part III.

## PATHWAY FOUR: THE WORLD AROUND THE FAMILY

No family lives in a vacuum. Families live inside economies, communities, cultures, and histories, and these shape what feels safe and what feels possible.

A family that survived famine may hold fast to rules about never wasting food, and may feel anxious when the refrigerator is nearly empty even decades later. A family that fled persecution may teach its children to keep their heads down and their voices low. A family that has faced discrimination may teach caution, emphasize toughness, or discourage vulnerability, not out of cruelty, but out of an accurate sense that the world is not always safe.

Scholars who study these patterns use the term *historical trauma*. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart and Lemyra DeBruyn, writing about American Indian communities, described how the cumulative impact of massacres, forced removal, and cultural suppression can echo across generations as unresolved grief (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998). Similar analyses have been developed for descendants of enslaved people, refugees, and survivors of genocide.

You do not need to know your family's entire history to benefit from this lens. It is enough to ask, *What did my family live through, and what rules about safety, trust, or silence may have come from it?* Seeing a rule in its historical context often softens judgment. The rule may no longer serve you. But it likely made sense when it was formed.

Present-day pressures matter too. Poverty, unstable work, unsafe housing, and long hours make it harder for caregivers to be patient and attuned, even when love is strong. Recognizing this is not an excuse for harm. It is an acknowledgment that families are shaped by conditions as well as by choices.

## THE POWER OF SILENCE

If there is one thread that runs through all four pathways, it is silence.

Silence about what happened. Silence about what was felt. Silence about who died, who left, who was hurt, and why. In many families, silence began as a kindness or a protection: *Why burden the children with this?* But silence carries its own message. A child who senses that something happened and is not allowed to ask learns that something is too dangerous to say, and often assumes that the problem is somehow themselves.

Research on family narratives suggests the other side of this. Marshall Duke and his colleagues developed a short measure of how much children and adolescents know about their family history. They found that greater knowledge of the family story, including both difficult and happy chapters, was associated with higher self-esteem and a stronger sense of control over one's life (Duke, Lazarus, & Fivush, 2008). The pattern may be especially strong when the story includes both times of struggle and times of recovery. A child who knows that the family has faced hardship and come through it can begin to see themselves as part of something resilient.

This does not mean that every painful detail should be shared with every child. Age and readiness matter. But it does suggest that giving shape to a family's story, rather than leaving it as a silent presence, can be protective.

The Chain Has Links You Can offers a way out.

- **Learning** can be redirected. You can notice a rule, question it, and practice a different one.
- **Attachment patterns** can shift, through safe relationships, reflection, and repair.
- **The body** can learn safety, through regulation practices and through experiences of being supported.

- **Context** can be understood, which softens judgment, and can sometimes be changed, one choice at a time.
- **Silence** can be broken, gently, at your own pace.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and a pattern is only as fixed as its least examined link. You do not need to change everything. You need to find one link and begin.

## HEALING PRACTICE: TRACING A PATTERN THROUGH THE FOUR PATHWAYS

This practice helps you see how one pattern in your life may have been shaped by more than one pathway. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: Choose one pattern.** Pick something you notice in yourself that feels automatic, such as apologizing too much, avoiding conflict, working without rest, or going silent when upset.

**Step 2: Learning.** Ask: *Who did I see do this, or do the opposite? What were the family rules about this?* Write down anything that comes.

**Step 3: Attachment.** Ask: *What happened when I needed comfort, help, or attention as a child? Did this pattern help me get closer to the people I needed?* Write down your answers.

**Step 4: The body.** Ask: *What does my body do when this pattern starts? Where do I feel it?* Common answers include a tight chest, a hot face, a hollow stomach, or a sudden fatigue.

**Step 5: The world around the family.** Ask: *What was happening in my family's life during my childhood, financially, culturally, or historically, that might have made this pattern seem necessary?*

**Step 6: Choose one link.** Look over your notes and choose the link that feels most approachable. It could be a rule you want to question, a breath you can take, or a conversation you can begin. Write it down as an intention: *This week I will...*

Keep your intention small. The goal is not to fix the pattern. It is to begin a different relationship with it.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which of the four pathways, learning, attachment, the body, or the world around your family, do you recognize most clearly in your own life?
2. What unspoken rules did your family have? Which of them still operate in you?
3. What did your family live through that may have shaped its rules about safety, trust, or silence?
4. What is one story about your family that has never been fully told? What would it mean to learn more?
5. Which link in the chain feels ready to be changed?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Patterns travel through learning, attachment, the body, and the circumstances surrounding a family. Most families involve all four.

What matters is not only what a parent went through, but how well it has been understood. Unfinished business tends to show up in the room.

Silence is one of the strongest carriers of pattern, and breaking it gently is one of the strongest forms of healing.

Each pathway also contains a way out. You do not need to change everything. You need to find one link and begin.

*In the next chapter, you will begin to map your own family story, so that the pathways described here become visible in your own history.*

## NORA'S THREAD

Nora tried the practice on a Sunday afternoon, in the car, before going into her mother's house.

She chose the pattern: *I can't rest unless I'm useful.* Under *Learning*, she wrote: *Mom never rested. I was praised when I helped.* Under

*Attachment*, she wrote: *The times I felt closest to Mom were when I was taking care of something.* That one made her stop.

Under *The body*, she wrote: *Chest tightens when there is nothing to do.* And under *The world around the family*, she wrote: *Dad left. Mom had no money and no help.*

She read the page twice. For the first time, the habit she had always described as "just who I am" looked like a very good solution to a very hard problem. A ten-year-old girl had figured out how to keep a household together.

She sat in the car for another few minutes, hands on the steering wheel. Then she went in, and for the first twenty minutes of the visit, she did not clear a single plate.

# CHAPTER 3
# MAPPING YOUR FAMILY STORY



Walt Brennan sat at his kitchen table with a yellow legal pad and a pencil, and drew a rectangle.

It was supposed to be his father. Next to it, he drew a circle for his mother, and below them a square for himself and a circle for his sister, Carol. He looked at the four shapes for a long time. Then he tried to draw a line upward, to his father's parents, and found that he did not know what to draw.

He knew his grandfather's name. He knew that he had worked on the railroad, and that he drank. He knew nothing about his grandmother except that she had been "quiet." He did not know where either of them had been born, why his father left home at sixteen, or

what, if anything, had happened in that house that made the man Walt grew up with the way he was.

His father had been a man of few words. When Walt cried as a boy, his father said, "That's enough." When Walt's team lost, his father said, "Don't be a baby." When Walt's mother got sick, his father said nothing at all, and the house filled up with it.

Walt put the pencil down. He was fifty-eight years old and had just realized that he knew less about the family that raised him than he knew about the neighbors across the street.

He had not spoken to his sister in six years. The argument that ended their relationship was about their mother's care, but sitting at the table, looking at the empty space above the rectangle, he had a sudden, uncomfortable thought: *We were never taught how to disagree. Not once.*

## WHY YOUR FAMILY STORY MATTERS

It may seem odd to begin the work of change with history. You might think that patterns are best handled in the present: notice a reaction, take a breath, choose differently. And that is part of the work, as the coming chapters will show.

But patterns do not arrive from nowhere. They come attached to stories, such as the story of what your family went through, how it coped, what it valued, what it feared, and what it never said. When you do not know the story, the pattern can feel like a personal mystery, a flaw with no explanation. When you know even a little of it, the pattern begins to make sense.

This is more than a comfort. As we saw in the previous chapter, people who know more about their family history tend to have a stronger sense of identity and resilience (Duke, Lazarus, & Fivush, 2008). Researchers have suggested that stories help us place ourselves within something larger than our own struggles. A person who knows

that grandparents survived hard times and persevered carries a different inner message than one who feels isolated in difficulty.

The purpose of this chapter is not to investigate your family like a detective, or to dig for secrets, or to assign fault. It is to draw a rough map, so that the pathways described in Chapter 2 become visible in your own history.

## THE GENOGRAM: A MAP OF PATTERNS

Family therapists have long used a tool called a *genogram*, a diagram that looks like a family tree but records more than names and dates. A genogram can show relationships, major events, illnesses, migrations, losses, and recurring patterns across generations (McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008). It was developed in family systems therapy, drawing on the work of Murray Bowen and others who saw the family as an emotional unit whose members shape one another across time (Bowen, 1978).

You do not need professional training to make a simple version. The standard symbols are easy to learn:

- A **square** represents a male, and a **circle** represents a female. You can use any shapes that make sense to you.
- A **horizontal line** connects partners, and a **vertical line** leads down to children.
- A **slash** through a shape can indicate death, with the year if you know it.
- **Wavy or dashed lines** can mark distant or strained relationships, and **double lines** can mark very close ones.

What makes a genogram useful is the information you add beside each person. A single word or phrase can open a window: *Immigrated. Raised alone. Drank heavily. Worked nights. Silent. Warm. Angry. Lost a child. Left.* You are not diagnosing anyone. You are listing what you know or have been told.

Then comes the most important step: stepping back and looking for patterns. Does a particular theme appear in more than one generation, such as early loss, addiction, caretaking, abandonment, silence, or anger? Do certain relationships seem to repeat the same shape? Does something appear to skip a generation and then return?

Many people find that the map reveals something they sensed but never saw clearly: the same sentence spoken by three generations, the same role filled by the oldest daughter, the same silence settling after the same kind of event.

## THE UNWRITTEN RULES

Every family has rules. Some are spoken, but the most powerful are not. They are learned by watching what is rewarded and what is quietly punished. Writing them down can feel strange at first, but it is one of the most revealing parts of this work.

Consider the following categories. For each, ask what the rule was in your family home, even if no one ever said it aloud.

**Feelings.** Which emotions were allowed? Which were discouraged? What happened when someone cried, raged, or showed fear?

**Needs.** What happened when someone asked for help? Was it treated as normal, as weakness, or as a burden?

**Conflict.** How did disagreement unfold? Was it explosive, avoided, punished, or never allowed to begin?

**Money and work.** What did your family believe about success, effort, and security? What was said about people who had more or less?

**The outside world.** Who could be trusted? Who could not? What was said about neighbors, institutions, or people from other backgrounds?

**Love.** How was it shown? Through words, touch, work, food, sacrifice, silence? What had to be done to earn it?

**Secrets.** What could never be mentioned? Who was never talked about?

Notice how many of these rules, even the ones that cause pain now, grew out of attempts to protect. A rule against showing feelings may have started in a household where feelings were dangerous. A rule against asking for help may have come from a time when no help was available. Seeing the logic does not make a rule right for the present. But it makes it easier to hold with compassion.

## ROLES IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM

In many families, people settle into roles. One child becomes the responsible one, another the rebel, another the peacemaker, another the invisible one. A parent may be the provider, the worrier, the one who never says no. These roles are rarely chosen deliberately. They form to keep the family balanced, and they can feel so natural from the inside that no one notices them.

The family therapist Salvador Minuchin described how roles and boundaries within a family create its structure, and how that structure can be rigid or flexible, supportive or constraining (Minuchin, 1974). A role that helps a family survive a crisis can become a trap when it continues long after the crisis has passed.

You may recognize some of these roles:

- **The caretaker**, who manages everyone's needs and neglects their own.
- **The achiever**, whose success carries the family's pride.
- **The peacemaker**, who absorbs tension and smooths conflict.
- **The scapegoat**, who is blamed for what is wrong.
- **The invisible one**, who stays out of the way and asks for nothing.
- **The rebel**, who expresses what no one else will, and is punished for it.

We will return to roles in Chapter 6, because they are closely tied to survival responses. For now, simply notice which ones appear on your map.

## READING THE SILENCES

A map is made of what is there, but it is also shaped by what is missing. Blank spaces carry information.

Perhaps there is a relative no one mentions. Perhaps a date is missing, or a name changes from one document to another. Perhaps a birth came too soon after a wedding, or a death came with no explanation. Perhaps a whole branch of the family disappears at a certain point.

You do not need to solve these mysteries. You can simply note them: *No one talks about Uncle Ray. My grandmother's first marriage is not mentioned. My father never speaks of his childhood home.* Then ask yourself, gently, what the silence might be protecting, and what it might have cost.

Sometimes the silence protected people from shame, in a time when divorce, illegitimacy, illness, or poverty carried heavy stigma. Sometimes it protected them from pain. Sometimes it protected the person who caused harm. Looking at silence is not the same as breaking it. But seeing it clearly helps you decide, later, whether and how you want to speak.

## CULTURE, HISTORY, AND THE WIDER FRAME

Every family is part of a larger story. As you map your own, it helps to widen the lens from time to time and ask what was happening in the world around it.

When did your family come to the place where you grew up, and why? Were there wars, famines, economic collapses, or political upheavals in the places they came from? Were there experiences of discrimination, exclusion, or displacement? How did your family's

culture, religion, or community shape its rules about feelings, authority, gender, and obedience?

Such questions are not about assigning your family to categories. They are about recognizing that a rule like "keep your head down" may have been an accurate response to danger. They are also about noticing strengths: the resourcefulness, solidarity, humor, and faith that carried people through. Scholars who study historical trauma emphasize that communities pass on resilience as well as injury (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

If you know little about your family's wider history, you can learn about the history of the region or community your ancestors came from. Even that broader knowledge can bring understanding.

## GATHERING INFORMATION GENTLY

You do not need to interview your whole family to do this work. But if you have relatives who are willing, a few conversations can add valuable detail. Some suggestions:

**Start with curiosity, not confrontation.** Questions that begin with "What was it like?" or "Tell me about..." tend to open conversation. Questions that begin with "Why did you..." can feel like accusations.

**Ask about the ordinary.** What did your grandmother cook? What was the house like? What did people do on Sundays? Everyday details lead to deeper stories, and they are safer to ask about.

**Listen without correcting.** Relatives may tell the story differently than you expect, or differently from each other. The goal is not to establish a single version of the truth. It is to understand how each person experienced it.

**Respect limits.** Some people are not ready to talk. Some topics are too painful. You can ask once, gently, and leave the door open.

**Use other sources.** Photographs, letters, documents, recipes, songs, and objects can tell stories that no one speaks aloud.

If speaking with relatives is not possible, whether because of distance, death, estrangement, or safety, you can work with what you have. Your own memories, your own observations, and your own reactions are all part of the map.

## HOLDING TWO TRUTHS

As the map takes shape, you may find yourself pulled in two directions. On one side is compassion: *They went through so much. They did the best they could.* On the other is a more painful recognition: *And I still did not get what I needed.*

Both are true. One does not cancel the other. Many people try to force a choice, either excusing everything or blaming everyone, because holding both feels uncomfortable. But maturity in this work consists largely of tolerating that discomfort.

You can honor the struggles of the people who raised you and still acknowledge your own unmet needs. You can feel gratitude and grief at the same time. You can love someone and recognize that something they did, or did not do, hurt you. This is not disloyalty. It is honesty, and honesty is what makes real change possible.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE ONE-PAGE FAMILY MAP

This practice creates a simple, usable map of your family story. You will need a large sheet of paper or the notebook pages turned sideways, and a pencil.

**Step 1: Draw three generations.** Draw your grandparents across the top, your parents in the middle, and yourself and your siblings at the bottom. Include aunts, uncles, and others who played an important role. Don't worry if you do not know everyone. Leave blanks.

**Step 2: Add a few words by each person.** For each, write one or two words or phrases that describe what you know: a strength, a struggle, a major event, a role. Use your own words.

**Step 3: Mark the relationships.** Use solid lines for close ones, dashed lines for distant ones, and zigzag lines for conflict. Mark any cutoffs, estrangements, or silences.

**Step 4: Circle the patterns.** Look for anything that appears more than once: early loss, addiction, anger, caretaking, silence, perfectionism, migration, illness. Circle each recurring theme with a color or symbol.

**Step 5: Add the unwritten rules.** In the margin, write three to five rules that seemed to govern your family. Use phrases like "Don't ask," "Be strong," or "Keep it in the family."

**Step 6: Write two sentences at the bottom.** Complete these sentences: *Something I want to carry forward from my family is...* and *Something I want to leave behind is...*

When you finish, step back and look at the map as a whole. You may notice something you did not expect. Allow yourself to feel whatever arises, and then take a break.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What surprised you most as you drew your map? What was missing?
2. Which pattern appears across more than one generation? What might have helped it continue?
3. Which unwritten rule from your family still shapes your behavior?
4. What role did you play in your family? What strengths and costs came with it?
5. Is there someone you could ask, gently, about the family's past? What would you most want to know?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Your patterns have a history. Mapping that history turns a mystery into a story.

A genogram is a simple way to see patterns across generations. It does not need to be complete or accurate to be useful.

Unwritten rules and silences carry as much information as spoken words. Seeing them is the first step toward choosing differently.

You can hold compassion for the people who raised you and still acknowledge what you needed and did not receive.

*In Part II, we will turn from the family to the self, and begin to look at the beliefs, emotions, roles, and relationship habits that you carry today.*

## WALT'S THREAD

Walt finished the rough map over the course of a week. It was a mess of arrows and question marks, but it held something he had never seen before: four generations on one page.

He noticed that his grandfather, his father, and he himself had all shared one trait, a refusal to talk when something hurt. He noticed that in each generation, there was one person who had been "the strong one," and that the strong one was never allowed to fall apart. He noticed that his sister, Carol, had been the one in the family who cried, and that she had been called "dramatic" for it by all three men.

At the bottom of the page he wrote, under *Something I want to leave behind*: *Not talking.* He looked at it, and then, a little shakily, added: *Not even trying.*

He did not call Carol that night. But for the first time in six years, he took her last card out of the drawer and read it.

# PART II: RECOGNIZING THE PATTERNS

## CHAPTER 4
## THE BELIEFS YOU INHERITED




Elena Ruiz's manager asked a simple question in the Monday meeting. "Who wants to take the lead on the new client onboarding?"

Three seconds passed. Elena felt her pulse in her throat. She had run the last two onboarding projects. She knew the process better than anyone in the room. She wanted the work. And yet she heard herself say, very quietly, "I could, but if someone else wants it, that's fine."

A colleague with half her experience said, "I'll do it." Her manager nodded, and the meeting moved on.

Elena looked at her notebook. Her handwriting seemed to belong to someone smaller. She felt a familiar mix of relief and disappointment, and underneath it, a thought so automatic that she hardly noticed it: *Wanting things out loud is greedy.*

She had not decided to think that. Nobody had told her so in those words. But she remembered her mother at the grocery store, counting coins at the register, saying "We don't need it" in a flat voice that closed the subject. She remembered learning, around the age of seven, that the safest answer to "What do you want?" was "Whatever you want."

Elena had grown up inside a belief the way a fish grows up inside water. It was everywhere, and it was invisible.

## BELIEFS BENEATH THE BEHAVIOR

Most of us believe that our behavior comes from our thoughts in the moment. We think, *I decided to stay quiet*, or *I chose not to ask.* But much of what we do is shaped by beliefs we hold at a deeper level, convictions about ourselves, other people, and the world that operate automatically, often outside our awareness.

Psychologists call these *core beliefs*. Aaron Beck, who developed cognitive therapy, observed that people's emotional reactions often follow not from events themselves but from the meanings they attach to events, and that these meanings are shaped by deep underlying assumptions (Beck, 1976). Jeffrey Young and his colleagues, working with people whose difficulties persisted despite treatment, described patterns they called *early maladaptive schemas*: broad, self-defeating themes about self and others that begin in childhood and repeat through life (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003). Examples include beliefs such as "I am defective," "People abandon me," "I must meet others' needs or be rejected," and "Something bad is about to happen."

What matters for our purposes is how these beliefs are formed. They do not appear out of nowhere. They are drawn from repeated

experience in the family, and they are often absorbed in the years when a child has no capacity to question them.

## HOW BELIEFS ARE PASSED ON

Family beliefs travel in several ways, and understanding them helps explain why they feel so true.

**They are spoken.** Some messages are said directly, often with love, and often many times. "Money doesn't grow on trees." "Men don't cry." "You're the smart one." "Don't get too big for yourself." Words repeated in childhood become inner voices in adulthood.

**They are modeled.** A child who sees a parent never asking for help learns that help is not to be asked for. A child who sees a parent apologize constantly learns that existence requires apology. What adults do speaks louder than what they say.

**They are inferred.** Children are natural meaning-makers, and they tend to explain what happens around them by reference to themselves. If a parent is withdrawn, a child may conclude, "I am too much." If a parent is angry, the child may conclude, "I am bad." If a parent is struggling and the child cannot help, the child may conclude, "My needs are a burden." These conclusions are rarely accurate, but a young child does not have the tools to question them.

**They are reinforced.** Once a belief forms, we tend to notice experiences that fit it and overlook those that do not. This is not a weakness. It is how human attention works. But it means that a belief can feel confirmed even when it is not true.

## THE BELIEF IS NOT THE WHOLE YOU

One reason it is hard to examine our beliefs is that they do not feel like beliefs. They feel like facts. *I am a burden* does not feel like an opinion. It feels like a description of reality.

A useful step is to learn to hear the difference between an observation and an inherited statement. An observation is something

that can be checked: "I was late to the meeting." An inherited belief is a sweeping, emotional claim that usually contains words like *always*, *never*, *everyone*, or *no one*: "I always ruin things." "Nobody really wants me around."

Notice, too, the voice in which a belief speaks. Many people discover that when they listen closely, the voice is not their own. It is a parent's tone, a grandparent's expression, a teacher's remark. It is the sound of someone else's fear, living in your head.

## COMMON INHERITED BELIEFS

While every family has its own particular messages, certain beliefs appear again and again. Read the following list slowly, and notice which ones produce a reaction in your body.

- *I have to earn love.*
- *My needs are a burden.*
- *If I'm not useful, I'm not valuable.*
- *Anger is dangerous.*
- *Feelings are weakness.*
- *If I let people close, they will hurt me.*
- *I have to be strong, no matter what.*
- *Mistakes are unforgivable.*
- *I can only rely on myself.*
- *Good things don't last.*
- *If I'm happy, something bad will happen.*
- *Putting myself first is selfish.*

You may have noticed that many of these beliefs contain a kernel of protection. *I can only rely on myself* may have been accurate in a family where no one was reliable. *Anger is dangerous* may have been accurate in a house where anger led to harm. *Good things don't last* may have been learned in a family that had lost almost everything. These beliefs were not foolish. They were adaptations.

## WHY POSITIVE THINKING DOES NOT WORK

When people notice a harsh belief, the first impulse is often to cover it with its opposite: *I am worthy. I am enough. I am lovable.* Affirmations of this kind are popular, and for some people they help.

But research suggests that they do not help everyone, and may backfire for those who need them most. In one set of studies, people with low self-esteem who repeated the statement "I am a lovable person" actually felt worse afterward than those who did not, apparently because the statement collided with what they believed about themselves (Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009).

This makes sense. If a belief has been supported by thousands of small experiences, a single sentence cannot dislodge it. It may even provoke an inner argument: *That isn't true, and you know it.*

What tends to work better is smaller and more honest. Rather than forcing a positive statement, you can build a *believable alternative*, something that is both kinder and true enough for you to accept. Compare these:

| Inherited belief | Forced opposite | Believable alternative |
|---|---|---|
| My needs are a burden. | My needs are always important. | Some of my needs are reasonable, and I can learn to ask. |
| I always ruin things. | I never make mistakes. | I made a mistake, and I can fix it or learn from it. |
| I can't trust anyone. | I can trust everyone. | I can learn who is safe, one step at a time. |

Notice how the last column leaves room for doubt while pointing in a new direction.

## EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

Cognitive therapy has long offered a simple but powerful tool: treat the belief as a hypothesis rather than a fact, and look at the evidence. Not to prove it wrong, but to see it more clearly (Beck, 1976).

Take a belief such as *Wanting things out loud is greedy.* Ask:

- Where did I first learn this? From whom?
- What experiences support it? Be honest.
- What experiences do not fit it? Look for exceptions, even small ones.
- Would I say this to a friend in my position?
- What would I say to a child who believed this?
- What is a more balanced way to see it?

The goal is not to argue yourself into a different feeling. It is to loosen the belief's grip by showing it that it is one view among several. Over time, as you collect different experiences, the old belief may lose its authority.

## FROM BELIEF TO BEHAVIOR

Beliefs show up in behavior. A person who believes *My needs are a burden* may avoid asking for help, minimize pain, or become resentful when others do not guess what they need. A person who believes *I must be strong* may refuse comfort, take on too much, or become angry when others show vulnerability. A person who believes *Good things don't last* may sabotage happiness before it can be taken away.

Tracing a behavior back to its belief can be a powerful insight. It also suggests where to start changing it. You do not have to overcome a deep conviction in one step. You can practice a new behavior, ask for something small, speak up in a low-stakes situation, rest for ten minutes, and let the experience gradually gather its own evidence.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE BELIEF DETECTIVE

This practice helps you identify one inherited belief, examine its origin and evidence, and begin building a believable alternative. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: Notice a trigger.** Think of a recent moment when you felt a strong emotional reaction or acted in a way that surprised you. Write down what happened in one or two plain sentences.

**Step 2: Find the thought.** Ask: *What was I telling myself in that moment?* Write the thought as it sounded. If it contains words like *always*, *never*, or *should*, underline them.

**Step 3: Name the belief.** Ask: *What deeper belief about myself, others, or the world would make that thought feel true?* Try to complete the sentence: *Deep down, I believe that...*

**Step 4: Trace its origin.** Ask: *Where did I learn this? Who said it, or showed it? How old was I?* Write down the first memory or image that comes.

**Step 5: Check the evidence.** Make two lists: *What supports this belief* and *What does not fit it.* Be fair to both.

**Step 6: Write a believable alternative.** Write a sentence that is kinder than the original and that you can honestly accept. Start with phrases like "I am learning that...", "Some of the time...", or "I can begin to...".

**Step 7: Choose a tiny action.** Pick one small action that matches the new sentence. Write it down and do it this week.

Remember that this is a process, not a single event. The old belief will probably return. When it does, you can meet it with the same curiosity.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which inherited belief from the list in this chapter produced the strongest reaction in you? What do you think it was protecting?

2. Whose voice do you hear when your inner critic speaks?
3. What did your family say, directly or indirectly, about needs, mistakes, and money?
4. What is one belief you hold that may have been true for your family's circumstances but may not be true for your life now?
5. What is one small action that would go against an old belief and give you new evidence?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Beliefs sit beneath behavior. Most were formed in childhood from repeated experience, and they feel like facts.

Beliefs are passed on through words, modeling, inference, and reinforcement. A child who explains an adult's behavior as being about themselves can carry the conclusion for decades.

Forcing the opposite thought rarely works. A believable alternative, supported by small actions, tends to work better.

You can treat a belief as a hypothesis, examine it with curiosity, and gradually collect new evidence.

*In the next chapter, we will turn to the emotional rules of a family, and look at how feelings were welcomed, ignored, or feared.*

## ELENA'S THREAD

That evening, Elena worked through the practice at her kitchen table. She wrote down the meeting. She wrote down the thought: *Wanting things out loud is greedy.* Under *Where did I learn this?*, she wrote, *Mom. The grocery store. "We don't need it."*

She wrote down the evidence. Under *What supports it*, she wrote, *Mom worked two jobs. We were short on money. Asking for things made her tired.* Under *What does not fit*, she sat for a while. Then she wrote, *Last year I asked for a raise and got it. My team likes it when I take the lead. Wanting the project is not taking something from someone.*

Her alternative came slowly: *I am learning that wanting something does not mean taking it from someone else.*

It did not feel true yet. It felt like a sentence in a foreign language. But it did not feel false either. At the bottom of the page, under *Tiny action*, she wrote: *Tell my manager I want the next lead role.*

She looked at it for a long time. Then she wrote a date beside it, three days away.

# CHAPTER 5
# THE EMOTIONAL RULES OF YOUR FAMILY



Sam's son, Jordan, came home from school with a scraped knee and a closed face.

"What happened, buddy?"

"Nothing."

"Looks like something happened."

Jordan, eight years old, shrugged. His chin was trembling, but his eyes were fixed on the floor with fierce attention. Sam felt a pull in his chest that he knew well: part tenderness, part panic. He wanted to hug his son. He also wanted to say, *Toughen up,* and the words were so close to his tongue that he could almost taste them.

He remembered the last time he came home from school with a scraped knee, thirty-three years earlier. His father had looked at the blood, looked at his face, and said, "Walk it off. You'll live." Sam had gone to the bathroom, run cold water over the cut, and cried quietly with the tap running so that no one could hear.

He had been seven. He had learned two things that day. The first was that his pain was an inconvenience. The second was that the way to deal with it was to hide it.

Now, in his own kitchen, with his own son, Sam knelt down. "That looks like it hurt," he said, as gently as he could. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

Jordan looked at him for a moment, surprised. Then his face crumpled, and he walked into his father's arms.

Sam held him, and felt something give way inside his own chest, something he had not known was clenched.

## EVERY FAMILY HAS AN EMOTIONAL CLIMATE

Families teach feelings the way they teach language, by immersion, repetition, and example. Long before a child can read, they have learned which emotions bring comfort and which bring withdrawal, which are welcomed and which are treated as problems.

You can think of this as the *emotional climate* of a family: the pattern of what is felt, what is shown, what is named, and what is kept hidden. In some homes the climate is warm and open, with feelings discussed and comforted. In others it is stormy, with emotions erupting unpredictably. In others it is frozen, with feelings quietly suppressed. Many families are a mixture, with different rules for different emotions, or for different people.

The climate you grew up in becomes your internal default. You may not remember choosing it. You may not even notice it until you step into a different climate, perhaps with a partner whose family handled feelings differently, and feel the difference.

## THE EMOTIONS FAMILIES STRUGGLE WITH MOST

Most families have some emotions they handle well and some they find difficult. The pattern is rarely random. It tends to follow what was permitted in earlier generations, and what happened to those who expressed what was not.

**Anger.** In some families, anger is the only permitted emotion, at least for certain people, and it can be frightening. In others, anger is forbidden, and people learn to swallow it, redirect it, or turn it against themselves. Neither pattern teaches how to feel anger safely.

**Sadness.** Many families treat sadness as something to fix quickly, with distraction, cheering up, or reassurance. Children who are told "Don't cry" or "It's not that bad" learn that sadness is unwelcome.

**Fear.** In families that value toughness, fear may be treated as weakness. Children learn to hide worry, to push through, or to become angry instead.

**Need and vulnerability.** Asking for help, comfort, or affection may be considered embarrassing, selfish, or dangerous. Children learn to need less, or to ask indirectly.

**Joy.** It may seem surprising, but in some families joy is difficult too. In households shaped by loss, happiness can feel dangerous, as if celebrating invites disaster. "Don't get your hopes up" is a common expression of this belief.

**Shame.** Though rarely named, shame is the quiet organizer of many family climates. It is the feeling behind "What will people think?", behind secrets, behind the instinct to hide.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN FEELINGS ARE NOT WELCOME

Children do not stop feeling because a feeling is unwelcome. They find other places to put it.

Some turn emotion inward, becoming quiet, anxious, or self-critical. Some turn it into the body, with headaches, stomachaches, or tension.

Some turn it into action, with anger, defiance, or overwork. Some turn it off, becoming numb or detached. Some learn to feel nothing and to say, "I'm fine," with a convincing smile.

Research on emotional suppression suggests that this strategy has costs. In a series of studies, James Gross and Oliver John found that people who habitually suppressed emotional expression reported less positive emotion, had poorer relationships, and were less well-liked by others than people who used strategies such as reappraisal, reconsidering the meaning of a situation (Gross & John, 2003). Suppression may help in the moment, but it does not make the feeling go away, and it can make connection harder.

There is also a cost to those who are not suppressed but flooded: children raised in homes where emotions erupt without warning may learn to expect danger whenever emotions rise. They may become hypervigilant, scanning for signs of rising tension, or they may become quick to explode themselves.

## THE POWER OF NAMING

If emotions that are unnamed tend to cause trouble, what helps? One of the simplest and best-supported answers is: *name the feeling*.

In a series of brain imaging studies, Matthew Lieberman and his colleagues found that putting feelings into words, a process they call *affect labeling*, was associated with reduced activity in the amygdala, a brain region involved in threat response, and with increased activity in regions of the prefrontal cortex involved in regulation (Lieberman et al., 2007). In simple terms, naming a feeling seems to calm the alarm.

This is why emotional vocabulary matters so much. Many people raised in emotionally quiet homes describe their inner life with a handful of words: *fine*, *stressed*, *tired*, *annoyed*. But there is a much wider world available. Consider the difference between "bad" and any of the following: disappointed, ashamed, lonely, overlooked, nervous, embarrassed, grieving, resentful, hopeful, relieved.

Precision matters because it tells you what the feeling needs. Loneliness calls for connection. Disappointment calls for acknowledgment. Fear calls for safety. Anger calls for a boundary. Shame calls for compassion. Without a name, all you know is that something is wrong.

## SHAME: THE HIDDEN RULE-KEEPER

Of all the emotions that move through families, shame deserves special attention, because it often guards the other rules.

Shame is the painful feeling that something is wrong with *me*, not just something I did, but who I am. It differs from guilt, which says "I did something wrong." Researchers June Tangney and Ronda Dearing, who have studied the two emotions extensively, found that guilt tends to motivate repair and apology, while shame tends to motivate hiding, defensiveness, or attack (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

Children are especially vulnerable to shame because they depend on caregivers for survival. When a parent is angry, withdrawn, or disappointed, a child often interprets this as meaning that they are bad or inadequate. Shame can also be passed down: a parent who feels ashamed of their own history may, without meaning to, communicate that some topics, feelings, or parts of the self are unacceptable.

Social pain seems to be genuinely painful. Neuroimaging research has found that social exclusion activates brain regions involved in the distress of physical pain (Eisenberger, Lieberman, & Williams, 2003). This may help explain why shame and rejection hurt so intensely, and why we work so hard to avoid them.

One of the most important steps in healing is learning to tell shame from guilt, and to answer shame not with more self-criticism but with understanding. We will return to this in Part III.

## THREE COMMON EMOTIONAL STYLES

Many families fall into one of three broad styles. Most real families mix them, but recognizing the pattern can be useful.

**The silent household.** Feelings are rarely discussed. People manage by staying calm, keeping busy, and avoiding difficult topics. Children raised here often become competent and self-reliant, and they may find it hard to know what they feel or to ask for comfort.

**The stormy household.** Emotions, especially anger, are intense and unpredictable. Children raised here may become watchful and quick to read moods, and may carry a lasting wariness about conflict, or a tendency to react strongly themselves.

**The performing household.** Certain emotions are displayed, usually positive ones, while others are hidden. "We're a happy family" may be the rule, and difficult feelings have no place. Children may become skilled at appearing fine while carrying quiet pain.

None of these styles is simply bad. Each has strengths: calm, passion, optimism. But each leaves gaps in emotional education that adults may need to fill later.

## EMOTIONS IN THE BODY

Feelings do not live only in thoughts. They live in the body, and many people who were taught to suppress emotion find that their body expresses what words do not.

Anger may feel like heat in the face, a clenched jaw, or tight hands. Fear may feel like a fluttering chest, a hollow stomach, or cold hands. Sadness may feel like heaviness, a lump in the throat, or an ache behind the eyes. Shame may feel like a sinking feeling, a desire to shrink, or a hot flush.

Learning to notice these signals is part of emotional awareness. It does not require interpretation, only attention. *Where in my body do I feel this? What is the sensation like? Does it change if I breathe into it?* Over

time, bodily awareness gives you earlier warning of what you are feeling, which is a crucial first step in choosing how to respond.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE EMOTIONAL RULES INVENTORY

This practice helps you identify the emotional climate you grew up in and begin to choose which rules you want to keep. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: List the emotions.** Write the following emotions across the top of a page: *anger, sadness, fear, joy, need, shame.* Leave space under each.

**Step 2: Recall the family response.** For each emotion, write what happened in your family when someone showed it. Think of your parents, your siblings, and yourself. Did people comfort, ignore, ridicule, punish, or change the subject? Write one or two sentences for each.

**Step 3: Find the rule.** For each emotion, write the unspoken rule that seemed to follow. For example: *Anger: it's dangerous, so hide it. Sadness: don't dwell. Need: don't ask.*

**Step 4: Notice your own pattern.** Ask: *When I feel this emotion today, what do I tend to do?* Compare it to the family rule. You may be surprised by how closely they match.

**Step 5: Choose one emotion to work with.** Pick the emotion that feels most difficult or most interesting. Write down one new response you could try when it appears: naming it, placing a hand on your chest, taking three slow breaths, telling someone safe.

**Step 6: Practice naming.** For the next seven days, once a day, pause and ask: *What am I feeling right now?* Write down the most precise word you can find. Notice where you feel it in your body.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which emotions were most welcome in your family? Which were least welcome?
2. What did your family do when someone cried, raged, or showed fear?
3. How do you respond today when you feel the emotion your family found hardest?
4. What is one emotion you would like to be able to feel and express more freely?
5. What would you want a child in your care to learn about feelings that you did not learn?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Every family has an emotional climate, and you absorbed it long before you could question it.

Feelings that are not welcome do not disappear. They go underground, into the body, into action, or into numbness.

Naming a feeling can help calm the alarm. Building an emotional vocabulary is one of the most useful skills you can develop.

Shame often guards the other family rules. Learning to tell shame from guilt, and to answer shame with understanding, is a central part of healing.

*In the next chapter, we will look at the roles, masks, and survival responses that families teach, and how they shape the way you protect yourself.*

## SAM'S THREAD

That night, after the kids were asleep, Sam sat on the edge of the bathtub with a notebook and tried the Emotional Rules Inventory.

Next to *Anger*, he wrote: *Everyone gets quiet. Dad explodes. I get blamed for making it worse.* Next to *Sadness*, he wrote: *Walk it off.* Next to *Fear*, he wrote: *Not allowed.* Next to *Need*, he wrote: *Never asked.*

He looked at the page for a long time. Then he turned back to the top and added a single line: *Today I knelt down and Jordan cried. Nothing bad happened.*

It seemed like a small thing to write. But he understood, sitting there, that he had just violated a rule that had governed his life for thirty-three years, and that the house was still standing.

# CHAPTER 6
# ROLES, MASKS, AND SURVIVAL RESPONSES



On a Friday afternoon, Nora Whitfield's phone buzzed with three messages in a row.

The first was from her sister, asking if she could cover a babysitting shift. The second was from a colleague, asking if she could "just quickly" review a spreadsheet before the weekend. The third was from her mother, asking whether Nora could drive her to a medical appointment on Monday morning.

Nora had planned to spend Saturday doing nothing. She had told herself she would sleep late, read a novel, and let the phone stay in a drawer. She felt exhausted in a way that sleep did not seem to fix.

She looked at the messages for a few seconds. Then she typed, *Of course!* to her sister, *Sure, send it over* to her colleague, and *No problem, Mom* to her mother. She put the phone down and felt, as she always did, a flicker of satisfaction, followed almost instantly by a wave of resentment so quiet that she barely noticed it.

That night she lay awake doing math: the babysitting, the spreadsheet, the appointment. She had never said no to any of them. She could not remember how it felt to want to.

*I'm just helpful,* she told herself. *It's just who I am.*

But the way she said it was less like a description and more like a defense.

## WHAT CHILDREN DO TO SURVIVE

When a child grows up in an environment that is stressful, unpredictable, or lacking in emotional support, the child adapts. This is not a choice. It is an automatic process, and it is brilliant in its way. The child learns what keeps the adults calm, what gets attention, what avoids punishment, and what brings a measure of safety, and gradually builds a whole way of being around those lessons.

We can think of these adaptations as operating on two levels. The first is *survival responses*, the fast, body-based reactions that happen when a threat is sensed. The second is *roles and masks*, the longer-term identities we build out of those responses. This chapter looks at both.

## THE FOUR SURVIVAL RESPONSES

You have probably heard of "fight or flight," the body's reaction to danger, first described by the physiologist Walter Cannon in the early twentieth century. Later work added a third response, freezing, and many clinicians now describe a fourth, often called *fawning*, popularized by the therapist Pete Walker in his work on complex trauma (Walker, 2013).

Each response is a different strategy for staying safe.

**Fight** is the attempt to protect oneself by confronting or controlling the threat. In adulthood, it may appear as irritability, argumentativeness, perfectionism, or a need to be in charge. It can feel like strength, and often is, but it can also push people away.

**Flight** is the attempt to protect oneself by escaping or staying ahead of the threat. In adulthood, it may appear as overwork, constant busyness, restlessness, avoidance, or leaving relationships when they become close. It can look like productivity, but it often leaves people exhausted and disconnected.

**Freeze** is the attempt to protect oneself by becoming still or disappearing. In adulthood, it may appear as indecision, numbness, procrastination, going blank under pressure, or feeling paralyzed. It can look like laziness, but it is more accurately a nervous system that has learned that stillness is safer than action.

**Fawn** is the attempt to protect oneself by pleasing, appeasing, or serving the threat. In adulthood, it may appear as people-pleasing, difficulty saying no, over-apologizing, or losing track of what one wants. It can look like kindness, and it often includes real kindness, but it comes at the cost of the self.

Most people use more than one, depending on the situation and the person. Many have a *default* response that appears first, and a *backup* that appears when the default does not work. Learning your pattern is a powerful step toward changing it.

## THE BODY TAKES THE LEAD

These responses are not decisions. They happen before thought, driven by the nervous system's rapid assessment of whether a situation feels safe.

Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory offers one influential account of how this works. It proposes that the autonomic nervous system moves between states of social engagement, mobilization, and shutdown in response to perceived safety and danger (Porges, 2011). The theory has

been widely used in trauma therapy, though some physiologists have questioned parts of its anatomical claims. For our purposes, what matters is the practical observation, supported by a great deal of clinical experience: when the body senses threat, it shifts into protective modes, and these modes are not under direct conscious control.

This explains something that confuses many people. *Why do I freeze in a meeting when I know the answer? Why do I snap at someone I love? Why can't I just say no?* The answer is that the response you are having is not coming from your thinking mind. It is coming from an older, faster system that learned long ago what keeps you safe.

It also explains why willpower alone usually fails. To change a survival response, you need to help the body feel safe, which is the focus of Part III.

## FROM RESPONSES TO ROLES

When a survival response is repeated, rewarded, and relied upon, it hardens into a role. The role gives a child a place in the family, and a way to belong.

The family therapists Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy and Geraldine Spark described how, in some families, children take on responsibilities that belong to adults, caring for siblings, soothing parents, or managing the household, a pattern they called *parentification* (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973). Such children are often praised for being mature, responsible, or "such a help," and their contribution is real. But they may also pay a price, growing up without room to be a child, and learning that their worth lies in what they do for others.

Nora, whom you met at the start of this chapter, is a classic example. She became essential at ten. The role worked, and it still does, but it was never really chosen.

## THE MASKS WE WEAR

Roles that persist into adulthood can feel like masks: public selves we show to the world, which protect us but also hide us. Here are some of the most common.

**The Caretaker** looks after everyone else, often before being asked. Beneath the mask is often a belief that their value lies in being needed, and that their own needs do not matter. The cost is exhaustion, resentment, and a deep loneliness: *no one takes care of me.*

**The Achiever** earns love through accomplishment. Beneath the mask is often a belief that worth must be proven, again and again. The cost is chronic pressure, fear of failure, and difficulty feeling that anything is enough.

**The Peacemaker** keeps everyone calm and smooths over conflict. Beneath the mask is often a belief that conflict is dangerous, and that their own feelings are less important than harmony. The cost is a loss of voice, and a quiet buildup of unspoken resentment.

**The Perfectionist** avoids criticism by leaving no room for error. Beneath the mask is often a belief that mistakes will lead to rejection. The cost is anxiety, procrastination, and a harsh inner critic.

**The Invisible One** avoids attention, demands nothing, and stays out of the way. Beneath the mask is often a belief that being noticed is dangerous or burdensome. The cost is a sense of not mattering, and difficulty receiving support.

**The Fortress** keeps everyone at a distance. Beneath the mask is often a belief that vulnerability leads to harm. The cost is isolation, and a longing for closeness that feels impossible to meet.

**The Entertainer** uses humor and charm to deflect pain. Beneath the mask is often a belief that people will like them only if they are light. The cost is a feeling of not being known.

You may recognize yourself in more than one. Masks are not diagnoses. They are descriptions of how a person learned to belong.

## THE MASK IS NOT THE ENEMY

It would be easy to read the above and conclude that you should get rid of your mask. That is not the goal, and it would not work.

The mask was built by a younger version of you who needed it. It helped you survive, belong, and perhaps even thrive. The caretaker's compassion is real. The achiever's drive has built real accomplishments. The peacemaker's sensitivity helps people feel safe. The fortress's independence has protected you from real hurt. The entertainer's humor has brought real joy.

The task is not to destroy the mask. It is to loosen its grip, so that you can choose when to wear it, and so that you have other options. A caretaker who can also receive care is not less caring. An achiever who can also rest is not less capable. A peacemaker who can also speak up is not less kind.

Think of the mask as a coat. It is useful in a storm. The trouble begins when you cannot take it off, even indoors, even with people who would welcome you without it.

## SIGNS YOUR OLD RESPONSE IS RUNNING

How can you tell when a survival response has taken over? Common signals include:

- A reaction that feels bigger or faster than the situation seems to warrant.
- A sudden rush of heat, tightness, or numbness.
- A feeling of being *a lot younger* than you are.
- Thinking in all-or-nothing terms: *always, never, everyone, no one.*
- Doing something automatically that you later regret or feel puzzled about.
- A sense of urgency to fix, escape, defend, or please.

When you notice these signals, you have caught the response in the act. That moment of noticing, small as it is, is the beginning of choice.

## THE GAP BETWEEN TRIGGER AND RESPONSE

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl is often credited with the idea that between stimulus and response there is a space, and in that space lies our freedom. Whether or not he said it in those words, the idea captures something that modern neuroscience would endorse: although survival responses are fast, they are not entirely fixed. With practice, it is possible to widen the gap.

This does not happen by suppressing the response. It happens through awareness, regulation, and a tolerable amount of discomfort. You notice the urge, you let your body settle a little, and you choose from the wider set of options that are available when you are not in survival mode.

In the beginning, the gap is tiny, perhaps only a breath. That is enough. Every time you use it, you make it a little wider.

## HEALING PRACTICE: MAPPING YOUR MASK AND YOUR RESPONSE

This practice helps you identify your most common survival responses and masks, and begin to build choice. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: Identify your default response.** Look at the descriptions of fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. Which appears first for you when you feel threatened or stressed? Which is your backup? Write them down, with an example of each from the past month.

**Step 2: Identify your masks.** From the list of masks, choose the two or three that feel most familiar. For each, write one sentence about how it helped you in your family.

**Step 3: Name the cost.** For each mask, complete the sentence: *The cost of this mask in my life today is...*

**Step 4: Name the gift.** For each mask, complete the sentence: *The strength inside this mask is...*

**Step 5: Find the signal.** Write three early signals that tell you your response is running: a bodily sensation, a thought, an urge.

**Step 6: Write a pause.** Choose one simple pause you will practice when you notice a signal. For example: *Put my feet on the floor and take one slow breath. Silently say, "This is my old response." Then choose.*

**Step 7: Practice in small moments.** For one week, practice your pause at least once a day, in low-stakes situations: a request from a coworker, a question from a family member, a moment of disagreement.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which survival response, fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, do you recognize most clearly in yourself? What is your backup?
2. What role did you play in your family? What did you receive for playing it?
3. What strengths are hidden inside your mask?
4. What does your mask cost you today?
5. What would it feel like to take the mask off, even for a few minutes, with someone safe?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Survival responses are fast, automatic, and often learned in childhood. They are not character flaws.

Responses harden into roles and masks, which protect us and also hide us.

The goal is not to destroy the mask. It is to loosen it, so that you can choose when to wear it.

Between a trigger and a response there is a small gap. Awareness and practice can make it wider.

*In the next chapter, we will see how these patterns enter your closest relationships, and how the past shapes the way you love.*

## NORA'S THREAD

The following Friday, Nora received another request. This time it was from a colleague who wanted her to cover a presentation on Monday.

She felt the familiar tug: the rush of warmth in her chest, the *Of course!* forming on her lips. She felt her feet on the floor, remembered the pause, and took one slow breath.

"Let me check my calendar and get back to you," she said.

It was not a no. It was a gap, about thirty seconds wide. But in that gap she noticed something she had not noticed in years: she did not want to do it. She was tired. She had plans that were not plans, a quiet weekend she had been looking forward to.

She said no the next day, in an email she rewrote four times. The colleague replied, "No worries, thanks for letting me know."

That was it. The earth did not open. Nora sat looking at the reply for a long time, feeling a mixture of relief, grief, and astonishment that something she had feared for nineteen years had cost her nothing.

# CHAPTER 7
# HOW THE PAST WALKS INTO YOUR RELATIONSHIPS



The argument started, as most of them did, over something small.

Elena's husband, Mateo, had forgotten to tell her that his brother was coming to dinner on Saturday. It was a minor lapse, and the kind of thing that happens in any busy household. But Elena felt a coldness settle over her face. She said, "It's fine," in a voice that was not fine, and began loading the dishwasher with great precision.

Mateo came into the kitchen. "I'm sorry. I should have told you. Are you upset?"

"I said it's fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"I'm *fine*, Mateo."

He stood there for a moment, searching her face. Then, as he always did when she shut down, he did the thing that made everything worse. He pressed. "Can we just talk about it? I hate when you go quiet. It makes me feel like I did something terrible."

Elena felt her throat tighten. The more he moved toward her, the more she felt the urge to disappear. She wanted to say, *Please give me space,* but what came out was a flat, "I can't do this right now," and she walked to the bedroom and closed the door.

On the other side of it, Mateo stood in the hallway, hurt and bewildered. On this side, Elena sat on the edge of the bed with her heart racing, aware, in some distant way, that she had just reenacted a scene she had learned at six years old: *When voices rise, vanish.*

Neither of them was the villain. They were two people, each trying to feel safe in the only way they knew.

## THE RELATIONSHIP IS WHERE IT SHOWS

Of all the places where family patterns appear, relationships may be the most revealing. We bring our entire emotional history into the room with us, who we trust, how we ask, what we fear, how we handle disagreement, what we expect from closeness. And because intimate relationships activate our deepest needs, they tend to activate our oldest strategies.

This is why people who feel they have made great progress in other areas of life sometimes find that a partner, a close friend, or a parent can undo it in a sentence. It is not because they have not changed. It is because close relationships touch the earliest layers.

## ATTACHMENT IN ADULTHOOD

In Chapter 2 we met attachment theory, which describes how early caregiving shapes expectations about closeness. In the 1980s, researchers Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver proposed that the same patterns visible in infants could be seen in adult romantic relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Later work by Kim Bartholomew and Leonard Horowitz described four adult patterns based on two dimensions: how one views oneself, as worthy or unworthy of love, and how one views others, as reliable or unreliable (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).

| Pattern | Inner experience | Common behavior |
|---|---|---|
| **Secure** | "I am worthy, and others are generally reliable." | Comfortable with closeness and independence; able to ask for and give support. |
| **Anxious** | "I may not be enough, and I fear being left." | Seeks reassurance, worries about the relationship, sensitive to signs of distance. |
| **Avoidant** | "I must rely on myself, and closeness is risky." | Values independence, withdraws under stress, uncomfortable with emotional demands. |
| **Fearful (disorganized)** | "I want closeness, and I fear it." | Alternates between seeking and pushing away; difficulty trusting. |

It is important to treat these as tendencies, not diagnoses. Most people show a mixture, depending on the relationship and the stress level. A person may be secure with friends and anxious with a partner, or avoidant at work and clingy at home. The patterns also change over time, with experience and with effort.

## YOUR STYLE HAS A HISTORY

If you recognize yourself in one of the insecure patterns, it is useful to ask what experience might have taught it.

A person with an anxious pattern may have grown up with caregivers who were unpredictable, sometimes warm and sometimes absent, so that closeness had to be monitored and pursued. Reassurance became a necessity because it was never reliably there.

A person with an avoidant pattern may have grown up with caregivers who were uncomfortable with emotions, or who responded to needs with discouragement or irritation. The child learned to need less, and to handle things alone.

A person with a fearful pattern may have grown up with caregivers who were both a source of comfort and a source of fear, so that wanting closeness and fearing it became one confused response.

None of these is a flaw. Each is an intelligent adaptation to a particular environment. The difficulty arises when the old strategy is applied to a new relationship where it no longer fits.

## THE DANCE THAT TWO PEOPLE DO

Relationships are not made by individuals alone. They are made by the interaction between two people's patterns, and some combinations produce painful, repetitive cycles.

One of the most common is the *pursue-withdraw cycle*. One partner, often anxious, feels disconnected and moves toward the other, asking, pushing, or protesting. The other, often avoidant, feels overwhelmed and moves away, becoming quiet or leaving the room. The pursuit intensifies the withdrawal, and the withdrawal intensifies the pursuit. Each person is protecting themselves, and each is hurting the other.

Researchers who study couples have described this pattern for decades. John Gottman's work found that "stonewalling," the shutting down of one partner during conflict, is a powerful predictor of

relationship distress (Gottman, 1994). Sue Johnson, who developed emotionally focused therapy, describes such cycles as a kind of dance in which both partners are reaching for safety and missing each other (Johnson, 2004).

Elena and Mateo are in this dance. Mateo pursues because silence feels like abandonment. Elena withdraws because pursuit feels like pressure. Neither of them wants to hurt the other. Neither knows another step.

The most hopeful part of this finding is that, once you can see the cycle, you can begin to treat it as the enemy rather than each other. *We are caught in our pattern again* is a very different sentence than *You are doing this to me.*

## WHY WE CHOOSE WHAT WE KNOW

Many people notice that they seem to choose the same kind of partner, friend, or boss again and again: someone critical, someone unavailable, someone who needs rescuing. It can feel like bad luck, or like a personal failing.

A more compassionate explanation is that we are drawn to the familiar. What is familiar feels like home, even when home was painful. A person who grew up trying to earn the love of a distant parent may feel a particular electricity with someone distant. A person who grew up as the family's caretaker may feel most "useful" with someone who needs fixing. A person who learned that love comes with criticism may find calm, kind people strangely uninteresting.

This does not mean that you are doomed to repeat your history. It means that your sense of attraction and your sense of comfort were trained by it, and that when you begin to choose differently, it may feel strange before it feels good. A calm, steady relationship can feel boring, or even unsafe, to a nervous system accustomed to intensity. That discomfort is not a sign that something is wrong. It may be a sign that something is changing.

## REPAIR: THE SKILL THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING

If there is one idea to take from this chapter, it is this: *the health of a relationship depends less on whether conflict occurs than on whether repair follows.*

Gottman's research found that successful couples were distinguished not by avoiding conflict, but by their ability to make and accept "repair attempts," small gestures that deescalate tension: a touch of humor, an apology, a pause, a "Let's start again" (Gottman, 1998). The same insight appears in the research on parents and infants described in Chapter 2: relationships grow stronger through rupture and repair.

Repair can be simple. It might sound like:

- "I got defensive. I'm sorry. Can I try again?"
- "I need a break, and I will come back in twenty minutes."
- "I can see this matters to you. Tell me more."
- "I'm not angry at you. I'm overwhelmed."

Many people raised in families where repair never occurred do not know how to do this. Arguments ended in silence, and life continued as though nothing had happened. If this is you, repair may feel awkward at first. That is normal. It is a skill, and like any skill, it improves with practice.

## EARNED SECURITY

If you recognize an insecure pattern in yourself, you may worry that it is permanent. The research gives reason for hope. Attachment researchers have identified people who describe difficult early experiences and who nevertheless show secure patterns in adulthood, a state called *earned security*. Studies suggest that such individuals can have adult relationships that look like those of people who were securely attached from the start (Roisman, Padron, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2002).

What seems to help is a combination of things: at least one steady, safe relationship, whether a partner, a friend, a mentor, or a therapist; the ability to reflect on one's history with understanding rather than denial or overwhelm; and repeated experiences of being treated reliably and kindly. Each of these can be built.

In other words, security is not only something you are given. It is also something you can grow.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE RELATIONSHIP PATTERN MAP

This practice helps you see how your family patterns appear in your relationships, and identify one step you can change. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: Choose three relationships.** These can be romantic, friendships, family relationships, or work relationships. Choose ones that matter to you.

**Step 2: Describe the pattern.** For each, write one sentence about a *recurring* difficulty. For example: *When we disagree, I withdraw. I overgive and then feel resentful. I wait to be asked instead of saying what I want.*

**Step 3: Look across the three.** Notice what is similar. Is there a role you play in all of them? A fear that appears each time? A move you make, such as pleasing, withdrawing, controlling, or testing?

**Step 4: Connect to your family.** Ask: *Where did I learn this move? Who in my family did it, or what did I see or experience that made it seem necessary?*

**Step 5: Write the cycle.** For one relationship, write the cycle step by step: *What triggers me. What I do. What the other person does in response. How I feel. How they feel.* Draw it as a circle if that helps.

**Step 6: Find the exit.** Look at your cycle and choose one point where you could do something different. It might be asking for a pause, saying what you feel instead of withdrawing, or offering a repair. Write it down.

**Step 7: Share it, if safe.** If you have a trusted partner or friend, consider sharing the cycle with them, using language like: *I have noticed a pattern in how I react, and I would like to try something different. Can I tell you about it?*

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Which attachment pattern, secure, anxious, avoidant, or fearful, do you most recognize in yourself? Does it differ across relationships?
2. What does your body do when you feel disconnected from someone close?
3. What kinds of people or situations feel familiar and comfortable, even when they are painful?
4. How was conflict repaired in your family, if at all? What do you want your own repair to look like?
5. What is one small step you could take to move a close relationship toward more safety?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Close relationships activate our earliest strategies. Seeing this is not a failure of progress. It is part of the map.

Attachment patterns are tendencies, not labels. They can shift with experience, reflection, and safe relationships.

Relationship cycles, such as pursue and withdraw, involve two people protecting themselves. Naming the cycle helps you face it together.

Repair matters more than perfection. The ability to return after conflict is the foundation of a healthy relationship.

*In Part III, we turn from recognizing patterns to healing them. We begin with the foundation of all change: helping your body feel safe.*

## ELENA'S THREAD

The next morning, Elena found Mateo in the kitchen, making coffee. He looked tired.

"Can I try something?" she said.

He turned. She could see the caution in his face.

"Last night, I went quiet because I get overwhelmed. It isn't about you. When someone moves toward me and I'm upset, it feels like I have to disappear." She paused. Her voice shook slightly. "I'm trying to learn to say, *I need a few minutes, and I'll be back.* Instead of just leaving."

Mateo put down the coffee. For a moment he said nothing. Then he said, "That would help me a lot. When you disappear, I think I did something terrible."

"I know," she said. "You didn't."

They stood there for a moment, a little awkward, a little relieved. It was not a fix. It was only a small agreement, the beginning of a different dance. But Elena noticed something that surprised her: her shoulders had come down from her ears.

# PART III: THE HEALING PATH

## CHAPTER 8
## SAFETY FIRST: CALMING THE BODY




Sam was in the driveway, gripping the steering wheel, when he realized he had been sitting there for eleven minutes.

The day had been bad. A shipment was late, a driver had called in sick, and his manager had asked, in front of the whole floor, why the numbers were off. Sam had nodded and said "I'm on it" in a calm voice. Then he had gone to the loading dock, found a pallet jack in the wrong place, and kicked a cardboard box so hard that it split open.

Now he was home, and the garage door was closed, and he could hear his kids on the other side of the wall. His jaw ached. His hands

were shaking slightly. His heart was pounding as though he had been running.

He knew exactly what would happen if he walked in like this. One small thing, a backpack on the floor or a loud question, and the voice would come out again.

He had read about the voice. He understood where it came from. He had even written it down on the back of an envelope. But understanding, he realized, was no help at all when his body was this activated. His mind was a quiet, sensible passenger in a car that was already moving.

He took his hands off the wheel, put them on his knees, and tried to remember what the book had said about the first step.

## WHY WE BEGIN WITH THE BODY

It may seem strange to start the healing path with the body rather than with insight. After four chapters of understanding, you might expect the next step to be deeper analysis, more memories, more connection-making.

But there is a reason for the order. Understanding works best when the nervous system is calm. When the body is in alarm, the parts of the brain that handle reflection, perspective, and choice become less available. This is true for everyone, and especially for people whose early environments taught the body to stay on guard.

The trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk has emphasized that for people with histories of overwhelming stress, insight alone is often insufficient, because the body continues to respond as though the danger were still present (van der Kolk, 2014). Real change involves helping the body learn that it is safe, through experience and not only through ideas.

For that reason, everything in this part begins with safety. Before you grieve, before you reparent, before you rewrite beliefs, you build the capacity to stay steady enough to do those things.

## THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

The psychiatrist Daniel Siegel introduced a useful image for understanding emotional regulation: the *window of tolerance* (Siegel, 1999). It describes the zone of arousal within which a person can experience emotions, even strong ones, and still think, speak, and act in ways that feel like their own.

Inside the window, you can feel anger, sadness, or fear without being overwhelmed. You can listen, reflect, and choose. You may feel uncomfortable, but you are still *you*.

Outside the window, things change in one of two directions.

**Above the window: hyperarousal.** The nervous system is flooded. Heart racing, shallow breathing, muscle tension, rapid thoughts, irritability, panic, or rage. This is the fight-or-flight zone. People above the window may snap, argue, flee, or feel as though they are about to lose control.

**Below the window: hypoarousal.** The nervous system has shut down. Numbness, heaviness, disconnection, fogginess, exhaustion, or a sense of unreality. This is the freeze or collapse zone. People below the window may go blank, withdraw, or feel unable to move or speak.

The size of a person's window is shaped by many factors, including temperament, sleep, health, current stress, and, importantly, early experience. People who grew up in safe, responsive environments usually have wider windows. People who grew up with chronic stress or unpredictability often have narrower ones, and find themselves outside it more often.

This is not a character flaw. It is physiology, and it can change.

## RECOGNIZING WHERE YOU ARE

The first skill of regulation is simply noticing. Many people have spent years ignoring the body's signals, and they may need practice in reading them.

Here are some questions you can ask yourself, several times a day:

- *Where is my body right now? Tight, loose, heavy, buzzing?*
- *How is my breathing: fast, shallow, held, steady?*
- *What is my jaw doing? My shoulders? My hands?*
- *Is my mind racing, blank, or reasonably clear?*
- *If I rated my activation from one to ten, where am I?*

You may find it helpful to use a simple scale. Let one be sleepy and flat, five be steady and present, and ten be flooded and overwhelmed. Most of us function best between about three and seven. When you notice yourself at an eight or above, or at a two or below, you have found a signal that your window is being exceeded.

## TOOLS FOR COMING BACK

Once you notice that you are outside your window, there are simple tools that can help you return. None of them requires belief or special equipment. All of them work best when practiced *before* you need them.

**Slow breathing.** Slow, steady breathing, especially with a longer exhale than inhale, appears to influence the body's stress systems. A systematic review of studies on slow breathing found associations with increased heart rate variability and reductions in anxiety and stress (Zaccaro et al., 2018). A simple pattern is to breathe in through the nose for four counts and out through the mouth for six. Repeat five or six times. If counting feels stressful, simply make the exhale a little longer than the inhale.

**Grounding through the senses.** Bringing attention to the present moment through the senses can interrupt the loop of alarm. A common technique is to name five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. The point is not the exact numbers. It is to let your attention rest on the actual room you are in.

**Feeling your contact with the world.** Press your feet into the floor. Feel the chair under you. Notice the weight of your body being held. This reminds the nervous system that you are supported.

**Orienting.** Slowly turn your head and look around the room, letting your eyes land on whatever they find. Notice that there is no threat here. This simple movement tells your body that it is safe to scan and soften.

**Movement.** Walking, stretching, shaking out your hands, or pushing against a wall can help discharge energy when you are above the window. Gentle movement can also help when you are below it, bringing you back into your body.

**Warmth and comfort.** A warm drink, a soft blanket, a hand placed over your heart or on your arm. Many people find that gentle, warm self-touch calms the body, and it requires no explanation.

**Naming.** As discussed in Chapter 5, labeling what you feel can reduce the intensity of the feeling. Silently saying *This is anger* or *This is fear* may help.

**Other people.** Perhaps the most powerful regulator of all is the presence of a calm, caring person. Humans co-regulate; we settle one another. If it is safe to do so, simply being near someone steady, or hearing their voice, can calm the nervous system.

## WHAT WORKS ABOVE THE WINDOW, AND WHAT WORKS BELOW

Different states call for different tools. A technique that calms someone who is flooded may not help someone who is shut down, and vice versa.

**If you are above the window** (racing, flooded, furious, panicked), the goal is to slow down and discharge. Longer exhales, movement, stepping away, putting words to what you feel, and orienting to the room tend to help.

**If you are below the window** (numb, foggy, heavy, disconnected), the goal is to gently activate and reconnect. Gentle movement, cool air on the face, listening to music, naming objects in the room, and contact with another person tend to help.

It takes experimentation to find what works for you. Treat this as a laboratory rather than a test.

## A WORD ABOUT NOT FIXING THINGS IN THE HEAT

One of the most useful lessons in regulation is also one of the simplest: *do not try to resolve conflict or make big decisions when you are outside your window.*

When the body is flooded, the thinking brain is less available, and what you say or do is more likely to reflect the old pattern than your current values. This is why a break is so powerful. A break is not avoidance. It is a way of returning to a state where you can actually do what you intend.

A useful rule: *If I'm above a seven, I take a break.* You can say, "I want to talk about this, and I need twenty minutes to settle first. I'll come back." Then actually return. A break that is never followed by a return becomes avoidance, and defeats its purpose.

## WIDENING THE WINDOW OVER TIME

The window of tolerance is not fixed. With practice, supportive relationships, adequate sleep, regular movement, and sometimes therapy, it can widen. Things that once pushed you out of it may begin to feel more manageable.

Research on the plasticity of the brain suggests that repeated experiences can reshape neural patterns throughout life (Davidson & McEwen, 2012). Mindfulness practice, for example, has been associated with measurable changes in brain regions related to attention and emotion regulation (Hölzel et al., 2011). These findings do not mean

that any single practice is a cure. They do suggest that the nervous system is not set in stone.

The best approach is steady and small. A few minutes of breathing each day, a short walk, a consistent bedtime, a weekly conversation with someone safe. Over weeks and months, such practices accumulate.

## SAFETY IS NOT ONLY INTERNAL

Regulation is not only about techniques. It is also about the conditions of your life. A body that is chronically sleep-deprived, overworked, isolated, or living in an unsafe environment will find regulation very difficult, no matter how many breathing exercises it practices.

It is worth asking: *Where in my life am I unsafe, depleted, or constantly activated? What is one change, however small, that would help?* That might mean setting a limit at work, fixing your sleep schedule, reducing news and social media, spending time with a calmer person, or, if you are in a situation that is actually dangerous, seeking help to leave it.

If you are experiencing violence or serious threat in your relationships, your safety comes first. Please reach out to a local emergency number, a domestic violence hotline, or another trusted resource.

## WHEN TO SEEK EXTRA SUPPORT

While the practices in this chapter are generally safe, some people find that attending to the body brings up intense reactions, such as flashbacks, panic, or a sense of unreality. If this happens, you do not need to push through. It may be a sign that you would benefit from the support of a trauma-informed professional.

Other signs that extra support may help include nightmares or flashbacks, difficulty functioning in daily life, use of substances to cope, persistent numbness, or thoughts of harming yourself. These are

not signs of weakness. They are signs that your system has been carrying a great deal and deserves help.

## HEALING PRACTICE: BUILD YOUR CALM PLAN

This practice helps you create a personal plan for the moments when you are outside your window. You will need a notebook, and you may want to copy the final plan onto a card or into your phone.

**Step 1: Learn your signals.** Write down the three earliest signs that tell you you are leaving your window: for example, *jaw tight, hands hot, thoughts racing.* Include one sign for the "above" side and one for the "below" side, if you experience both.

**Step 2: Rate your levels.** Using a scale of one to ten, write what level you tend to be at when you notice a signal, and at what level you would like to act. A good target for stepping in is around seven on the high side, or three on the low side.

**Step 3: Choose three tools.** From the list in this chapter, choose three that appeal to you: one for the body (such as breathing or movement), one for the senses (such as grounding), and one for connection (such as a call to a friend or a pet nearby).

**Step 4: Write the script.** Write a short script you can say to yourself or others. For example: *"I'm getting activated. I'm going to take a break and come back in twenty minutes."*

**Step 5: Prepare your people.** If you share a home or work closely with someone, consider telling them about your plan ahead of time, so that a break is not misunderstood. You might say, "When I say I need a break, it means I want to come back to this when I'm calmer."

**Step 6: Practice when you are calm.** Spend five minutes a day practicing one of your tools when you are in the middle of your window, not only in a crisis. Skills practiced in calm are far easier to reach in stress.

**Step 7: Review.** After a hard moment, ask: *What helped? What would I change?* Adjust your plan.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What are the earliest signals in your body that you are leaving your window of tolerance?
2. Are you more often above the window (flooded) or below it (numb)? What does that tell you?
3. Which tool from this chapter feels most helpful? Which feels uncomfortable?
4. Where in your life are you chronically depleted or activated? What is one change you could make?
5. Who is a calm, steady person in your life? How might you let their presence support you?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Understanding works best when the body feels safe. That is why healing begins with regulation.

The window of tolerance describes the zone in which you can feel and still think. Above it is flooding; below it is shutdown.

Simple tools, slow breathing, grounding, movement, naming, and connection, help you return to the window. They work best when practiced in advance.

Do not resolve conflict or make big decisions outside the window. Take a break, and return.

The window can widen over time. If you need extra support, seeking it is part of the work.

*In the next chapter, we will begin the tender work of grieving what was missing and learning to give yourself what you needed.*

## SAM'S THREAD

In the driveway, with the engine off, Sam tried a breath. In for four. Out for six. His shoulders did not come down at first. He tried again, and then a third time, feeling the seat press against his back and his feet against the floor mat.

He looked at the garage wall and counted five things he could see: an oil stain, a broken rake, a stack of paint cans, a bicycle tire, a spider web in the corner.

After about four minutes, his hands stopped shaking. The anger had not vanished. But it was no longer driving. He was in the car, and the car had stopped.

He walked into the house. His wife, Amara, looked up from the kitchen, and he said, quietly, "Rough day. I need ten minutes, and then I'm all yours." She nodded, a little surprised.

He washed his face. He stood for a moment in the bathroom, looking at the person in the mirror, and said, to no one, "That's twice."

It was not a victory. But it was the first time in his life he had walked through that door on his own terms.

# CHAPTER 9
# GRIEVING WHAT WAS MISSING AND REPARENTING YOURSELF



The photograph was in a drawer Nora had not opened in years.

It showed her at age ten, in a yellow raincoat, standing on the front step of the old apartment. She was holding a lunch box in one hand and her youngest brother's hand in the other. She was smiling at the camera, but not quite with her eyes. Her shoulders were squared, as though she were carrying something that the camera could not see.

Nora held it for a long time. She had seen the photograph before, and had always thought, *What a cute little girl.* Now she saw something different. She saw a child who was already tired.

She thought of what she would have said to a ten-year-old at her office, or to a niece. She would have said, *You should not have to do this. You should be playing. Somebody should be taking care of you.*

The sentence arrived so clearly, and so completely, that she put the photograph down and pressed her hand against her mouth. Something she had been holding for nineteen years, a pressure behind the sternum that she had mistaken for ordinary tiredness, shifted for the first time.

She was not sad about her mother. Her mother had worked herself to the bone. She was not angry at her siblings, who had been babies. She was grieving something harder to name: a childhood that had been quietly traded away, for good reasons, by people who had no better options.

*Nobody did anything wrong,* she thought. *And I still needed something.*

## THE NEEDS THAT WENT UNMET

Every child arrives with needs. Some are obvious: food, shelter, safety. Others are quieter but equally important: to be seen, to be comforted, to be delighted in, to have limits that are firm and kind, to play, to make mistakes without disaster, to be allowed to be a child.

When these needs are met reliably enough, a child builds an inner sense that the world is safe, that they matter, and that feelings can be survived. When they are not, the child adapts, and the adaptation becomes a part of who they are. But the unmet need does not disappear. It waits.

In adulthood, the unmet need may show up as a vague ache, a repeated pattern, or a hunger that nothing seems to satisfy. It may show up as a longing to be taken care of that feels embarrassing. It may show up in the way you are drawn to certain people, or react to certain words. It may even show up as a numbness where the need would otherwise be.

Here are some questions that can help you name what you needed:

- *What did I need most when I was upset or afraid?*
- *What did I need when I succeeded, or failed?*
- *What did I need to hear?*
- *What did I need someone to notice?*
- *What did I need to be allowed to do, or not do?*

The answers are not accusations. They are information. A child who needed comfort and did not receive it was not asking for too much. They were asking for something every child asks for.

## UNDERSTANDING WITHOUT EXCUSING, AND WITHOUT BLAMING

Thinking about unmet needs often triggers a wave of conflicting thoughts. *My parents did their best. They were struggling. It wasn't that bad. Other people had it worse.*

These thoughts may all be true. They are also, very often, ways to avoid feeling the loss. The psychologist Kenneth Doka coined the term *disenfranchised grief* for grief that is not openly acknowledged or socially supported (Doka, 1989). Grieving the childhood you did not have is often exactly that. There is no funeral, no casseroles, no moment when anyone says, "I'm sorry for what you lost."

But the loss is real. And the grief that accompanies it is not a betrayal of your family. It is a way of honoring the importance of what you needed.

You can hold three things at once:

*What happened was real.*

*The people involved were doing their best with what they had.*

*I am allowed to grieve what I did not receive.*

None of these cancels the others.

## THE SHAPE OF GRIEF

Grief does not move in a straight line, and it does not look the same for everyone. For the loss of a childhood, it can take many forms.

**Sadness.** A deep, quiet ache, sometimes accompanied by tears and sometimes not.

**Anger.** Resentment at the unfairness of what happened, at the people who did not protect or notice, or at the world. Anger is often an important part of grief. It signals that something mattered, and that a boundary was crossed. It is also frightening to many people, especially those raised in homes where anger was dangerous. If this is you, remember that feeling anger is different from acting on it.

**Longing.** A yearning for what might have been: the parent who would have listened, the home that would have felt safe, the childhood that would have been light.

**Guilt.** A sense that grieving is disloyal. *They did so much for me. How can I be sad?*

**Relief.** Sometimes, when grief is finally allowed, there is a loosening, as though something that was clenched has relaxed.

**Numbness.** A temporary pause. Numbness can be protective. It may signal that you need rest before feeling more.

The writer and therapist Pauline Boss developed the idea of *ambiguous loss*: loss that lacks clarity or closure, such as the loss of a parent who is physically present but emotionally unavailable (Boss, 1999). Many adults who grew up with emotionally distant, preoccupied, or unpredictable caregivers will recognize it. It is a loss without a funeral, and it can be hard to grieve for that reason.

Let grief come in its own time, and in its own form. It is not a task to complete. It is a process to allow.

## THE CHILD WITHIN

Many people find it helpful to think of the part of themselves that carries the unmet need as a younger self, a child who is still, in some sense, waiting. This idea appears in various forms across psychotherapy, in what is sometimes called *inner child* work.

It is worth being clear about what this means and what it does not. It is a metaphor, not a literal second person inside you. Therapists working in different traditions have described similar ideas: Richard Schwartz's Internal Family Systems model describes "parts" of the self, including young, wounded ones (Schwartz, 1995), and schema therapy describes a "vulnerable child mode," a state in which early feelings of fear, loneliness, or shame are reactivated (Young, Klosko, & Weishaar, 2003).

Research on these specific approaches is still developing, and no single model has all the answers. But the underlying idea, that early feelings and needs can remain active in adulthood and respond to compassionate attention, is consistent with a good deal of clinical experience and with research on attachment and self-compassion. If the metaphor helps you, use it. If it does not, you can simply think of it as caring for the feelings and needs that arose early in your life.

## WHAT REPARENTING MEANS

*Reparenting* is the practice of giving yourself, in adulthood, some of what you needed and did not receive in childhood. It does not mean pretending to be a child, and it does not replace real relationships. It means learning to treat yourself with the attention, warmth, and consistency that a caring adult would offer a child.

In practice, reparenting is often surprisingly simple.

**Notice.** Pay attention to what you feel and need. Many of us were trained not to. Asking, *What do I need right now?* is itself an act of reparenting.

**Respond.** When you notice a need, meet it when you can. If you are tired, rest. If you are lonely, reach out. If you are scared, seek comfort. If you are overwhelmed, take a break.

**Speak kindly.** Pay attention to how you talk to yourself. Would you say those words to a ten-year-old who was struggling? What would you say instead?

**Be consistent.** A child learns safety through reliability. Keeping small promises to yourself, such as going to bed on time or taking the walk you said you would, builds trust.

**Set limits with love.** Children also need guidance. Reparenting includes gentle structure: sleep, nourishment, boundaries, and accountability, offered with warmth instead of contempt.

**Allow play.** Many people who were required to be responsible too early have forgotten how to play. Play is not frivolous. It is how children, and adults, restore themselves.

## THE ROLE OF WRITING

One of the most accessible tools for this work is writing. In a series of studies, James Pennebaker found that people who wrote about emotionally significant experiences for a few days showed improvements in several measures of well-being compared with those who wrote about neutral topics (Pennebaker, 1997). Later research has found that writing is not equally helpful for everyone, and that it works best when it involves finding meaning rather than merely repeating distress. But as a way to give shape to grief and care, writing can be powerful.

A letter to your younger self is one of the most commonly used forms. It allows you to speak, as the adult you are now, to the child you were, to acknowledge what happened, to offer what was missing, and to say what you wish someone had said.

## PACING AND SAFETY

Grief and reparenting work can stir strong feelings. It is better to go slowly and often than to go deep and fast. A few guidelines:

- **Use the tools from Chapter 8.** Before and after any practice, check your window. If you notice yourself becoming flooded or numb, stop and use your calm plan.
- **Limit the time.** Twenty to thirty minutes is often enough. You can always return.
- **Plan something gentle for afterward.** A walk, a warm drink, a call with a friend, a favorite show.
- **Choose a safe place.** Do this work somewhere you feel secure, at a time when you will not be interrupted.
- **Stop if needed.** If memories feel overwhelming, or if you notice flashbacks, dissociation, or distress that does not ease, stop and seek support from a trauma-informed professional.

If your childhood included serious abuse or violence, please consider doing this work with a qualified therapist rather than alone.

## HEALING PRACTICE: A LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF

This practice invites you to write a letter from the adult you are now to the child you were. Set aside thirty minutes. Have a glass of water nearby and, if you wish, a photograph of yourself at the age you are writing to.

**Step 1: Choose an age.** Pick an age when you remember needing comfort, understanding, or protection. It does not have to be the most painful time. Choose one that feels manageable.

**Step 2: Check your window.** Take three slow breaths. Notice where your body is. If you feel steady, begin. If not, try again another day.

**Step 3: Begin the letter.** Write, "Dear [your name] at [age]," and describe what you see: where they are, what they look like, what they are carrying.

**Step 4: Acknowledge.** Tell your younger self that you see what was happening. Name the feelings you imagine they had, and let them know those feelings made sense.

**Step 5: Offer what was missing.** Write what you wish someone had said or done: *"You didn't deserve to be alone with that." "It wasn't your job." "You're allowed to be a kid." "I'm here now."*

**Step 6: Make a promise.** Write one small, realistic promise you will keep to yourself from now on. For example: *"I will notice when you're tired." "I will let you rest."*

**Step 7: Close gently.** End with words of care, and sign it with your name. Read it aloud, slowly, if you feel able.

**Step 8: Care for yourself afterward.** Do something gentle. If strong feelings remain, use your calm plan, or reach out to someone safe.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What did you most need as a child that you did not receive? Can you name it without minimizing it?
2. How do you speak to yourself when you are struggling? How would you speak to a child in the same situation?
3. Which kind of grief, sadness, anger, longing, guilt, relief, or numbness, feels most present for you right now?
4. What is one small act of reparenting you could offer yourself this week?
5. What would it mean to allow yourself to grieve without needing to blame anyone?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Every child has needs, and every childhood leaves some unmet. Acknowledging this is not blame. It is honesty.

Grief for what was missing is often unrecognized, but it is real. It can take many forms, and it deserves time.

Reparenting means giving yourself some of what you needed: attention, comfort, structure, play, and kindness.

Go slowly. Use your regulation tools, and seek support if the work feels too heavy to hold alone.

*In the next chapter, we turn to the inner voice itself, and look at how to rewrite the story you tell about yourself.*

## NORA'S THREAD

Nora wrote the letter on a rainy Saturday, at her kitchen table, with the photograph propped against the sugar bowl.

*Dear Nora at ten,* she began. *You are standing on the step with a lunch box and your brother's hand. You look tired. You are carrying more than you should.*

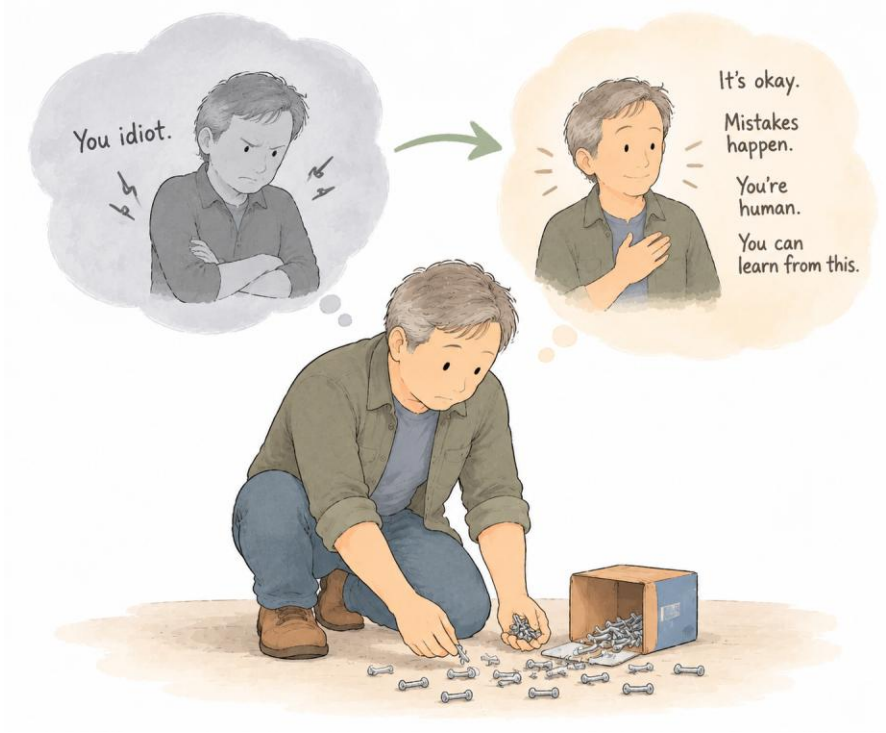
She stopped. Her eyes were wet, and she let them be. She wrote, *You didn't do anything wrong. It wasn't your job to hold everything together. You were a child, and you were amazing, and you should have been allowed to be a kid.*

She wrote for twenty minutes. At the end she wrote, *I'm sorry nobody told you this. I'm telling you now. I'm going to start letting you rest.*

She read it once, quietly. Then she went outside and stood on the porch in the rain for a while, with no umbrella and no task, letting it fall on her face.

On Monday morning she took a lunch break for the first time in six months. She sat on a bench in the sun and did nothing, and noticed that the pressure behind her sternum had loosened, just slightly, like a hand opening.

# CHAPTER 10
# REWRITING THE STORY: SELF-TALK AND SELF-COMPASSION




Walt dropped the box of screws in the middle of the hardware store aisle.

They went everywhere, hundreds of small silver pieces skittering across the concrete, rolling under shelves. A teenager in an orange apron looked over and began walking toward him.

"I've got it," Walt said sharply. He crouched down, knees complaining, and began gathering screws into his palm.

*You idiot,* said a voice in his head. *Fifty-eight years old and you can't carry a box. Everybody's looking. Look at you.*

It was not a new voice. It had been narrating his mistakes for as long as he could remember, in a tone that was dry, contemptuous, and unmistakably his father's. He had always assumed it was simply *him*, the honest part, the part that kept him in line.

But kneeling there among the screws, with the teenager standing awkwardly over him, Walt had a strange thought. He tried to imagine saying those words to someone else. To the teenager. To his sister, Carol, on one of her worst days. To a child who had dropped a box.

He could not imagine it. The words were too cruel to say to anyone.

"Sir, it's really no problem," the teenager said, kneeling down beside him. "Happens all the time."

Walt looked at him. He felt his throat tighten, absurdly, over a box of screws. "Thanks," he said. "I appreciate it."

They picked up the rest in silence. And somewhere in the middle of it, Walt realized that he had been talking to himself, every day, for fifty years, in a way he would never speak to another living person.

## THE VOICE IN YOUR HEAD

Almost everyone has an inner critic. It is the internal voice that comments on your performance, appearance, choices, and worth. For some people it is a mild background murmur. For others it is a relentless prosecutor.

Where does it come from? In many cases, it began as someone else's voice. A parent's sharp remark, a teacher's disappointment, a sibling's mockery, the tone of a household in which mistakes were punished. A child cannot dismiss such messages as the opinions of imperfect people. They are the most important people in the child's world, and their words are internalized as truth.

Over time, the voice becomes so familiar that it feels like one's own mind. But if you listen carefully, you can often hear its origin: the phrases, the cadence, the contempt. It sounds like someone you know.

The inner critic is also, in its own way, trying to help. It often operates on a simple theory: *If I criticize myself first and hardest, I will avoid being criticized by others, I will do better, and I will stay safe.* It is the voice of a frightened protector. The problem is that the method does not work. Harsh self-criticism rarely produces lasting improvement, and it tends to produce shame, anxiety, and avoidance.

## ACCOUNTABILITY IS NOT CONTEMPT

Many people fear that if they stop criticizing themselves, they will become lazy, selfish, or irresponsible. They believe that harshness is what keeps them honest.

It is worth separating two things that are often confused: *accountability* and *contempt*.

Accountability says: *I made a mistake. It affected someone. I want to understand it, repair it if I can, and do better.* It is specific, forward-looking, and motivated by care.

Contempt says: *I am a failure. I always do this. What is wrong with me?* It is global, backward-looking, and motivated by fear.

Accountability supports growth. Contempt tends to shut it down. When we feel contempt for ourselves, we become defensive, we hide mistakes, and we avoid risk. When we can hold our mistakes with some kindness, we can look at them honestly and learn.

## WHAT SELF-COMPASSION ACTUALLY IS

The psychologist Kristin Neff, whose work has shaped this field, defines self-compassion as treating oneself with the same kindness and care we would offer a good friend. She describes three connected components (Neff, 2003):

**Self-kindness versus self-judgment.** Responding to your own pain and failure with understanding and warmth, rather than harsh criticism.

**Common humanity versus isolation.** Recognizing that suffering and imperfection are part of the shared human experience, rather than feeling that you alone are flawed.

**Mindfulness versus over-identification.** Holding painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness, neither suppressing them nor being swept away by them.

Notice how these three address the experience of shame. Shame says, *I am uniquely defective and must hide.* Self-compassion answers: *This is painful, and I am not alone, and I can treat myself gently.*

## WHAT SELF-COMPASSION IS NOT

Because the word can be misunderstood, it helps to say what self-compassion does not mean.

**It is not self-pity.** Self-pity says, *Poor me, no one has it as bad as I do.* Self-compassion recognizes that everyone suffers.

**It is not weakness.** It takes courage to turn toward your own pain instead of numbing or attacking it.

**It is not self-indulgence.** It does not mean avoiding responsibility or doing whatever feels good. A good parent can be both loving and firm.

**It is not lowering your standards.** Research suggests the opposite. In a series of studies, Juliana Breines and Serena Chen found that people who were led to take a self-compassionate view of a failure were *more* motivated to improve and spent more time studying afterward than those who focused on boosting their self-esteem or received no intervention (Breines & Chen, 2012).

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SUGGESTS

Studies have found that self-compassion is associated with lower levels of anxiety and depression, greater resilience, and healthier relationships. A randomized trial of an eight-week Mindful Self-

Compassion program found increases in self-compassion, mindfulness, and well-being, along with decreases in depression, anxiety, and stress (Neff & Germer, 2013).

These findings do not mean that self-compassion solves everything. But they do suggest that it is a skill that can be learned, and that learning it is associated with real benefits.

It is also worth noting that for many people who grew up with harsh or unpredictable caregiving, self-compassion feels uncomfortable at first. Kindness toward the self may feel foreign, undeserved, or even threatening. If this happens, it does not mean that you are doing it wrong. It may mean that you are encountering a part of yourself that has never been treated kindly. Go slowly, and start with small, neutral phrases.

## CHANGING THE WAY YOU TALK TO YOURSELF

One practical way to shift your inner dialogue is to change your *perspective* on it. Research by Ethan Kross and colleagues found that people who referred to themselves by name or in the third person when reflecting on a stressful experience showed less emotional reactivity and a calmer approach than those who used "I" (Kross et al., 2014). The small bit of psychological distance seems to help.

For example, instead of "Why am I such a mess?", you might say, "Walt, you're having a hard moment. What do you need right now?" It may feel odd at first. It often helps.

Another approach is to ask yourself: *What would I say to a friend?* Most people can find compassionate words for others much more easily than for themselves. Borrow those words.

A third approach is to name the critic as a separate voice: *"There's my inner critic again."* This is not a trick to silence it. It is a way of stepping back, so that you are the one listening to the voice instead of being the voice.

## REWRITING THE STORY

Beyond moment-to-moment self-talk, there is a larger story each of us tells about our life. It contains a plot and a cast of characters, and it shapes how we understand the past and imagine the future.

Many people who grew up in difficult families carry a story that goes something like: *I was a problem. I was too much. I was never enough. Things were bad, and I am damaged.* Or, *I was just a survivor, and nothing good could come from it.*

The psychologist Dan McAdams has studied the life stories that people tell, and found that people who construct narratives with themes of growth, redemption, and agency tend to report higher well-being than those whose stories emphasize contamination and powerlessness (McAdams, 2006). Research by Pennebaker and Seagal found that the benefits of expressive writing seem to be greatest for those whose writing evolves toward a coherent story, one that makes sense of what happened and includes insight (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Rewriting your story does not mean denying what happened or pretending it was fine. It means telling the whole truth, including what was hard, what you survived, what you learned, what strengths you developed, and what you are choosing now. It means shifting the narrator from a harsh judge to a compassionate witness.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE COMPASSIONATE REPLY

This practice has two parts. The first is a short compassion break for use in the moment. The second is a longer writing exercise for when you have time. You will need a notebook for part two.

**Part One: The Self-Compassion Break**

**Step 1: Notice.** When you are in a hard moment, pause and say silently, *This is a moment of struggle.* Naming it is the first step. You might also say, *This hurts.*

**Step 2: Remember you are not alone.** Say, *Struggle is part of being human. Other people feel this too.* This reminds you that you are not uniquely flawed.

**Step 3: Offer kindness.** Place a hand on your chest or arm if that feels comfortable. Say a kind phrase, such as *May I be gentle with myself*, or *I'm doing the best I can*, or *What do I need right now?*

**Part Two: The Written Reply**

**Step 1: Write down the critic.** Write one thing your inner critic says to you often, exactly as it sounds.

**Step 2: Find its origin.** Next to it, write whose voice it resembles and when you first heard something like it.

**Step 3: Thank it.** Write a sentence to the critic: *Thank you for trying to protect me. I know you were afraid.* It may feel odd. Many people find it softens the voice.

**Step 4: Write what a good friend would say.** Imagine a friend telling you the same thing about themselves. Write what you would say to them. Be specific, warm, and honest.

**Step 5: Rewrite the sentence.** Turn the critic's statement into one that has accountability and kindness. For example: *"You idiot" becomes "That was clumsy. It happens. Let's clean it up."*

**Step 6: Read it aloud.** If you can, read the compassionate version to yourself in your own voice. Notice how it feels. If it feels false, soften it until it feels bearable.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Whose voice do you hear when you criticize yourself? What does it say?
2. What do you believe would happen if you stopped criticizing yourself so harshly?
3. How does your inner critic try to protect you? What does it fear?

4. What would you say to a friend who had made the same mistake you are criticizing yourself for?
5. If you could rewrite one sentence in the story you tell about your life, which sentence would it be, and how would you change it?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

The inner critic often began as someone else's voice, and it is usually trying to protect you, even if it does so badly.

Accountability is specific and forward-looking. Contempt is global and backward-looking. Only one of them supports change.

Self-compassion is not weakness or self-pity. It is a learnable skill, with three parts: kindness, common humanity, and mindfulness.

You can change how you talk to yourself, and you can change the story you tell about your life, without denying what happened.

*In the next part, we turn outward, to boundaries, difficult conversations, parenting, support, and the legacy you hope to build.*

## WALT'S THREAD

That evening, Walt wrote a note and stuck it on the bathroom mirror. It said: *Would I say this to Carol?*

It was a clumsy tool, but it worked. The next time the voice started, when he burned the toast, he stopped, looked at the note, and said aloud, to the empty kitchen, "Walt, it's toast. Make another one."

He felt foolish. He also felt, for a moment, lighter.

Over the following weeks, the note became a habit. He did not stop hearing the critic, but he began to hear it as something separate from himself, a voice with a history. He even started, tentatively, to feel sorry for the boy who had first heard it.

One night, he took out the legal pad and, beneath the old line, *Not talking*, added a new one: *I was a kid who learned to be hard because nobody*

*showed me another way.* He looked at it for a long time. It did not feel like an excuse. It felt like the first true thing he had written in years.

# PART IV: CHANGING THE CYCLE

## CHAPTER 11
## BOUNDARIES, HARD CONVERSATIONS, AND WHEN FAMILY CANNOT CHANGE




Walt rehearsed the phone call for nine days.

He wrote a script on the legal pad. He crossed it out. He wrote another. In the shower, in the car, at the sink, he practiced the first sentence. *Carol, it's Walt. I'd like to talk, if you're willing.* It sounded stiff and unlike him, but it was the best he could do.

On the tenth day, a Sunday afternoon, he sat on the edge of his bed with the phone in his hand, took four slow breaths, and called.

It rang five times. Then a voice, wary and slightly older than he remembered, said, "Hello?"

"Carol, it's Walt."

Silence. He could hear a television in the background, and then the sound of it being muted.

"I'd like to talk," he said, "if you're willing. I'm not calling to argue about Mom. I'm calling because I've been thinking about us, and I've realized that I was never very good at this kind of thing. Talking, I mean. I'd like to try."

The silence was long. He felt his heart pounding, and he put his free hand flat on the bed, feeling the weight of his own arm.

"That's not what I expected," Carol said finally. Her voice was shaking, just a little. "I don't know if I'm ready to talk about everything. But I'm glad you called."

It was not forgiveness, and it was not a solution. But it was the first sentence, in six years, that either of them had spoken without a weapon in it.

## BOUNDARIES: WHAT THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY ARE NOT

Boundaries are among the most misunderstood tools in the language of healing. Many people hear the word and imagine walls, ultimatums, or a way of controlling other people. In reality, a healthy boundary is something quite different.

A boundary is a statement about *what you will do* to take care of yourself, not a demand that someone else change. "Please stop yelling" is a request. "If the conversation turns to yelling, I will end the call" is a boundary. The first depends on the other person. The second depends only on you.

Boundaries serve several purposes. They protect your time, energy, and emotional wellbeing. They clarify what you are and are not

available for. And, perhaps counterintuitively, they often make closeness *safer*, because both people know where they stand. Resentment tends to grow in the absence of clear limits, and honest limits can prevent it.

Boundaries can be flexible or firm, depending on the situation. Some are about time ("I can stay for two hours"). Some are about topics ("I'm not discussing my weight"). Some are about behavior ("I won't be spoken to that way"). Some are about emotional space ("I need a few days before I can talk about this").

Writer and therapist Nedra Glover Tawwab, who has written widely about boundaries in families and relationships, emphasizes that boundaries are about self-respect and clear communication, and that the right ones vary with the person and the relationship (Tawwab, 2021).

## WHY BOUNDARIES ARE SO HARD IN FAMILIES

For many people, setting a boundary with family triggers a storm of discomfort: guilt, fear, a sense of betrayal, a sinking feeling that you are doing something terribly wrong. There are reasons.

**Old rules.** In many families, the unspoken rules include "Family comes first," "Don't make waves," or "Your needs are less important than the family's peace." A boundary breaks these rules. The guilt you feel is often not evidence that you are doing something wrong. It is the sound of an old rule being broken.

**Role expectations.** If you have been the caretaker, the peacemaker, or the strong one, your family has built a system around your role. When you change, they may feel the shift, and resist it.

**Fear of loss.** Many people fear that if they set a limit, the relationship will end. For people who grew up with conditional love, this fear can be intense.

**Lack of practice.** If you never saw healthy boundaries modeled, you may not know what they look like.

Family therapists have long observed that when one member of a family changes, the system tends to push back, attempting to restore the old balance (Bowen, 1978). This is not necessarily malicious. It is how systems work. Expect some resistance, and expect that it may increase before it settles.

## WRITING A BOUNDARY

A good boundary has four parts: it is clear, it is specific, it states what *you* will do, and it is delivered with as much calm and kindness as you can manage.

Here is a simple structure:

1. **Name the situation.** *When the conversation turns to criticism of my parenting...*
2. **State the boundary.** *...I will end the conversation.*
3. **Add care if it is true.** *I love you and I want us to have a good relationship.*
4. **Follow through.** If it happens, you do what you said you would do, calmly and without punishment.

The follow-through matters most. A boundary that is stated and not enforced teaches others that it can be ignored. A boundary that is enforced calmly, even when it is uncomfortable, becomes believable.

Examples of boundary sentences:

- *"I'm not able to talk about that topic. Let's talk about something else."*
- *"I can stay for two hours. After that, I need to head home."*
- *"I'm not available after nine at night. I'll call you tomorrow."*
- *"I understand you see it differently. My decision is the same."*

You do not need to justify, over-explain, or argue. A boundary is not a debate.

## DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Boundaries often require conversation, and some conversations are very hard: the ones about old hurts, about patterns in the family, about what was and was not given. Before you begin, it is worth asking two questions.

**Is this the right conversation?** Not every hard conversation needs to happen. Some may not be safe. Some may not be productive. Some may be better held in a letter you do not send, or in the privacy of therapy. It is legitimate to decide that a conversation is not worth having, or that it is not safe to have.

**What do I hope for?** Be clear about your purpose. Do you want to be understood? To repair? To set a limit? To say something that has gone unsaid? A clear purpose helps you stay focused when emotions rise, and helps you decide what outcome you can accept.

A useful rule: *Do not enter the conversation needing a particular response.* You can hope for acknowledgment, apology, or change. But if your peace depends on the other person's reaction, you are handing them a great deal of power. Aim to say what is true and what you need, and to remain steady whatever they say.

## A STRUCTURE FOR HONEST COMMUNICATION

Many couples therapists and communication researchers recommend a simple structure for hard conversations. Marshall Rosenberg's model of nonviolent communication, for example, suggests four parts: observation, feeling, need, and request (Rosenberg, 2003).

**Observation.** Describe what happened in neutral, factual terms. *When you said that I was too sensitive at dinner...*

**Feeling.** Say what you felt. *...I felt hurt and embarrassed.*

**Need.** Say what need was underneath the feeling. *I need to feel respected when I share something.*

**Request.** Ask for something specific and doable. *Would you be willing to listen without commenting next time?*

Notice what the structure avoids: blame, labeling, generalizing ("You always..."), and mind-reading. It speaks from your own experience, which is hard to dispute, and it ends with something the other person can actually do.

A few additional tips:

- **Choose a good time.** Not during a meal, an argument, or a holiday. Ask, "Is this a good time to talk?"
- **Start soft.** The first thirty seconds often set the tone for the whole conversation.
- **Listen too.** Allow the other person to respond. Reflect what you hear: "It sounds like you felt criticized."
- **Take breaks.** If either of you becomes flooded, pause and return later.
- **Expect imperfection.** The goal is not a perfect conversation. It is a more honest one.

## WHEN FAMILY CANNOT OR WILL NOT CHANGE

Sometimes you do everything well, with clarity, calm, and care, and the other person does not respond. They deny, minimize, attack, or simply carry on as before. This is one of the hardest realities of this work.

It helps to remember that people can only give what they have the capacity to give. A parent who never learned to talk about feelings may be unable to do so, even when they love you. A parent who is defensive about their own history may be unable to hear yours. This does not mean you were wrong to speak. It means that you have learned something about the limits of this relationship.

**Acceptance is not approval.** To accept a person's limits is not to agree with what they did, to pretend it did not hurt, or to stop caring. It is to see them clearly, and to stop waiting for a different response.

**Choosing your level of contact.** Relationships exist on a spectrum. At one end is close and frequent contact. At the other is none. In between there are many options: shorter visits, scheduled calls, meeting in public, limiting certain topics, communicating through writing. The right level depends on safety, respect, and what you can give without losing yourself. It may also change over time.

**When distance is necessary.** In situations involving abuse, ongoing harm, or serious disrespect, distance may be essential. You do not owe anyone access to you. Ending or limiting contact is a significant decision, and it is wise to make it with support, from a therapist or a trusted person, because it can bring grief, guilt, and complicated feelings alongside relief.

## GRIEVING THE FAMILY YOU NEEDED

When family cannot change, a kind of grief often follows. It is grief for the parent, the sibling, or the relationship you hoped for, even while the person is still alive. As discussed in Chapter 9, this has sometimes been described as ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999).

This grief deserves to be acknowledged. Some people find it helpful to write a letter they do not send, to create a small ritual, or to talk with someone who understands. Others find that it helps to turn some of the energy toward building the kind of connection they need elsewhere.

## BUILDING CHOSEN FAMILY

Many people who cannot find what they need in their family of origin build it elsewhere, with friends, mentors, partners, communities, or groups. Sometimes called *chosen family*, these are relationships marked by consistency, respect, reciprocity, and safety.

They do not replace where you come from. They can, however, provide experiences of being accepted and cared for that rewrite what you expect from closeness. As we have seen, steady, safe relationships

are one of the main ways that people develop earned security (Roisman et al., 2002).

Building chosen family takes time and risk. It starts with small steps: showing up, being honest, accepting care, and offering it. It also takes patience with yourself, because trust that was damaged early often rebuilds slowly.

## HEALING PRACTICE: ONE BOUNDARY, ONE CONVERSATION

This practice helps you prepare for one boundary or one hard conversation. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: Choose.** Pick one relationship and one issue. Start with something manageable rather than the hardest thing in your life.

**Step 2: Clarify your purpose.** Write: *What do I hope for? What outcome could I accept, even if it is not the one I want?*

**Step 3: Write your boundary or message.** Use the structures in this chapter. Write one boundary sentence, or a short message with observation, feeling, need, and request.

**Step 4: Anticipate the response.** Write the three most likely reactions, and how you would respond to each calmly.

**Step 5: Plan your regulation.** Write what you will do if you start to flood: a breath, a pause, a sentence like "I need a few minutes."

**Step 6: Rehearse.** Say the words aloud, alone or with a trusted friend. Practice until they feel steady.

**Step 7: Plan your aftercare.** Decide what you will do afterward: a walk, a call, a quiet evening. Expect to feel unsettled.

**Step 8: Do it, or decide not to.** Both are legitimate. If you do, notice what you did well, regardless of the outcome.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. In your family, what happened when someone set a limit or disagreed? How does that affect you now?
2. Where in your life do you most need a clearer boundary? What stops you?
3. What do you feel in your body when you imagine setting that boundary?
4. What would it mean to accept someone's limits without giving up on your own needs?
5. Who are the people, inside or outside your family, who offer the kind of connection you want more of?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

A boundary describes what you will do to take care of yourself. It is not a demand that someone else change.

Guilt after setting a boundary often signals that an old rule is being broken, not that you are doing something wrong.

Hard conversations work best with a clear purpose, a calm start, and a simple structure. Not every conversation needs to happen.

When family cannot change, you can accept their limits, choose your level of contact, grieve, and build connection elsewhere.

*In the next chapter, we turn to those who care for children, and to the work of raising them differently.*

## WALT'S THREAD

Carol and Walt talked for fourteen minutes that first call. It was awkward and stilted. Twice they started to argue, and twice Walt said, "I need a minute," and breathed, and came back.

At the end, Carol said, "Maybe we could have coffee. Somewhere neutral."

"I'd like that," Walt said.

He hung up and sat on the edge of the bed with the phone in his hand. His shoulders were aching from tension he had not noticed. He did not feel triumphant. He felt, mostly, tired and a little shy, like a man who had walked through a door that had been closed so long he had forgotten it was a door.

He did not know whether the coffee would go well. He did not know whether Carol would forgive him, or whether he would be able to forgive himself. But as he put the phone away, he noticed that the old, flat voice in his head was quiet, and that in its place was something unfamiliar and a little frightening: hope.

# CHAPTER 12
# BREAKING THE CYCLE AS A PARENT




It happened again on a Saturday morning, over something small.

Maya, now five and a half, had decided to pour her own cereal. The box tipped, and a landslide of flakes hit the counter, the floor, and the dog. Sam, who had slept badly, was standing at the coffee machine with his back to her. He heard the crash, and the old surge climbed his spine, hot and fast.

"Maya, what did I tell you about—"

He stopped. He had turned around, and he saw her face. She had gone completely still. Her hands were hovering in the air, and her eyes were enormous and fixed on him, the way a small animal watches a shape in the dark.

For one second, Sam saw himself from outside: a large man in a doorway, voice raised, a child frozen at a counter. He saw, with terrible clarity, his own father. And he saw Maya, who was not afraid of cereal, but of him.

He breathed out slowly, and put down his mug. He crouched to her level.

"I raised my voice," he said. "That wasn't okay. You didn't do anything wrong. It was an accident, and I got frustrated, and that's my job to handle, not yours."

Maya blinked. After a moment, in a very small voice, she said, "Are you still mad?"

"I'm not mad at you," he said. "I was surprised, and I let it come out too loud. I'm sorry. Do you want to help me clean up?"

She nodded. They swept the cereal together, and the dog, delighted, cleaned up the rest.

Later, while Maya was watching cartoons, Sam sat at the kitchen table and put his head in his hands. Not in despair, exactly. In something closer to astonishment. He had just done something that no one had ever done for him.

He had repaired.

## WHY PARENTING WAKES THE PAST

For many people, becoming a parent, or caring for any child, is the moment when family history becomes impossible to ignore. A child's crying, defiance, neediness, or fear can touch the oldest layers of your own experience. You may find yourself saying words you heard as a child, or feeling a rush of emotion far greater than the moment seems to call for. You may find yourself caught between the parent you swore not to be and the parent you are afraid you are becoming.

This is not a sign that you are failing. It is a sign that you are human, and that parenting is a uniquely intense form of relationship.

Psychiatrists Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell, in their book *Parenting from the Inside Out*, argue that the most powerful predictor of how we parent is not the techniques we learn, but how well we have made sense of our own childhood (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). This echoes the research on attachment we explored in Chapter 2: it is not how hard a parent's early life was, but how well it has been understood, that most shapes what is passed on.

And it echoes Fraiberg's "ghosts in the nursery" (Fraiberg et al., 1975). The ghosts are not villains. They are unfinished business. And as every chapter of this book has tried to show, unfinished business can be finished.

This chapter is written for parents, but it is also for grandparents, aunts and uncles, teachers, coaches, foster carers, and mentors, anyone who plays a role in a child's life. And if there are no children in your life, you may find that much of it applies to the child within you, whom Chapter 9 invited you to care for.

## WHAT CHILDREN NEED

Children do not need perfect adults. The pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott introduced the idea of the "good-enough" mother: someone who is attentive and responsive most of the time, and who allows small, tolerable failures that help a child learn to cope (Winnicott, 1953). Perfection, he suggested, would actually be unhelpful. A child needs an adult who is real.

What children do need is reasonably consistent:

- **Safety**, both physical and emotional: an adult who is not a source of fear.
- **Attunement**: an adult who notices what the child feels and needs, and responds.
- **Warmth**: affection, delight, and the sense of being wanted.
- **Structure**: clear, predictable limits, set firmly and kindly.

- **Repair**: an adult who returns after a rupture and makes things right.
- **Permission to feel**: the freedom to have all emotions, with guidance about what to do with them.

The developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind described a style of parenting she called *authoritative*, which combines high warmth with clear, consistent expectations. Children raised this way tended to show better social and emotional outcomes than those raised by parents who were either harsh and controlling or permissive and unstructured (Baumrind, 1966). The takeaway is that warmth and limits are not opposites. Children need both.

## THE SWING TO THE OTHER EXTREME

Many people who grew up with anger or harshness are so determined not to repeat it that they swing to the opposite extreme. They avoid all conflict, give in to every demand, or cannot tolerate their child's distress. They may feel terrified of saying no, or of seeing disappointment in their child's face.

This is understandable, and it is also a form of the same pattern. A parent who cannot tolerate their child's anger may be reacting to their own history of dangerous anger. A parent who cannot bear to set limits may be avoiding the conflict they feared as a child.

The goal is not to become the opposite of your parent. It is to become your own parent, one who can hold both a loving yes and a loving no, who can tolerate a child's feelings without fixing or fleeing them, and who can stay steady when things are hard.

## WHEN THE GHOST ARRIVES

Certain moments are especially likely to activate the past: a child's tantrum, a defiant "No!", a refusal to listen, a spilled drink, a hit, a lie. You may notice your body responding before your mind has a chance:

heat in the face, a clenched jaw, a pounding heart, an urge to shout, withdraw, or give in.

This is your survival response, the one you met in Chapter 6, doing its job. The question is what you do in the gap.

Here is a simple sequence that many parents find helpful, drawing on the tools from Chapter 8:

**1. Notice.** Catch the early signal in your body.

**2. Pause.** Take one slow breath, longer on the exhale. Drop your shoulders. Plant your feet.

**3. Name.** Silently say, *This is my old response.* Or, *My body thinks this is danger.* This helps you separate the moment from the past.

**4. Remember.** Remind yourself: *My child is having a hard time. They are not giving me a hard time.*

**5. Choose.** Ask: *What does my child need right now? What do I want to teach?* Then respond, with a limit and with warmth.

**6. Step away if you must.** If you are too activated to be safe or kind, say, "I need a minute," and take it in a safe place. Return as soon as you can.

None of this has to be done perfectly. Even a half-completed pause is an improvement. Over time, you will find that the gap grows.

## CO-REGULATION: LENDING CALM

Young children cannot calm themselves. They borrow calm from the adults around them. This process, called *co-regulation*, is one of the most important gifts a parent can give.

When a child is distressed and a parent stays steady, the child's nervous system gradually learns that distress can be survived. When a parent becomes distressed in response, the child's alarm intensifies. This is why your own regulation matters so much. It is not about

hiding feelings. It is about offering a calm presence that a child can lean on.

You do not need to be perfectly calm. A parent who says, in a steady voice, "I'm getting upset, and I'm going to take a breath," teaches a child something powerful: that big feelings can be named and handled.

## RUPTURE AND REPAIR

As we saw in Chapters 2 and 7, relationships are not built on the absence of rupture, but on repair. Studies of caregivers and infants suggest that mismatches and missteps are a normal part of even healthy relationships, and that the repair of those ruptures supports the child's developing sense of security (Tronick, 1989).

This is perhaps the most hopeful idea in parenting. You will make mistakes. You will yell, withdraw, say the wrong thing, or miss something important. What matters is what happens next.

A good repair has several parts:

1. **Wait until you are calm.** A repair offered in a flooded state may only add pressure.
2. **Name what happened.** *"I yelled at you. That was too loud."*
3. **Take responsibility without excuses.** *"That was my choice, and it wasn't okay."* Avoid "I yelled because you..."
4. **Acknowledge the child's experience.** *"I think it scared you."*
5. **Reassure.** *"It wasn't your fault. I love you."*
6. **Say what you will try.** *"Next time I'll take a breath before I talk."*
7. **Reconnect.** A hug, a shared activity, a few minutes of attention.

For young children, keep it short and concrete. For older children and teenagers, listen more than you talk. Be prepared for them to be angry, and let them be. Your task is not to be forgiven instantly. It is to show that relationships can survive mistakes.

## HELPING CHILDREN WITH FEELINGS

If your own family was silent or stormy about emotions, you may have a lot to learn about how to help a child with theirs. The research offers a clear direction.

John Gottman and colleagues, studying how parents respond to children's emotions, found that parents who acted as "emotion coaches," noticing emotions, treating them as opportunities for connection, listening with empathy, naming feelings, and helping children problem-solve, tended to have children with better emotional regulation and social skills (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996).

In everyday terms, this looks like:

- **Noticing**: *"You look disappointed."*
- **Welcoming**: *"It's okay to feel that."*
- **Naming**: *"I think you might be feeling embarrassed."*
- **Listening**: allowing the child to describe the feeling in their own words.
- **Setting limits on behavior, not feeling**: *"You can be angry. You cannot hit."*
- **Problem-solving together**, when the feeling has settled.

If this feels unnatural, that is not a problem. You may be learning a language that no one taught you. Practice with small moments, such as a dropped ice cream, a lost game, or a disappointment about the weather, before the bigger ones.

## WONDERING ABOUT YOUR CHILD'S MIND

A related skill that researchers call *mentalization* or *reflective functioning* is the ability to wonder about what is going on inside another person, and to see behavior as an expression of feelings, needs, and thoughts. Parents who are able to do this, to ask *What might my child be feeling? What is this behavior trying to tell me?*, tend to have children who develop more secure attachments (Fonagy, Gergely, Jurist, & Target, 2002; Slade, 2005).

In the heat of the moment, the question might be: *What is behind this?* A child who throws a toy may be tired, hungry, overwhelmed, or frightened. A teenager who slams a door may be ashamed or hurt. Seeing the behavior as communication does not mean letting it go unaddressed. It means responding to the need under it, as well as to the behavior itself.

## TELLING CHILDREN ABOUT YOUR FAMILY

At some point, you may wonder how much to tell children about your own history, or the family's. There is no single answer, but a few principles can help.

**Share age-appropriately.** Young children need simple, reassuring statements. Older children and teenagers can handle more complexity.

**Share strengths along with struggles.** As the research on family narratives suggests, children benefit from stories of both difficulty and resilience (Duke et al., 2008). "Your great-grandmother came here with nothing and worked very hard. It was hard, and she was brave" is very different from silence.

**Do not make your child your confidant.** Children should not be burdened with adult trauma, or asked to take care of a parent's feelings. Seek adult support for the heavier parts of your story.

**Be willing to say, "That's a topic for when you're older."** It is better to be honest about what you are not ready to share than to deny that anything happened.

## BEING GENTLE WITH YOURSELF

Parents who are working to break a cycle often carry an enormous burden of guilt. Every raised voice, every lost temper, every moment of withdrawal can feel like proof of failure.

It is not. It is evidence of a human being doing difficult work. The question is not whether you will make mistakes, but whether you will repair, learn, and keep going.

Here too, self-compassion is essential. Shame does not make anyone a better parent. It makes people defensive, or avoidant, or exhausted. Kindness toward yourself, the kind you are learning to offer, is one of the greatest gifts you can give your children, because they learn what self-treatment looks like by watching you.

If you are struggling, seek support. Parenting is hard, and it was never meant to be done alone. A trusted friend, a parent group, a counselor, a pediatrician, or a family therapist can help.

## HEALING PRACTICE: THE PAUSE AND REPAIR PLAN

This practice helps you prepare for the moments when old reactions are likely to appear, and gives you a way to repair. You will need a notebook.

**Step 1: Identify your triggers.** List the three situations with children that most often activate you. For example: *Refusing to listen. Messes. Hitting. Whining. Bedtime. Backtalk.*

**Step 2: Name your early signals.** For each, write the first sign in your body: *jaw tight, hot face, loud heartbeat.*

**Step 3: Choose your pause.** Write the sentence you will say to yourself, and one physical action. For example: *"This is my old response." Then: one slow breath and feet on the floor.*

**Step 4: Write your phrase for the child.** Choose a short sentence that offers both a limit and warmth. For example: *"I can see you're upset. I won't let you hit. Let's take a breath together."*

**Step 5: Write your repair script.** Using the structure in this chapter, write a repair statement for a moment when you lose your temper. Practice saying it aloud.

**Step 6: Plan your recovery.** Write what you will do for yourself after a hard moment: a few minutes alone, a walk, a call, a kind phrase. Remind yourself: *One hard moment does not define me.*

**Step 7: Choose one connection ritual.** Pick one small, regular practice that builds warmth: ten minutes of undivided attention, a bedtime story, a weekly walk. Repeated warmth is the foundation on which repair rests.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. What was the hardest moment with a child in your life recently? What did your body do?
2. What did you need as a child in a moment like that? What do you want a child in your care to receive?
3. In what ways have you swung toward the opposite of your own parents? What would be a more balanced path?
4. What repair would you like to make, to a child, or to the child you once were?
5. What kind of support would make parenting, or caring for children, feel less lonely?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Parenting touches the oldest layers of your own experience. The most important factor is not technique, but how well you have understood your own history.

Children need good-enough adults who offer safety, warmth, limits, and repair. They do not need perfection.

Your calm is a gift. Co-regulation, lending your steadiness, helps children learn that feelings can be survived.

Repair after rupture is among the most powerful things you can do. A mistake followed by repair teaches more than a lifetime without mistakes.

*In the next chapter, we look at how to find support and how to turn this work into a lasting legacy.*

## SAM'S THREAD

That evening, after Maya's bath, Sam sat on the edge of her bed. She was in her pajamas, hair damp, holding a stuffed rabbit.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"Are you still sorry about the cereal?"

He smiled, a little unsteadily. "I'm still sorry I yelled. The cereal was just cereal."

She considered this. Then she said, with the solemnity of a five-year-old delivering a verdict, "It's okay. You said sorry. That's the rule."

He nearly laughed, and nearly wept. He tucked the blanket around her. "That's the rule," he said. "I'm glad you remember."

In the kitchen, later, Amara asked how the day had gone. He told her all of it, the yelling, the pause, the repair, Maya's face. When he finished, she put a hand on his arm.

"That sounds hard," she said. "It also sounds like exactly what you wanted to do."

He nodded. "I almost didn't," he said.

"But you did."

He thought of his own father, who had never apologized for anything in his life, and who had died without ever once saying that he was sorry. Sam felt grief, and compassion, and something like the beginning of peace. He had not become a perfect father. He had become a father who repairs. It was not what he had set out to be, but it was beginning to seem like something better.

# CHAPTER 13
# FINDING SUPPORT AND BUILDING A LEGACY



The waiting room was smaller than Elena had imagined.

There were four chairs, a low table with a plant, and a framed print of a lake. A white-noise machine hummed in the corner. Elena sat with her coat still on and her bag on her knees, reading the same line of a magazine for the third time.

She had booked the appointment six weeks earlier, and cancelled it twice. Each time she had told herself that she was fine, that other people had real problems, that she should be able to handle this on her own. Each time, the voice in her head had said, quietly and reasonably, *Don't take up space.*

But the Sunday after the argument with Mateo, she had opened her laptop and booked it again, and this time she had put a note in her calendar that said only, *Go.*

The door opened. A woman in a gray cardigan smiled and said, "Elena? Come on in."

Elena stood up. Her knees felt unsteady. She walked across the small room, thinking, absurdly, *I have never in my life asked for this much attention.*

Then she stepped through the door, and sat down, and said, in a voice that surprised her with its steadiness, "I'm not sure where to start."

"That's all right," the therapist said. "That's a perfectly good place to start."

## YOU WERE NEVER MEANT TO DO THIS ALONE

Throughout this book we have talked about tools: maps, practices, pauses, scripts. They are valuable, and they work. But there is something that tools cannot do alone, and that is give you the experience of being accompanied.

Human beings are social creatures, and many of our deepest patterns were formed in relationship. It makes sense that they are also most reliably changed in relationship. A steady, safe person who listens without judgment, who stays calm when you are not, and who believes that you can change, provides something that no book can.

This does not mean that self-help is useless. It means that self-help and support work best together.

## FORMS OF SUPPORT

Support comes in many shapes, and no single form fits everyone. Here are some of the main options.

**Individual therapy.** Working one-on-one with a licensed professional provides a confidential space, individualized attention, and expertise. Many approaches exist, and research suggests that the quality of the relationship between therapist and client is one of the most consistent predictors of outcome across different methods (Norcross & Lambert, 2018).

**Group therapy and support groups.** Sitting with others who share similar experiences can reduce shame and isolation powerfully. Hearing your story echoed in someone else's words is often a profound relief. Groups led by professionals offer structure and safety, and peer-led groups offer community and continuity.

**Family and couples therapy.** When several people in a relationship want to change a pattern together, working with a trained therapist can help. Not every family is ready, and it is not appropriate in situations involving abuse or ongoing danger.

**Trusted people.** A friend, a mentor, a relative, or a faith leader who can listen and who respects your pace. Choose carefully, and begin with small disclosures.

**Books, courses, and journals.** These are helpful complements, but they work best alongside human connection, not in place of it.

## UNDERSTANDING THERAPY

If you have never been in therapy, it can feel mysterious. A few basics may help.

Therapy is a collaborative process between you and a trained professional, in which you explore your experiences, feelings, and patterns, and develop new ways of understanding and responding. Sessions are usually fifty minutes, weekly at first. You set the pace, and you are never required to share more than you want.

Several types of therapy are commonly used for trauma and family patterns:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** focuses on the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and teaches skills for changing unhelpful patterns.
- **Trauma-focused therapies**, such as trauma-focused CBT, cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), are designed to help people process traumatic memories safely. They are among the approaches recommended in clinical guidelines for post-traumatic stress.
- **Attachment-based and emotionally focused therapies** work on patterns of closeness, trust, and communication.
- **Family systems therapy** looks at patterns across relationships and generations.
- **Schema therapy and parts-based approaches** work with deep beliefs and the younger parts of the self.
- **Somatic approaches** pay particular attention to the body's role in stress and healing.

No single approach is best for everyone. If you are considering therapy for trauma, it is worth looking for someone with specific training in trauma-informed care.

## FINDING THE RIGHT PERSON

Choosing a therapist is a bit like choosing a doctor, with an added layer of personal fit. A few suggestions:

**Ask about experience.** Does the therapist have experience with family patterns, trauma, or the issues that matter to you?

**Ask about approach.** How do they work? What does a typical session look like?

**Ask about pacing.** How do they make sure you do not feel overwhelmed? A good trauma-informed therapist will emphasize safety and pace.

**Ask about practicalities.** Fees, insurance, cancellation policies, scheduling, and whether sessions are in person or online.

**Trust your sense of fit.** After a session or two, ask yourself: *Do I feel respected? Heard? Safe enough to be honest? Gently challenged?* If not, it is entirely acceptable to try someone else. This is not rude. It is how the process is meant to work.

## BARRIERS, AND WAYS THROUGH THEM

Many people want support and find it hard to get. The most common obstacles are cost, time, stigma, fear, and not knowing where to start.

**Cost.** Many therapists offer sliding-scale fees. Community mental health centers, university training clinics, and employee assistance programs often offer lower-cost or free sessions. Some nonprofits specialize in affordable therapy. Support groups are frequently free.

**Time.** Online sessions can reduce travel. Some therapists offer early-morning, evening, or weekend hours.

**Stigma.** Many people grew up with the message that therapy is for "crazy" people, or that family business should stay in the family. It may help to remember that many people use therapy as a tool for growth, including people who are doing well.

**Fear.** *What if I fall apart? What if it opens something I cannot close?* A good therapist will not push you faster than you can go. You have the right to set the pace, and to say, "I'm not ready to talk about that yet."

**Not knowing where to start.** A primary care doctor, a school or workplace counselor, a local mental health association, or an online directory can point you to options. Beginning with a single introductory session carries no obligation.

If you are in crisis, or having thoughts of harming yourself, please do not wait. Contact emergency services or a crisis line right away. The Resources section at the back of this book lists some options.

## DAILY FOUNDATIONS

Therapy and community sit on top of something simpler: the daily conditions of your life. A body that is exhausted, isolated, and overloaded finds change very hard.

Consider the basics:

- **Sleep.** Consistent sleep and wake times, as far as your life allows.
- **Movement.** Regular physical activity you enjoy, even a short walk.
- **Nourishment.** Regular meals, and some that are eaten slowly, without screens.
- **Connection.** At least one moment of real contact with another person each day.
- **Quiet.** A few minutes of stillness, breathing, or prayer.
- **Limits.** Boundaries on overwork, doomscrolling, and relationships that drain you.

These may seem too ordinary to matter. They matter a great deal. They are the soil in which everything else grows.

## WHEN OLD PATTERNS RETURN

One of the most important things to know is that old patterns will return. They tend to appear at predictable times: during stress, around family gatherings, after major life changes, and, sometimes, just when things seem to be going well.

This does not mean you have failed. It means you are human, and that patterns learned over decades have deep roots. Many people experience healing as a spiral rather than a line: they revisit the same themes at deeper levels, each time with more understanding and more tools.

When a pattern returns, here is a simple approach:

1. **Notice without judgment.** *There it is.*
2. **Regulate.** Use your calm plan.
3. **Get curious.** *What triggered this? What does it need?*

4. **Repair if needed.** With yourself, or with someone else.
5. **Return to your practice.** Even a small step counts.

## THE WIDER CIRCLE

So far we have focused on individuals and families. But families live in communities, cultures, and histories, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3. Healing is not only a private matter.

Many cultures and communities have long traditions of collective care: elders who tell stories, rituals that mark loss and renewal, faith practices that hold grief, extended families that share burdens. Scholars studying historical trauma have emphasized that communities can heal together, through the revival of cultural practices, the telling of suppressed histories, and the building of supportive relationships (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998).

You may find that part of your healing involves reconnecting with a tradition, a community, or a story from your own heritage that was lost, hidden, or devalued. You may also find that your own healing opens the door to others': a friend who begins to talk, a sibling who begins to listen, a child who grows up knowing that feelings can be named.

## BUILDING A LEGACY

A legacy is what you leave, intentionally or not, to the people who come after you. Every one of us leaves one. The question is whether it is chosen.

You do not need to do anything grand. A legacy lives in how you speak to a child, how you handle disagreement, how you rest, how you apologize, how you welcome strangers, and what stories you tell. Over time, these small choices become the patterns that others inherit.

It can help to put your intentions into words. Not as a vow of perfection, but as a direction. What do you want to carry forward?

What do you want to leave behind? What do you hope the people who come after you will inherit, from you, as a result of this work?

## HEALING PRACTICE: YOUR SUPPORT MAP AND LEGACY STATEMENT

This practice has two parts: mapping the support you have and want, and writing a legacy statement. You will need a notebook.

**Part One: The Support Map**

**Step 1: Draw three circles.** Label the inner circle *Close*, the middle circle *Wider*, and the outer circle *Professional and community.*

**Step 2: Fill in what you have.** Write the names, groups, or resources that belong in each circle. It is fine if some circles are empty.

**Step 3: Choose one to strengthen.** Pick one person or resource you would like to add or deepen, and write the first small step: *Call. Ask. Search. Attend.*

**Step 4: Set a date.** Write when you will take that step. Put it in your calendar.

**Part Two: The Legacy Statement**

**Step 5: Look back.** Review your family map from Chapter 3. Write three strengths you want to carry forward.

**Step 6: Name what you are leaving behind.** Write three patterns you are choosing to release, such as silence, harshness, or perfectionism.

**Step 7: Write the statement.** Complete these sentences, and add your own:

*The patterns I am choosing to end are...*

*The patterns I am choosing to begin are...*

*What I hope the people who come after me will inherit from me is...*

**Step 8: Keep it somewhere you will see it.** Read it when you need to remember why you are doing this work.

## REFLECTION PROMPTS

1. Who in your life is a safe person to talk to, even about small things? What would it mean to let them in a little more?
2. What is the biggest obstacle between you and the support you want? What is one small step around it?
3. What daily foundations, sleep, movement, nourishment, connection, quiet, need the most attention right now?
4. How do you want to respond when an old pattern returns?
5. What do you hope your legacy will be?

## WHAT TO REMEMBER

Healing happens most reliably in relationship. Tools help, and support helps more.

There are many forms of support, including therapy, groups, friends, and community. Finding the right fit may take more than one try, and that is normal.

Old patterns will return. A spiral is not a failure.

Your legacy is made of small, repeated choices. You do not need to be perfect, only intentional.

*In the conclusion, we return to the four people you have followed through this book, and we look at what a year of small changes can mean.*

## ELENA'S THREAD

Elena's first session lasted fifty minutes and felt like five. At the end, the therapist said, "You said 'sorry' eleven times today. Did you notice?"

Elena stared at her. "Eleven?"

"I was counting," the therapist said gently. "Not to criticize. I'm curious what it would be like to try a session without any."

Elena laughed, a short surprised laugh, and then, to her own astonishment, her eyes filled with tears. She had apologized for crying twice before she caught herself and stopped.

"Take your time," the therapist said.

Walking back to her car, Elena noticed that the sky was a very clear blue. It was an ordinary afternoon in autumn, and she did not feel fixed. But she felt, for the first time in a long while, that she had taken up exactly as much space as she needed, and that the world had not minded.

# CONCLUSION



## THE CHAIN HAS A NEW LINK

A year after the Sunday evening at the kitchen counter, Elena Ruiz stood at the same counter, slicing the same kind of onion.

Mateo came in and asked, "Did you call the plumber?"

"Not yet," she said, without turning. "I'll do it tomorrow."

That was all. No apology, no explanation, no rush of heat up the back of her neck. It was a small exchange, and she almost did not notice what was missing from it until later, when she was lying in bed and realized that the sentence she had once rehearsed in the shower, *I'm just asking for what I need*, had somehow become the way she spoke.

She had not become a different person. She still caught herself apologizing more than she needed to, and she still found it hard when voices were raised. But she had told her manager that she wanted the lead role, and she had gotten it. She had a standing appointment on Thursday afternoons, and she kept it. When she and Mateo disagreed, she said, "I need twenty minutes, and then I'll be back," and she came back.

## THE CHARACTERS, ONE YEAR LATER

**Sam** is still working on it. He would be the first to tell you so. He has raised his voice at his children four times since last spring, and each time, he has repaired. Maya, now six, has started using the phrase herself: "You said sorry, so it's okay now." Jordan, nine, recently told his father that he had a bad day at school and wanted to talk about it. Sam sat on the edge of the bed for forty minutes and listened, and when Jordan fell asleep, he went into the garage and wept for a while

with the door closed. He is not sure whether the tears were for his son, or for himself at nine, or for the father who never learned how. He thinks, now, that it was probably all three.

**Nora** took her first full vacation in three years: five days, in a small town, with no laptop. She said no to her sister four times that year, and each time, her sister was a little more surprised and a little less angry. She also began, haltingly, to tell her mother how she felt about having been the family's helper. Her mother was quiet for a long time, and then said, "I didn't know you were so tired." Nora is still not sure whether that counted as understanding. But for the first time, someone in her family had said something that sounded like noticing.

**Walt** and Carol met for coffee eleven months ago, in a diner halfway between their homes. The first meeting was stiff and short. The second was a little longer. By the fourth, they had both cried, once, in the parking lot, and had not mentioned it. They have not resolved everything about their mother's care, and they probably never will. But on his sister's birthday, Walt sent a card that said, in his awkward, careful handwriting: *I'm glad we're talking.* He has begun to write down memories of his grandfather, whom he never knew, in the hope that his own grandchildren might know a little more of the story than he did.

**Elena** is still seeing her therapist. She says she no longer thinks of it as asking for help. She thinks of it as practice.

## WHAT YOU HAVE DONE

If you have read this far, you have done something that is far from simple.

You have looked at the pathways by which experience travels through families: learned patterns, attachment, the body, the world around us, and the silences that bind them. You have mapped your own family story, and noticed what rules, roles, and beliefs it handed you. You have looked at emotions that were welcomed and emotions

that were feared, and at the survival responses you learned. You have seen how the past walks into your relationships, and you have begun to learn how to calm your body, grieve what was missing, rewrite the voice in your head, set boundaries, hold hard conversations, repair, and ask for support.

You may not have completed every practice. You may have skipped sections, or put the book down for weeks, or found parts of it too hard. That is part of the process. Healing is not a project to be finished in a month. It is a way of living that you keep practicing.

## HEALING IS NOT A FINISH LINE

It is tempting to imagine a moment when the work will be complete, when the old patterns will be gone and you will feel permanently calm, secure, and free. That moment does not arrive, at least not in that form. What arrives instead is something quieter, and in some ways better.

You notice a reaction sooner. You recover faster. You say what you need a little more clearly. You forgive yourself a little more easily. You find yourself, one ordinary afternoon, speaking to a child, or a partner, or a friend, in a way that you did not learn from anyone, and that you chose.

These are not small things. Across generations, they are the whole of what change looks like.

## THE NEXT GENERATION STARTS WITH YOU

This book began with a question: *Where does this come from, and why is it so hard to stop?*

Perhaps you now have a partial answer. It comes from people who loved you, and who did what they could with what they had. It comes from events that were too large for anyone to carry alone. It comes from silence, and fear, and survival, and also from resilience, humor, and love.

The people who came before you carried what they could. You are carrying it differently: with more awareness, more language, more tools, and, I hope, more compassion for them and for yourself.

What you pass on may not be perfect. It does not need to be. It only needs to be a little kinder, a little clearer, and a little freer than what you received. That is how a chain is changed. Not by breaking it all at once, but by becoming the link that bends differently.

## A FINAL WORD

Thank you for reading, and thank you for the courage that it took.

On the hard days, when the old voice returns and the old reaction rises, remember this: you are not behind. You are not broken. You are a person doing difficult, important work, in the middle of ordinary life.

The pattern would like you to believe that it is the whole story. It is not.

You are the beginning of the next one.

# APPENDIX A: CALM CARDS

These cards are designed to be photographed, copied, or cut out and kept somewhere you can reach quickly. Use them when you notice that you are leaving your window of tolerance. They work best when you have practiced them in calm moments.

**Card 1: Calm in Two Minutes**

1. Place both feet on the floor and feel their weight.
2. Breathe in through your nose for four counts and out for six. Repeat five times.
3. Name five things you can see, four you can touch, and three you can hear.
4. Tell yourself: *This feeling will pass. I am safe in this moment.*

**Card 2: When I Am Triggered**

1. Pause before reacting. Take one slow breath.
2. Name what you feel: *This is anger. This is fear. This is shame.*
3. Ask: *Is this about now, or about the past?*
4. Choose one small, kind action for the next ten minutes.

**Card 3: Coming Back From Numb**

1. Move gently: stretch, walk, or press your palms together.
2. Look around and name five objects in the room, out loud if you can.
3. Hold something with a texture, such as a warm mug or a soft blanket.
4. Reach out to one safe person, even with a single message.

**Card 4: My Support Circle**

Someone I can call or message: _____

Another person I trust: _____

A professional or group I can contact: _____

A place where I feel safe: _____

**Card 5: If I Am in Crisis**

If you may harm yourself or someone else, or you are in immediate danger, contact your local emergency number right now.

In the United States, you can call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

Outside the United States, findahelpline.com can help you find a crisis line in your country.

Tell someone near you what is happening. You do not have to handle this alone.

# APPENDIX B: CONVERSATION SCRIPTS

Words can be hard to find when old patterns are active. These sentences are starting points. Change them until they sound like you, and practice them aloud before you need them.

## SETTING A BOUNDARY

- "I care about you, and I'm not able to talk about that topic. Let's talk about something else."
- "I can stay for two hours. After that, I need to head home."
- "I'm not available after nine at night. I'll call you tomorrow."
- "I understand you disagree. My decision is still the same."

## ASKING FOR HELP

- "I'm having a hard time, and I would like some support. Do you have time to talk?"
- "I don't need you to fix this. I just need you to listen."
- "Could you help me with this on Saturday? I'm feeling stretched."

## TAKING A BREAK IN CONFLICT

- "I want to hear you, and I'm getting overwhelmed. Can we take twenty minutes and come back?"
- "I need to slow down so I don't say something I'll regret."
- "Let's pause this conversation and return to it tomorrow."

## APOLOGIZING AND REPAIRING

- "I'm sorry for how I spoke to you. You didn't deserve that."
- "I see how my actions affected you. Here is what I will do differently."
- "Thank you for telling me. I want to understand how it felt for you."

## RESPONDING TO CRITICISM OR PRESSURE

- "I hear that you see it differently. I'll think about it."
- "I'm not willing to discuss my choices, but I'm glad to hear how you're doing."
- "I know this is hard for you. It's still my decision."

## REPAIRING WITH A CHILD

- "I raised my voice, and that wasn't okay. It wasn't your fault. I love you."
- "I was frustrated, and I'm working on handling it better. Can we start again?"
- "I'm taking a breath. I'll be back in a minute, and then we'll figure it out together."

## ENDING A DIFFICULT CONVERSATION

- "I'm going to end this call now. I hope we can try again another time."
- "I need to stop here. I care about this relationship, and I need a break."

# APPENDIX C: THE 30-DAY PRACTICE PLAN

This plan turns the book into a daily habit. Each day takes five to fifteen minutes. If you miss a day, simply continue with the next one. Progress matters more than perfection.

At the end of each week, pause to reflect on what you noticed and what you want to carry into the next week.

## WEEK 1: NOTICE

- **Day 1.** Write down one family strength and one family struggle.
- **Day 2.** Notice one automatic reaction today and name it without judgment.
- **Day 3.** Complete the Three-Column Pattern Check (Chapter 1) for one moment.
- **Day 4.** Trace one pattern through the four pathways (Chapter 2).
- **Day 5.** Begin your One-Page Family Map (Chapter 3).
- **Day 6.** Add the unwritten rules of your family to the map.
- **Day 7.** Review the week and write what surprised you most.

## WEEK 2: UNDERSTAND

- **Day 8.** Complete the Belief Detective practice for one belief (Chapter 4).
- **Day 9.** Write a believable alternative and one tiny action that supports it.
- **Day 10.** Complete the Emotional Rules Inventory (Chapter 5).
- **Day 11.** Practice naming one feeling precisely, and notice where it lives in your body.
- **Day 12.** Map your mask and your survival response (Chapter 6).
- **Day 13.** Complete the Relationship Pattern Map for one relationship (Chapter 7).
- **Day 14.** Review the week and choose one pattern you want to change.

## WEEK 3: HEAL

- **Day 15.** Build your Calm Plan (Chapter 8).
- **Day 16.** Practice your calm tools for five minutes while you are calm.
- **Day 17.** Write down what you needed as a child and did not receive (Chapter 9).
- **Day 18.** Write your Letter to My Younger Self.
- **Day 19.** Offer yourself one thing your younger self needed.
- **Day 20.** Write the Compassionate Reply to your inner critic (Chapter 10).
- **Day 21.** Review the week and note one new response you tried.

## WEEK 4: CHANGE

- **Day 22.** Choose one boundary and write the sentence you will use (Chapter 11).
- **Day 23.** Rehearse the boundary aloud, alone or with someone you trust.
- **Day 24.** Prepare one honest conversation, or decide not to have it.
- **Day 25.** Write your Pause and Repair Plan (Chapter 12).
- **Day 26.** Spend ten minutes of undivided attention with a child, or with yourself.
- **Day 27.** Complete your Support Map (Chapter 13) and take one step toward it.
- **Day 28.** Write your Legacy Statement.
- **Day 29.** Reread your Legacy Statement and choose three daily practices to keep.
- **Day 30.** Review the month. Write what changed, what did not, and what you want next.

# APPENDIX D: GLOSSARY

These short definitions explain how terms are used in this book. They are not clinical definitions.

**Ambiguous loss.** Loss without clarity or closure, such as grieving a parent who is present but emotionally unavailable.

**Attachment.** The emotional bond and expectations about closeness that develop in early relationships.

**Boundary.** A limit that describes what you will do to protect your wellbeing.

**Co-regulation.** The process of calming through another person's steady presence.

**Core belief.** A deep, often unspoken idea about yourself, others, or the world.

**Earned security.** A secure way of relating that develops in adulthood despite a difficult early history.

**Emotional neglect.** A lack of attention or response to a child's emotional needs.

**Fawn response.** A survival response in which a person tries to stay safe by pleasing or appeasing.

**Generational trauma.** Wounds, beliefs, and survival responses that influence people across generations.

**Genogram.** A family map that shows relationships, events, and patterns across generations.

**Grounding.** Techniques that bring attention to the present moment through the senses.

**Hypervigilance.** A constant state of watchfulness for possible threats.

**Inner critic.** A harsh internal voice, often absorbed from earlier experiences.

**Parentification.** When a child takes on adult responsibilities or emotional caretaking.

**Reparenting.** Offering yourself the care, structure, and safety you needed in childhood.

**Repair.** Returning after a conflict or mistake to acknowledge impact and restore trust.

**Rupture.** A moment of disconnection or conflict in a relationship.

**Self-compassion.** Responding to your own pain with kindness, a sense of shared humanity, and mindfulness.

**Shame.** A painful belief that something is wrong with you as a person.

**Survival response.** An automatic reaction, such as fight, flight, freeze, or fawn, that protects against threat.

**Trauma-informed.** An approach that recognizes the effects of trauma and prioritizes safety, choice, and collaboration.

**Trigger.** A reminder, often unconscious, that sets off a strong emotional or physical reaction.

**Window of tolerance.** The zone of arousal in which you can feel emotions and still think clearly.

# APPENDIX E: RESOURCES

Information changes, so please verify phone numbers and websites before relying on them. This list is a starting point, not a complete guide.

## SUPPORT AND CRISIS RESOURCES

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (United States): call or text 988.
- Crisis Text Line (United States): text HOME to 741741.
- SAMHSA National Helpline (United States): 1-800-662-4357, free and confidential treatment referrals.
- findahelpline.com: a directory of crisis lines in many countries.
- Psychology Today therapist directory: search for therapists by location and specialty.
- Open Path Collective: lower-cost therapy sessions.
- NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness): education, support groups, and family programs.

## FOR FURTHER READING

- *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk: how trauma affects the body and brain.
- *It Didn't Start with You* by Mark Wolynn: inherited family trauma.
- *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* by Lindsay C. Gibson: understanding and healing from emotionally immature parenting.
- *Attached* by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller: an introduction to attachment styles.
- *Self-Compassion* by Kristin Neff: research and practices for self-kindness.
- *Set Boundaries, Find Peace* by Nedra Glover Tawwab: practical guidance on boundaries.
- *Parenting from the Inside Out* by Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell: using self-understanding to parent.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY & SELECTED WORKS

The following works informed the psychological, developmental, relational, and therapeutic concepts discussed throughout *Breaking Generational Trauma Patterns*. They are provided for readers who wish to explore these subjects in greater depth.

## ATTACHMENT AND CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. (1978). *Patterns of attachment: A psychological study of the Strange Situation*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Bartholomew, K., & Horowitz, L. M. (1991). Attachment styles among young adults: A test of a four-category model. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 61*(2), 226–244.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. Basic Books.

Fonagy, P., Gergely, G., Jurist, E. L., & Target, M. (2002). *Affect regulation, mentalization, and the development of the self*. Other Press.

Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 52*(3), 511–524.

Main, M., & Hesse, E. (1990). Parents' unresolved traumatic experiences are related to infant disorganized attachment status. In M. T. Greenberg, D. Cicchetti, & E. M. Cummings (Eds.), *Attachment in the preschool years* (pp. 161–182). University of Chicago Press.

Roisman, G. I., Padron, E., Sroufe, L. A., & Egeland, B. (2002). Earned-secure attachment status in retrospect and prospect. *Child Development, 73*(4), 1204–1219.

Slade, A. (2005). Parental reflective functioning: An introduction. *Attachment & Human Development, 7*(3), 269–281.

Tronick, E. Z. (1989). Emotions and emotional communication in infants. *American Psychologist, 44*(2), 112–119.

van IJzendoorn, M. H. (1995). Adult attachment representations, parental responsiveness, and infant attachment: A meta-analysis on the predictive validity of the Adult Attachment Interview. *Psychological Bulletin, 117*(3), 387–403.

Winnicott, D. W. (1953). Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 34*, 89–97.

## TRAUMA, STRESS, AND THE BODY

Davidson, R. J., & McEwen, B. S. (2012). Social influences on neuroplasticity: Stress and interventions to promote well-being. *Nature Neuroscience, 15*(5), 689–695.

Dias, B. G., & Ressler, K. J. (2014). Parental olfactory experience influences behavior and neural structure in subsequent generations. *Nature Neuroscience, 17*(1), 89–96.

Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 14*(4), 245–258.

Hölzel, B. K., Carmody, J., Vangel, M., Congleton, C., Yerramsetti, S. M., Gard, T., & Lazar, S. W. (2011). Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging, 191*(1), 36–43.

Porges, S. W. (2011). *The polyvagal theory: Neurophysiological foundations of emotions, attachment, communication, and self-regulation*. W. W. Norton.

Shonkoff, J. P., & Garner, A. S. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics, 129*(1), e232–e246.

Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are*. Guilford Press.

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

Walker, P. (2013). *Complex PTSD: From surviving to thriving*. Azure Coyote.

Yehuda, R., Engel, S. M., Brand, S. R., Seckl, J., Marcus, S. M., & Berkowitz, G. S. (2005). Transgenerational effects of posttraumatic stress disorder in babies of mothers exposed to the World Trade Center attacks during pregnancy. *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism, 90*(7), 4115–4118.

Yehuda, R., Daskalakis, N. P., Bierer, L. M., Bader, H. N., Klengel, T., Holsboer, F., & Binder, E. B. (2016). Holocaust exposure induced intergenerational effects on FKBP5 methylation. *Biological Psychiatry, 80*(5), 372–380.

Zaccaro, A., Piarulli, A., Laurino, M., Garbella, E., Menicucci, D., Neri, B., & Gemignani, A. (2018). How breath-control can change your life: A systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience, 12*, 353.

## FAMILY SYSTEMS, HISTORY, AND CULTURE

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. Jason Aronson.

Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. M. (1973). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. Harper & Row.

Brave Heart, M. Y. H., & DeBruyn, L. M. (1998). The American Indian Holocaust: Healing historical unresolved grief. *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research, 8*(2), 56–78.

Duke, M. P., Lazarus, A., & Fivush, R. (2008). Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 45*(2), 268–272.

Fraiberg, S., Adelson, E., & Shapiro, V. (1975). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry, 14*(3), 387–421.

Kellermann, N. P. F. (2001). Transmission of Holocaust trauma: An integrative view. *Psychiatry, 64*(3), 256–267.

McGoldrick, M., Gerson, R., & Petry, S. (2008). *Genograms: Assessment and intervention* (3rd ed.). W. W. Norton.

Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Harvard University Press.

## BELIEFS, EMOTIONS, AND SELF-COMPASSION

Beck, A. T. (1976). *Cognitive therapy and the emotional disorders*. International Universities Press.

Boss, P. (1999). *Ambiguous loss: Learning to live with unresolved grief*. Harvard University Press.

Breines, J. G., & Chen, S. (2012). Self-compassion increases self-improvement motivation. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 38*(9), 1133–1143.

Doka, K. J. (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington Books.

Eisenberger, N. I., Lieberman, M. D., & Williams, K. D. (2003). Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion. *Science, 302*(5643), 290–292.

Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 85*(2), 348–362.

Kross, E., Bruehlman-Senecal, E., Park, J., Burson, A., Dougherty, A., Shablack, H., Bremner, R., Moser, J., & Ayduk, O. (2014). Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: How you do it matters. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 106*(2), 304–324.

Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H., & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science, 18*(5), 421–428.

McAdams, D. P. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by*. Oxford University Press.

Neff, K. D. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self and Identity, 2*(2), 85–101.

Neff, K. D., & Germer, C. K. (2013). A pilot study and randomized controlled trial of the Mindful Self-Compassion program. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 69*(1), 28–44.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science, 8*(3), 162–166.

Pennebaker, J. W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story: The health benefits of narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 55*(10), 1243–1254.

Schwartz, R. C. (1995). *Internal family systems therapy*. Guilford Press.

Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. L. (2002). *Shame and guilt*. Guilford Press.

Wood, J. V., Perunovic, W. Q. E., & Lee, J. W. (2009). Positive self-statements: Power for some, peril for others. *Psychological Science, 20*(7), 860–866.

Young, J. E., Klosko, J. S., & Weishaar, M. E. (2003). *Schema therapy: A practitioner's guide*. Guilford Press.

## LEARNING, RESILIENCE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND PARENTING

Bandura, A., Ross, D., & Ross, S. A. (1961). Transmission of aggression through imitation of aggressive models. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 63*(3), 575–582.

Baumrind, D. (1966). Effects of authoritative parental control on child behavior. *Child Development, 37*(4), 887–907.

Gottman, J. M. (1994). *What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes*. Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gottman, J. M. (1998). Psychology and the study of marital processes. *Annual Review of Psychology, 49*, 169–197.

Gottman, J. M., Katz, L. F., & Hooven, C. (1996). Parental meta-emotion philosophy and the emotional life of families: Theoretical models and preliminary data. *Journal of Family Psychology, 10*(3), 243–268.

Johnson, S. M. (2004). *The practice of emotionally focused couple therapy: Creating connection* (2nd ed.). Brunner-Routledge.

Masten, A. S. (2001). Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development. *American Psychologist, 56*(3), 227–238.

Norcross, J. C., & Lambert, M. J. (2018). Psychotherapy relationships that work III. *Psychotherapy, 55*(4), 303–315.

Rosenberg, M. B. (2003). *Nonviolent communication: A language of life* (2nd ed.). PuddleDancer Press.

Siegel, D. J., & Hartzell, M. (2003). *Parenting from the inside out*. Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.

Tawwab, N. G. (2021). *Set boundaries, find peace*. TarcherPerigee.

Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1992). *Overcoming the odds: High risk children from birth to adulthood*. Cornell University Press.

## ABOUT THE SOURCES

This book draws on research and clinical literature in psychology, attachment science, trauma studies, family systems, and emotion regulation. The works listed here represent selected sources that informed the concepts and frameworks discussed in these pages. Readers who wish to explore these subjects further are encouraged to consult the original sources.

*This book is educational in nature and is not a substitute for professional mental health care.*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hanz Yiglix creates practical educational resources designed to help mental health professionals, educators, and individuals better understand trauma, emotional regulation, and the healing process.

Through research-informed tools, worksheets, and guided exercises, his work focuses on making complex psychological concepts easier to understand and apply in real-world settings.

His goal is to provide clear, accessible resources that support greater awareness, resilience, and meaningful progress on the journey toward healing.