

The Therapy Notes

By COR

Why are we talking about my childhood when my problems are happening now?

By Dean Corbett

You've come to therapy because you're struggling with something happening in your life today. Perhaps it's your relationship, your confidence, or a manager who's making your working life miserable. Yet somehow, you're talking about your parents again. What on earth has your childhood got to do with any of this?

It's a completely fair question.

After all, you're an adult now. You've had years of experiences, made your own decisions, built relationships, and developed a life that's quite separate from the one you grew up in.

Surely what's happening now deserves more attention than something that happened twenty or thirty years ago? Well, yes. It does.

But sometimes, understanding the present means getting a little curious about the past. (In the psychotherapy profession, we often use the phrase, "the past is always present...").

What does my childhood have to do with anything?

Think about how you learned to navigate relationships.

Long before you understood what relationships were, you were learning how they worked.

Perhaps you discovered that being helpful earned you affection, that expressing anger led to arguments, that making mistakes brought criticism. Or perhaps you learned that keeping everybody happy, laughing or comfortable was the easiest way to keep the peace.

You probably didn't sit down and consciously decide any of this.

You simply adapted to the world around you, as children do.

And some of those adaptations may have been incredibly useful at the time.

The interesting thing is that **we don't always notice when an old way of coping has stopped being quite so helpful.**

The child who learned to avoid disagreement might become the adult who struggles to say no.

The child who received praise mainly for achievement might become the adult who feels strangely worthless when they're not being productive.

And the child who learned to look after everybody else might become the adult who finds asking for help almost unbearable.

Of course, these aren't inevitable outcomes. Human beings are considerably more complicated than that.

The Therapy Notes

By COR

But they can be useful questions to explore.

Does that mean everything is my parents' fault?

Not at all.

Our parents and/or early caregivers influence us, but they're only part of the story.

Temperament, friendships, school, culture, relationships, work, significant life events and countless other experiences contribute to who we become.

And plenty of people have difficult childhood experiences without developing the patterns we might expect.

Understanding how something developed isn't the same as finding somebody to blame.

You can love your parents and still recognise that some things were difficult.

You can have had a happy childhood and still find that certain experiences shaped how you relate to yourself and others.

And you can recognise the influence of your past without believing that it determines your future.

But I came to therapy to change what's happening now!

And that's important. Not every kind of therapy spends much time exploring childhood. Some approaches

concentrate primarily on what you're thinking, feeling and doing in the present - even, and especially, in the online therapy room.

Others are more interested in how earlier relationships and experiences might influence the patterns you're living with today.

Neither approach is automatically right for everyone.

The purpose of exploring your past shouldn't simply be to collect explanations for why you are the way you are.

Ideally, it's to help you recognise patterns that you might now have more freedom to change.

Perhaps you begin to notice that disagreement doesn't always lead to rejection or that making a mistake doesn't make you a failure. And perhaps you find that you can care about somebody without feeling responsible for their happiness.

Your past might help explain some of your reactions. It doesn't have to dictate what you do next.

And if you're struggling to see the relevance of something your therapist keeps returning to, you're allowed to ask.

Something worth asking your therapist

"I understand that my childhood might have shaped some of my experiences, but I'm finding it difficult to connect what we're discussing to

The Therapy Notes

By COR

the problems I'm facing today. Could we explore that connection?"

You don't have to accept every interpretation your therapist offers.

Sometimes the connection will become clearer. Sometimes you'll discover that an explanation doesn't quite fit.

Both can be useful. That's because therapy isn't about somebody else writing the story of your life; it's about helping you understand it - and perhaps discovering that you have more say in what happens next than you previously thought.

A little of the science

There's good evidence that our early experiences can influence how we understand relationships and respond to other people.

Psychologist John Bowlby's work on attachment suggested that our early relationships help shape expectations about whether other people will be available, responsive and supportive.

Research has also found associations between adverse childhood experiences and an increased likelihood of physical and mental health difficulties later in life. A major systematic review published in *The Lancet Public Health* examined evidence from 37 studies involving more than 250,000 participants.

But here's an important distinction: **An increased likelihood isn't a predetermined outcome.**

Childhood experiences don't explain everything, and associations between early adversity and later difficulties don't prove that any particular adult problem was caused by childhood.

Nor does everyone need to explore their childhood in depth to benefit from therapy.

In fact, research supports several effective psychological treatments that focus substantially on present-day difficulties.

The question isn't whether your childhood matters, it's whether understanding something about it might help you live differently today.

References

1. Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development*. Basic Books.
2. Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., et al. (2017). [*The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis*](#). *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8), e356–e366.
3. NICE (2022). [*Depression in adults: treatment and management \(NG222\)*](#). National Institute for Health and Care Excellence.