

Working with Childhood Wounds. A Framework For Building An Adult Response

This article explains why childhood wounds resurface even after they seem healed, and offers a framework for handling the situations that bring them back. It also lays out why common approaches to healing set the wrong expectation

Many, if not most of us, still carry our childhood wounds. Because they are called “wounds”, it sounds like the way to deal with them is similar to dealing with a cut: heal it, and the problem disappears. For many people, though, the process is anything but simple. Methods aimed at healing the heavy childhood experiences help, but in the end, nothing seems healed once and for all.

Let’s look at why the “healing” model might not be sufficient for living a wound-free life through an example of A:

Rejection followed A, a clearly non-neurotypical person, well into her adult life.

She followed every piece of advice for healing a childhood wound. She analyzed it, wrote about it, did the inner child work, felt the emotions, and reached acceptance. For a few years, it actually worked—the wound was gone. But recently, it resurfaced with almost its original intensity.

A was perplexed. “If the wound was healed, and I knew this situation had nothing to do with it, then why was I reacting like this? I had done the mental work and knew the narrative was false. I had done the emotional work and allowed myself to feel it each time. But the reaction was just as intense—and I still didn’t have any idea how to handle the actual situation in front of me.”

The Missing Piece: lack of adult skills

Then A tried just letting the emotion happen while she focused on other things. Fine; she could do it. But she still had no idea how to respond, or not, to a message, mail or silence.

You can visualize that by drawing two crossing circles: one for the wound, and one for the situation that provoked it. The common area is whatever, in the current situation, reminds A of the initial wound.

Looking at this, the gap is clear: A, like many people in this situation, had methods to analyze the wound itself. She had methods for what to do with the overlap, meaning dealing in real time with the wound resurfacing. But she had no **adult skills** for handling the right side: the situation itself. All she had was the childhood emotional reaction.

The Smoke Detector Metaphor

The wound is an intense emotional reaction that got locked in during childhood, back when the stakes actually were existential. So when a somewhat related event happens—like an unanswered message—it triggers that exact same response.

Often, this emotional reaction is so disproportionate that it treats an innocent piece of rope like a cobra. Ridiculous, “problem with me” type of thing. But looking at the diagram, the overlap is obvious. The wound and the current situation are not two completely unrelated things. Something in the current situation actually rings a bell for abandonment or rejection.

It is not a cobra, but it isn't a piece of rope either. There is some little snake there. The wound is actually pointing to some discomfort with the current situation, and then blowing it out of proportion.

The wound isn't just this ridiculous thing with nothing to do with reality. It is more like an over-calibrated smoke detector. Yes, it can go off because of an incense stick, but it can also detect a fire in the kitchen. And here's the problem: how does one know if this is just an incense stick—something genuinely unimportant—or if the house is actually burning down?

The Hurricane Pattern

When a wound gets activated by something as simple as an unanswered email, a hurricane of back-and-forth will follow:

“Oh, my God, I feel so awful, they hate me. No, you're ridiculous, of course they don't. But it feels like they do! They answer everyone else—why does everyone else deserve respect and I don't? Stop acting like a child. Maybe I'll try the email again. No, don't be ridiculous. Okay, I'll do nothing. Actually, next time they write to me, I'm just not going to answer.”

Emotions start spiraling, getting worse over time. Thoughts race and go in circles, which only makes everything worse. Shame often appears, activated by something that seems both very important and absurd at the same time. None of it helps a person in this situation know how to react in a calm, logical way.

For A this meant that deciding what to do when someone went silent was causing so much distress, that at the end of the day, she felt completely incapable of figuring out what to do and was dreading reaching out to anyone in case the problem resurfaces.

In situations like these, the solution is to stop trying to fix the wound and focus on what was missing: an adult response to an adult situation.

The Framework

This is the framework, written as an instruction so it can be useful to you.

Please note that there is no sense in doing this exercise while you are completely overwhelmed with the situation. In this case, it is a good idea to calm the nervous system by going for a walk, or taking a bath (and thinking about something else in the meantime). However, avoiding all the emotional activation when working with wounds is impossible and the very point of going through the steps below is to logically see that emotions make the situation bigger than it is. This is a form of desensitization: seeing for yourself that not everything that emotions suggest is true, and being able to function even when emotions fire. Learning that requires exposing yourself to emotions while using logical thinking, and not avoiding them altogether.

Step One: Separate Facts from Hypotheses

The goal is to separate what actually happened from the interpretation added by the wound.

Facts: What actually happened and what emotions appeared, as if you were explaining it to a friend or a police officer asking what happened.

Hypotheses: All the “whys” behind the situation that the wound creates.

Example of Facts:

You sent a second message in a row to your partner, and they didn’t respond within a 12-hour window. You felt rejected and had a reaction close to panic.

Example of Hypothesis:

They didn’t answer because they don’t care about you. They don’t respect you. They wanted to hurt you.

Example of Mixing Facts and Hypotheses at Work:

You and X presented ideas for next year's budget. Multiple people commented on X's presentation, and yours wasn't commented on at all, which obviously made you sad because "they value X more than you."

The phrase "they value X more than you" is only a hypothesis. The facts describe only what physically happened. Unless someone explicitly said, "We're not going to comment on your presentation because we value X's more," this is just a hypothesis—and presumably the wound talking.

The goal: Separate the facts from the ideas about why things happened, what they meant, and, particularly, what they meant about you.

Why are emotions considered facts? Because they happened. The very act of wondering whether emotions should or shouldn't happen adds to the shame and reduces your ability to deal with the situation. Emotions, however disproportionate they might seem, are facts because they already appeared.

A hypothesis is not a fact. Anything that may or may not be true is a hypothesis. Therefore, all explanations of why someone did something, what they thought while doing it, and what something means about you are hypothetical.

Step Two: Examining Expectations

What were the expectations about the situation, and were they reasonable?

This step is necessary because it is often difficult to tell if what actually happened was or wasn't bad, even when it caused intense negative emotions. Because of the lack of trust in the wound, it can become difficult to distinguish between something really important and something entirely non-important.

Let's look at the example of a partner not responding a second time in a row during a 12-hour window. What were the expectations in that situation? The expectation was an answer within a couple of hours.

When examining your own situation, be honest with yourself. Were you expecting the answer straight away? Were you expecting an answer at all?

Now, was that reasonable? To check if it was reasonable, get out of the emotionally charged situation and compare it with other, less emotionally charged relationships in your life. With your mother, or with a colleague from work—would expecting an answer within a few-hour timeframe be reasonable? Do you yourself always answer within this time window?

This creates a diagram with two arrows going in opposite directions.

Scenario 1: You might discover that your expectations were completely and fully unreasonable. You expected an answer within 15 minutes, but then realized: you don't reply that fast yourself. There are plenty of good reasons not to do it, and if it was anyone else but your partner, you wouldn't expect an answer so quickly.

You now have proof that this is, in fact, an incense stick situation where the alarm went off on nothing.

What to do about it? Note it mentally, say, "Okay, this happened," smile, and move on.

Scenario 2: You were expecting an answer during a reasonable window of time. Everyone in your environment answers you within this time. You do it yourself, always. And your partner did this for a long time. They also didn't give you any concrete reason for not answering. Then it means the alarm pointed to a real discomfort. Even though the emotional reaction might seem disproportionate to the situation, there is a clear signal that something important to you might be being disrespected or that a boundary might be crossed.

What then? Then you choose an adult response appropriate to the concrete situation, not the catastrophic explanation created by the wound.

Step Three: Find an Adult Response

How do you distinguish one from the other? Go back to Step One: choose the facts and respond according to the facts, not the hypothesis.

What does that mean?

- **The adult response concentrates on the facts:** I expected an answer from my partner within a reasonable timeframe. I didn't get it, and this lack of response made me feel sad and anxious.
- **The non-adult response concentrates on the hypothesis:** My partner didn't respond to me because they don't respect me, and this is what made me sad.

So, how do you find that adult response? The adult response should address the facts, but how do you formulate it?

The best way is to come up with the answer yourself. What helps is a set of two questions:

1. Imagine the same situation with someone who was less emotionally charged for you. What would you do? Would you say something? Would you leave it? Would you discuss it in a major way, or would you wait to see if the situation happens again?

2. If that is difficult, there is a second option: Imagine the same situation happening to a friend—someone you know doesn't have the same wound and is not as sensitive to rejection. How would they react? Would they bring up the subject, or would they completely ignore it?

The friend test is helpful as a general comparison, but it is not a precise tool. Your emotional reaction and your expectations are specific to your own situation. Someone else might react differently because they do not have the same history, relationship, or context.

3. Ask an AI. This allows you to practice separating facts from hypotheses again. A prompt could look like this:

“My partner, for the second time in a row, didn't answer my message within a 12-hour window, which I consider reasonable and which was normally respected during our communication. This made me feel sad and angry. What are the possible ways to address this situation in an adult manner?”

Results and Benefits

With time, the adult response becomes stronger and starts appearing more naturally, without much conscious thinking. How does this process achieve that result?

1. The connection between triggers and the wound weakens over time when logic is used. Logical response fires more automatically.
2. Once you know how to handle a situation that triggered the wound, the fear of those situations lessens. This itself reduces how intense the emotions feel.
3. Treating emotions as facts is useful on its own. Facts don't need to be fought with — they simply are. Practicing this reduces fighting with yourself and makes it much easier to know what you actually want to do, instead of what you are supposed to do.

How the Wound Gets Unconsciously Strengthened

Because the adult response is downstream from the wound, it may be difficult to understand how it can weaken the wound over time. At the same time, it is easy to overestimate the influence of conscious beliefs. A person can have a very mature and logical understanding of a situation while their emotional and behavioral response continues reinforcing the old pattern. This is because learning is shaped mainly by repeated experiences, emotions, and actions, not by the explanations we consciously hold.

To understand how the adult response weakens the wound, it helps to first look at how the non-adult response strengthens it — even when it is accompanied by an “adult” understanding of the situation

Example 1: Revenge

Consciously: X knows that someone didn't answer their message because they had other problems. They accept it, telling themselves "Sure, no worries."

Action: Yet in their head, they are planning revenge: "Next time they write to me, I'm also going to answer them in 24 hours. Let them see how awesome that feels."

Result: By planning revenge, X confirms the wound's assumption that someone did hurt them deliberately.

Example 2: Over-preparation

Conscious Thought: "Of course, nothing bad will happen. This is just my fear."

Action: X prepares a plan B if plan A doesn't work, and plan C if plan B doesn't work.

Result: The belief that X is not able to handle life difficulties is reinforced.

Example 3: Dwelling

Conscious Thought: X knows that their partner talking about them to their best friend is not a betrayal.

Action: Yet X dwells on it, in their head, with their partner, and in their journal.

Result: The betrayal wound is reinforced.

Example 4: Checking for Answers

Conscious Thought: X sends an invitation to a friend. X knows their answer is not a matter of life and death. X is aware that adults may or may not answer, and they do it on their own timeline.

Action: Yet, every three minutes, X goes back to their phone to check if they got the answer.

Result: The idea that this is a life-or-death situation gets reinforced.

An Injury Model

Even though we use the term “childhood wound,” the more accurate way to think about it is as an injury rather than a wound.

A wound heals and, in the worst-case scenario, maybe leaves an ugly scar. Or at least, that is what we expect to happen. When it doesn't, it seems like there is either something wrong with us or that we haven't done enough work yet.

When we get an injury, we understand that it often leaves us with a changed baseline. Expecting a badly broken arm to function as it did before the injury, or just like other people's arms, is its own kind of torture. The injury model allows us to accept this reality. A wound seems like something that can be undone. An injury is something we learn to live with.

Learning to live with something is a very practical approach. Taking as a given that what happened happened, and that it cannot be undone, the question becomes: what can I do now to enjoy my life to the fullest?

After breaking their arm, a person training it doesn't immediately know what the pain means. Is it the kind of pain that comes with training a weak muscle, or are they pushing themselves too hard? The same question comes up when working with a wound: is the reaction coming from an old pattern that makes a safe situation feel unsafe, or is it an accurate response to an actual insult? This framework is meant to help tell the difference.

Treating childhood wounds as injuries means starting with what we have and building from there, instead of waiting for things to change before we can move forward.

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