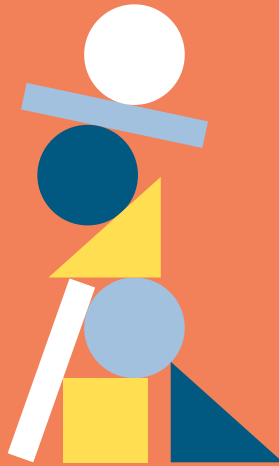


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HEAL CHILDHOOD TRAUMA



**The Self-Nurturing Therapy Approach
to Better Adult Relationships**

————— **Julie Gowthorpe PhD** —————



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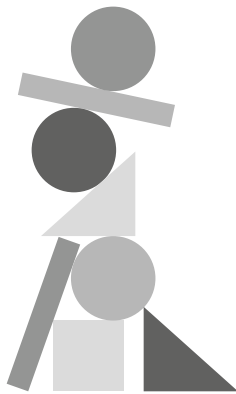
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Julie Gowthorpe PhD

HEAL CHILDHOOD TRAUMA



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Cataloguing in publication information
is available from Library and Archives Canada.

ISBN 978-1-77458-797-3 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-77458-798-0 (ebook)

Page Two
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Cover, interior design, and illustrations by Fiona Lee
Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens
Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books
Distributed in the US and internationally by Macmillan

26 27 28 29 30 5 4 3 2 1

drjuliegowthorpersw.com

*For all of you who have experienced trauma
because things have happened to you,
for those of you who feel worn out,
and for the family, friends and co-workers
who are at a loss for how to help.*

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Author's Note

THE MODERN THERAPEUTIC relationship is a partnership—one absent of paternalistic, authoritarian approaches that tell people how to heal. It is a journey we undertake together with the therapist's clinical knowledge coupled with the client experience.

I write this book drawing from the clinical knowledge, research available at this time, and insight given to me by people who have lived the journey of pain and healing. While I have not met you personally, there is understanding in the sameness we as humans share in how we navigate pain, develop resilience, and grow. Although post-traumatic growth has received criticism from those who believe it to be a sort of toxic positivity, considering an open, growth mindset on the pain caused by something happening to you is empowering. When it is used appropriately—as a stage in the healing process—post-traumatic growth offers incredible comfort. In no way does a decision to foster a growth mindset minimize the pain you have experienced, nor the circumstances you were dealt.

DISCLAIMER: The following self-help book contains dialogues and paraphrased conversations that are intended solely for educational and illustrative purposes. All client interactions depicted within this book have been modified to ensure the utmost protection of their identities and confidentiality. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, is purely coincidental. The purpose of including these dialogues is to offer readers practical insights and learning experiences that may aid them in their personal growth and development. It is crucial to note that the information provided in this book is not a substitute for professional therapy or counseling. Readers are advised to consult with a licensed therapist or mental health professional to address their specific concerns or issues. The author, publisher, and associated parties shall not be held responsible for any actions taken based on the content of this book. Readers are encouraged to exercise caution and personal judgment while applying the principles and techniques presented herein.

Introduction: *What's Your Story?*

ELLA SITS ACROSS from me in my therapy office room, her fingers weaving a tissue through meticulously manicured pink nails. “I can’t even think straight,” she admits. “Three weeks ago, everything seemed normal. I thought I’d finally found someone I could trust.” She clears her throat. “People wouldn’t guess how hard I’ve worked to get here. A beautiful home, two kids . . . at this point in my life, things should be great.” She halts, her body tensing.

Twenty-five years of experience in private practice taught me to wait when a patient pauses.

“I should have listened to myself. Really, you can’t trust anyone, right?” She sighs. “I ruin relationships. My mother said I destroyed her marriages, and now my marriage—well, it’s crumbling.” She massages her neck, recounting how her husband, Jason, recently blindsided her with his decision to separate. She speaks of their life—her leaving her teaching job, their financial strains, his late nights at his medical practice and growing distance. “He once said I was too needy. That must be it. It’s my fault that he couldn’t take it anymore.”

If you were hurt, deceived, disappointed, let down, or abandoned as a child, you may relate to how Ella feels. She is disappointed. She is hurt. She blames herself. No matter that she gave up her career, did her best to please her partner, and loved him fully, her immediate response is to attribute his decision to her neediness.

Ella expressed what so many of you may have experienced—a state of feeling unsettled, uncertain, and insecure about your ability to weather relationships. Even when your relationships *seem* to be healthy, you await the inevitable blindside of disappointment. When this happens, you blame yourself for not seeing it coming.

By now, you may have labels that help you understand what is happening, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder, or a personality disorder that makes you difficult to deal with. But you still have no idea what is causing how you feel, other than you have a distaste for anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. People. Places. Thoughts. Why hasn't the therapy you've likely done already worked? Perhaps you've attended so much therapy, you could write your own book! The problem is, these kinds of “thinking strategies” do not work when there have been multiple bad experiences from the past that challenged your sense of safety and security.

As a therapist with decades of providing trauma therapy and as a human with personal experiences, I've witnessed a spectrum of adult relational problems resulting from how people were hurt as children. If this is why you picked up this book, know that I wrote *Heal Childhood Trauma* to help you realize the implications of those experiences and understand how what happened to you has affected every aspect of your being, your relationships, and your daily functioning.

The insecurity you feel results in a belief that relationships require a fragile balance, like walking on eggshells. Before you

could walk, you learned that relationships with people bring danger. Or the danger was learned as a school-aged child, attending sports, church, or a club activity when someone in authority took advantage of the trust given to them. So now, as an adult, wading into relationships, committing to them, and surviving the challenges that come with vulnerability to another elicits anxiety.

Maybe like Ella, you learned that people threaten your safety and security, particularly if you give them the opportunity to see your vulnerability. Emotionally. Physically. Sexually. So, you gave your entire self to someone believing that suppressing your own needs was necessary to have a loving adult relationship.

Or you have become a self-described people hater, who has built an emotional fortress to prevent others from getting too close. After all, people are nothing but trouble, hurt, and sadness. You are okay alone because you can't create the life you want because of others. So, you avoid relationships and only engage with people in a way that allows no vulnerability. Intimacy simply becomes transactional, and friendships are about *doing* things together rather than *being* together. Hyper-independence may take over. You convince yourself that you are better off alone, where you take care of everything and there is no risk of disappointment or pain.

Perhaps you fall more central on the spectrum. You want better relationships, but the fear of being blindsided causes you to engage in push-pull dynamics with those you care about. You give to the other person unconditionally. The only way to stay safe *and* maintain a relationship is to have no needs—if they nudge you, remind you they are there, you ignore them. You don't complain and stay, thereby maintaining security—even if you become unhappy. It's a vicious cycle whereby you approach the thing you want—connection with another person—but

your anxiety goes up because of past experiences, and either you pull away or find fault with the relationship. Then your anxiety grows.

Step into My Office

You are capable. You have skills and attributes that are meant to help you navigate the uncertainty of the world. Bad things happened to you that were no fault of your own. Yes, these bad things have influenced how you see yourself and the world. Relationships and emotional connection have become anxiety provoking. Yes, we can change this.

Instead of a label that makes you feel like something is wrong with you, I want you to consider what fuels how you see yourself and the world around you. To help you with this understanding, I'll share stories of others' experiences and the resources they had or did not have as they tried to move forward in life and relationships. The names and certain details have been changed to protect people's privacy, but the case studies are real. No surprise, those with support had less trouble as adults than those without. However, what does elicit a "wow, that's fantastic!" is the realization that by addressing that lack of early support through a therapeutic process, it is possible to resolve the symptoms of unprocessed bad experiences. Beginning with an increased ability to tolerate feelings of vulnerability, you can train your brain and body to feel safe again and begin to experience the world with curiosity and joy.

As a clinician who continues to read the research, sits and talks with people, and supports them through their healing journey, I see how my clients have learned to trust that there is a process to help them achieve better adult relationships—and feel better about themselves. Everyone who has sat across from