

# WHY CHILDHOOD TRAUMA SABOTAGES ADULT LIFE AND HOW TO RESOLVE IT

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## AN EXPLORATION AND FIVE CASE STUDIES

BY  
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*“We don't see the world how it is, but how we are.”  
Anais Nin*

### **“Why Do I Have Trouble Saying ‘No’?”**

I was co-facilitating a leadership group a few years ago when a woman came in who was stuck in a job that she hated and wanted desperately to leave. Within several minutes I knew that she was fighting an unconscious trauma from her past. However, I could also tell that she was not ready to go there. Over the course of several weeks I watched other members of the group all attempt to coach her out of her fear so that she could transition into the life she really wanted.

As people spoke, she nodded her head, said she understood, went back and forth, gained hope, lost it, and then fell back into offering excuses for why she couldn't quit. From the outside, it didn't make sense. People were exasperated. Eyes rolled. Some participants, I could tell, just thought she was plain stupid. But I knew this wasn't true and that something much deeper was at play. From the very beginning I could see that this transition point in her life was triggering a significant trauma from her past that was creating a powerful, undeniable emotional signal within her that screamed at her to **“stay put, and suffer in silence!”**

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Logically, of course, she could see that nothing was stopping her. And there were moments when two very skilled consultants walked her through a series of questions that eventually led her to the clear-as-day conclusion that her life and prospects would be dramatically better if she simply summoned the courage to hand in her resignation and quit. And yet, as her conscious mind said “yes,” we all watched as something far more powerful within her continued to say “no.” She was stuck.

After several months she agreed to meet with me over video conferencing. I had explained to her my thoughts, but like many, she didn’t really believe in all of this “unconscious nonsense.” And yet, even as she spoke, the words came out hollow. She knew that something was going on and that she didn’t know what it was, which compounded her feelings of helplessness with shame. After all, who likes to admit they don’t know why they behave the way they do? But our relationship with our unconscious is like this. Without integrating it, we risk behaving like split personalities, thinking one thing, but feeling another, repeating self-sabotaging actions over and over, while constantly generating seemingly rational explanations for them, even though, deep down, we are unaware of the truth — that we are often powerfully and unconsciously guided by events from our past.

After a short conversation to orient us around the issue, I guided her into a hyper-conscious state and then introduced the fear of not being able to quit her job into the space. Within a short period, a 35-year-old memory bubbled to the surface. I could tell she was shocked. The incident was uncomplicated and, to some extent, even predictable. In the memory, she described a long-forgotten event from her early childhood in which she had defied an authority figure in a way that had almost cost her her life. In that moment, a hardwired program had been created, one that carved a very specific belief into her instinct for self preservation:

*Standing up for myself is dangerous.  
Saying “no” in the face of authority can be life-threatening.*

And her career (and personal life) reflected this. Although brilliant and hard-working, she had constantly struggled to stand her ground. Over time, she claimed to feel like a doormat. But there was no criticism or condemnation here. When hardwiring is at play, there is simply an early, usually overly simplistic, defense mechanism created by an experience that has been long overdue for an upgrade. Over all these years she had simply been following her own instructions *to herself*. The problem with these instructions, of course, is that they have been created with the mind of a child. Instead of being context-specific, they are general; instead of being rational, they are emotional and completely closed to logic. In time, they can become *all-pervasive*. And indeed, within a few short years, this defense mechanism had quickly begun to influence all of her relationships in ways that not only didn’t protect her, but that actually deeply disempowered her.

All hardwired beliefs, although innocent and overly simplistic reactions to events, are nonetheless expressions of our own intelligence. For this reason it is never appropriate to frame the hardwiring of the past as wrong or foolish just as it is inappropriate to consider the programming of early computers as wrong or foolish. For the time and the place in which they were conceived, they used the resources that were available to them. Upgrading hardwiring is not a question of rewiring, but of untangling. It is not a problem to be fixed, but an existing solution that simply

requires greater nuance, context and sophistication to develop. All hardwiring contains a useful connection to the power and driving force of our unconscious, which, in the fields of healing, performance and development, remains a highly valuable commodity. For this reason, upgrading your hardwiring is vital to avoid being unconsciously influenced by such powerful forces beyond our conscious control. Within only a few years, hardwired beliefs created in the first 10 to 15 years of life quickly become obsolete and soon thereafter can become one of the most important impediments to growth.

## Case Studies

### 1. “Why am I always angry at women?”

*I began working with Jeremy because he had come to the realization that he was always angry with his partners.<sup>1</sup> He had had many over the years and now in his mid-40s began to realize a pattern in his life that he had been unaware of previously. All of his relationships had ended in an unpleasant breakup instigated by his own resentment toward them.*

*When he finally contacted me, he was in a relationship that he profoundly wanted to make work but was beginning to feel the old feelings of frustration and anger toward his new partner bubble up once again, right on cue, with a single important difference: This time he understood that his frustration wasn't simply circumstantial. His partner wasn't simply doing something that irritated him. Something else was at work, and it was coming from within him.*

*I began the session by asking Jeremy to share his feelings for his partner. As he spoke, I waited for his body to provide us with the unconscious signal that was calling out to be addressed. When he said the words, “I feel furious at her,” I watched his body flush. This was the moment I had been waiting for.*

*Although there are many moments in a session in which an individual will enter emotional and energetically charged states, there is a very clear, palpable kind of charge that indicates a pre-deterministic hardwiring that wants to be resolved. These are the moments that I wait for when working with a client. With practice it becomes easier and easier to identify them because, most importantly, our hardwired beliefs that have brought us pain in life want desperately to be uncovered and upgraded. They hide in plain sight to anyone with eyes to see them. It is a common occurrence for an element of hardwiring to struggle to express itself while the client struggles to hide it. The exercise is usually one of futility that makes the hardwiring only more obvious. In these scenarios, the client simply requires more assurance that he is moving in the appropriate direction, regardless of how uncomfortable it may feel.*

*I begin by slowly making Jeremy aware of the feelings within his body. I do this by guiding him into a heightened state of awareness so that he can become acutely sensitive to the beat of his heart, the tingling of his fingers and the sensations swirling inside of him. When I am sure that he*

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<sup>1</sup> All names, and details have been significantly altered to preserve the anonymity of individual clients.

*is in the appropriate state, I begin to re-establish contact with the charge of the hardwiring that expressed itself earlier. I guide him into this place delicately and hyper-consciously and slowly invite it to offer a memory from his past, a memory from long, long ago. Almost immediately he squirms. His internal struggle is obvious. While the place that is calling out to us desperately wants to be resolved, the path to get there is not only unfamiliar but uncomfortable to re-enter. It is a trauma that he had long suppressed from his conscious mind. Finding it involves a combination of following the signal consciously, without being repulsed by the emotional intensity within it. As we follow it down to its root, I notice his face twitch, and another rush of energy flushes through his body. "That one," I said. He nods his head, but a moment later begins to shake his head and mutter that "it's nothing," a common defense. I gently press him to share what has emerged even if it seems unimportant.*

*Slowly Jeremy begins to recount a story from when he was 5 years old, one that he had not recalled for years, in which he had been the victim of "improper conduct," a sexual assault by another man. As he tells the story, I listen very carefully with my mind to follow the threads and digressions, but also with my emotions to feel the intensity of the charge, and with my heart to hold an intuitive space that guides the healing process. At any moment during the telling of a story, we risk going down a tributary that might make sense intellectually but would move us further and further away from the energetic clot that requires resolution. This is an important distinction that I have to constantly hold in place so that we are able to make the necessary journey.*

*As we continue to follow the story, we begin to realize that the most charge is not contained in the incident itself, but in the reaction of his mother. She had said nothing at all. Soon the words that he originally expressed for his partner reappeared for his mother. "I was furious at her." But you did not say anything? "No, I did not." And so it becomes clear. The resentment was kept in and never resolved or processed.*

*As we continued with the session, it became clear that the belief created in this moment was "she doesn't care," but being such a painful conclusion (and snap judgment reaction) from his place of childhood innocence, a second belief was created to protect himself from it: "I don't need her." In this way, Jeremy created a belief of empowerment to take the place of his feelings of disempowerment, one that he would later consciously forget but unconsciously re-engage when any woman began to take on as significant a role as his primary female imprint.*

*The rest of our work together was spent untangling these beliefs from that heightened place of awareness and somatically working with the well-worn emotional grooves that he had engaged internally over so many years mentally, emotionally and neurologically, so that he would no longer be triggered by his partner or any other woman, for that matter, in the ways that he once had been.*

*I later heard from the client who had referred him to me say that he felt "cured" after a single session, a word that holds a little too much definitiveness for me, but one that I certainly associate with having in some ways resolved an emotional knot that had challenged him for so many years.*

Hardwired belief: Females in my life do not truly care about me, especially when I feel ashamed.  
Result: Unconscious anger toward women.

## 2. “Why am I afraid of having an intimate relationship?”

*When Sarah came to me, she was unable to enter into an intimate relationship despite the fact that she desperately wanted to. She was able to have sexual relations, but the moment that she began to feel an authentic emotional intimacy toward another man, she would find herself overcome with so much anxiety that she would end the relationship immediately.*

*As we went through the process of uncovering where this powerful emotional impulse to remove herself from moments of potential love had originated, we quickly uncovered the peak moment of her young life: the death of her father.*

*As we looked at her emotions somatically, Sarah began to recount the event in more detail than she had been able to previously. Finally the energy within her body rose to a peak as she explained the anger that had become co-mingled with the pain of seeing his body, a natural mechanism of empowerment to avoid feeling the pain of losing him fully. Within that anger the belief had been created:*

*I will never put myself in this situation again.  
I will never make myself so vulnerable again.*

*In this moment, Sarah carved a hardwired belief into her psyche anchored by an extremely powerful experience. The result was that every time she began to feel her heart open, she would be immediately overwhelmed with the sensations that accompanied this original event: fear, terror, repulsion and a conviction that if she does not escape she will likely experience a pain that is so unbearable, it may even lead to death.*

Hardwired belief: Love leads to a pain that is unbearable. Never open yourself up too much or you risk feeling that unbearable pain again.

Result: Never opening up fully in a relationship.

## 3. “Why do I have such trouble expressing emotion?”

*When Noland came to me, he was incapable of experiencing emotion, something that naturally had created enormous difficulties in his relationships. Over the course of 10 years he had been married and divorced, and constantly found himself choosing women that his mind believed were right for him without ever **feeling** if they were right for him.*

*Quickly I discovered that Noland was not only unwilling to experience emotion, but almost unable to. When I asked him if this was true, he did not say that he **could not** but that he simply **chose not to**. When I pressed him more, he struggled to come up with a reasonable answer for why he did this, for why he chose consistently not to feel. At this point in his process, he was clearly able to identify his own cognitive dissonance. He was no longer able to fool himself.*

*When we finally identified the experience that caused this powerful conditioning that he should never, under any circumstances, experience emotion, it made perfect sense. As a child, Noland was punished every time he cried. Among the worst of these punishments was being locked in a cupboard for long periods of time without food or water. The hardwired belief that he had created in one of the most traumatic of these moments was:*

*Expressing emotion isolates me for painfully long periods of time.*

*The irony of this hardwired belief, as with so many of them, was that it caused precisely what it had been designed to avoid. Instead of preventing isolation from others, especially those he loved, it provoked it.*

Hardwired belief: Never express your emotion because you will be punished and isolated.

Result: Never expressing emotions, which creates mixed signals, confusion, resentment and, ultimately, breakups.

#### **4. “Why did I become an accountant?”**

*When I began working with Jane, she was a successful accountant for a large firm. She made good money, was very skilled at her job, but inherently unfulfilled by it and confused as to how one of her great gifts in life could have propelled her into such an unfulfilling career.*

*The peak experience that we discovered upon investigating her hardwiring was a mathematics competition that she won when she was a child. She had gained so much love and appreciation from those around her that she had created this hardwired belief:*

*If I succeed in math I will be loved.*

*The result of this was that she had followed the path of least resistance in her career that led her to accountancy. Every time she had begun to question her direction, she had continually felt a powerful emotional undercurrent within her directing her not to question her choices but to simply go with them.*

*In this scenario, even an empowering experience can create a hardwired influence that can act as a propulsion into a certain direction that, when questioned, can often feel completely counter-intuitive to what we might feel in our hearts is in our best interest. In this case, it was not that Jane needed to abandon her skill in mathematics; she simply needed to be open to it being employed in other ways.*

Hardwired belief: Using my mathematical gifts is the best way to gain the love of others.

Result: The persistent pursuing of a career solving the mathematical problems of others does not, in and of itself, reflect my purpose.

#### **5. “Why am I such an introvert?”**

*Ben came to me as a chronic introvert. After identifying the area in his body that held the greatest charge for his introversion I asked him to become aware of his body and invited a memory from his past to reveal itself. Immediately a powerful memory from his youth appeared. As he began to describe it, allowing the emotions from within his body to guide him, he described an event when he was 6 years old in which he found himself playing outside his house, a location that he described as:*

*the only place I ever truly felt safe.*

*As the memory unfolded, we discovered that this was a game of hide and seek, and that of all the moments that he enjoyed himself during this game, there was one moment within it that clearly revealed itself as the energetic positive peak. This was the moment in which Ben had discovered a really effective hiding place that confounded the other children. As he described this moment, he began to tap into the emotions of the time that had been lodged into his nervous system. He could hardly stop himself from sniggering, his excitement was so palpable. The enjoyment from being hidden was clear, and the longer he remained hidden the more pleasure he derived from the experience. When we began to explore other peak sensations within the memory, there was only one other. The moment when his stepfather repeatedly began to call him back into the house. In this moment, he was called out from his hiding place and into the house, where he would have to sit and listen to the other children playing outside. Hiding for Ben had become not only his great pleasure, but his great escape.*

*When we finished the session, we identified this “triumphant” moment, not a trauma that Ben had programmed himself to avoid, but one in which he had repeatedly found great pleasure and self-empowerment.*

Hardwired belief: Hiding is safe and fun.

Result: Deriving a sense of pleasure and mirth from not revealing oneself to others eventually developed into an introversion that distanced himself from others, culminating in a feeling of isolation and loneliness that he felt emotionally trapped in and unmotivated to abandon.

## CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

Unresolved hardwired programs will often continue to influence us over the course of our entire lives. Unless identified, they can go on running indefinitely, and no amount of rational persuasion or strategic consulting will be able to alter them. The overwhelming persuasiveness of the emotions driving them will often be as powerful as the day they were created, even if that time was decades ago and no longer applicable to the present moment.

People come to me and tell me that something is taking place in their lives, over and over again, that they cannot account for. It may sound like a frustrating place to be, but believe it or not, it's a great place to be. Because that revelation — that something is taking place that I cannot account for but that I sense is coming from within me — is the moment that we begin to see what was previously invisible to us. It is the first time we are able to avoid attributing it to external circumstances, or the fault or responsibility of someone else. For the first time, we are able to take

responsibility, and that is the most empowering place we can be, because it is the moment that change has become possible.

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