

Exploring Depression Related to Childhood Trauma

Journal Prompts 8/19/24

(Edited from 4/3/23 Journal Prompts)

Children going through abuse have natural and often genius ways of surviving what they are going through. We can look at surviving our childhood through some innate strategies: Fight, flight, freeze, shame, and cry for help. I believe most children due the absence of any power or help have to freeze (fawn), go to shame, and or go into flight. Some children fight and cry for help which comes with their own problems too.

In addition to those strategies that we know to be responses I believe children become depressed and shut down from the day-to-day existence of growing up in an unsafe family.

An additional survival strategy in battling our family situation and already engaging in trauma responses, is that children usually must come up with a false sense of self to make it through and somewhat go along with home and community life. Our false sense of self such as people pleasing, a performer, caretaker, little adult, or joker is a good way to mask while not getting any healthy parenting on developing an authentic sense of self.

[Check out a recent video on reclaiming a healthy sense of self.](#)

Another inner way children survive their abuse is to shut down, go into their heads and leave their emotional bodies.

The combination of the abuse at home, our trauma responses, developing a false self requires massive energy that leads to depression that can start as early as kindergarten.

Here are some examples of all these factors

- Trauma at home – daily: fighting, criticism, contempt or neglect
- False sense of self – trying to be funny or perfect and getting abused anyway
- Trauma responses – fawning to bullies who humiliate (already learned at home)

One can see that young children are already sitting with so much that depression makes sense due to lack of help, love, energy, and justice.

In my own story, I was:

- A combination of flight, shame, and fight (we are usually more than one).
- My false sense of identity was around being my mother's caretaker or parent (people pleasing)
- I was depressed and numb for most of my childhood when I wasn't trying to be funny or impressive to get attention.

When I got to therapy and started to have some healing shifts, I awakened from a depression known now as dysthymia. Dysthymia is a milder long-lasting depression with episodes of worsening here and there.

I call dysthymia “refrigerator buzz depression,” – meaning you don't know it's there because the fridge has been buzzing for ten years, and someone points it out. As a result, you've been desensitized to it.

In short, I didn't know I was in a chronic low-grade depression about my childhood trauma until I started to work on myself in therapy and started to benefit. Then, things went from opaque to clear, and I started feeling good, but I didn't know I was that depressed because I had been in that since the first grade.

There are various types of depression, usually accompanied by anxiety. We can be suicidally depressed with poor daily functioning, episodic with various severity, or chronic and low grade like dysthymia. Everyone is different.

Like most things around childhood trauma, I think the survivor struggles with strategies that kept them safe while growing up, but those strategies now limit joyous adulthood.

What I dislike about the traditional approach to the treatment of depression is to treat it without asking or exploring *why* someone is depressed.

Here are some more specific examples *of why* survivors experience depression due to childhood trauma.

- Having parents with mental illness and unfulfilled lives
- Unprocessed sexual abuse in the family and not being believed
- Not having a loving, protective father
- Being raised in an emotionally vacant family
- Being raised in a high-conflict parental system
- Being raised with medical trauma
- Narcissistic abuse
- Poverty, chaos, and betrayal

Children going through trauma have something that I call a compromised emotional experience. We go into our heads when we are not safe to be in our emotional bodies. This affects our emotional balance, and we might have rage but not feel sadness. On the other hand, we might have the opposite. We often have problems with feeling complete joy when the time comes to experience it, such as the birth of a child.

[Here is a video on childhood trauma symptoms that explains this imbalance of emotions further.](#)

The following prompts are designed to explore the roots of depression along with its symptoms.

Journal Prompt #1

How does depression manifest in your life? Write out your experience of it. Does it come in solid waves, such as a break-up fallout that lasts several years? Is it chronic and baseline that you might overlook for not having a contrasting emotional experience? Have you gotten feedback that you seem down but don't connect with that on your insides? Be as specific as you can.

Journal Prompt #2

Do you struggle with joy and celebrations? This is a sign of compromised emotional experience related to the video childhood trauma symptoms.

Do you feel shame in the inability not to feel good that you accomplished something such as a graduation or milestone? Do things feel meh, and they should be “whooooo hooooo”? Write out situations that come to mind.

Journal Prompt #3

Do you remember possibly being depressed growing up? If you felt sad and hopeless most days in that family, you were probably struggling with depression. Can you write about any potential signs, such as lack of interest in things or isolation in your school years?

Journal Prompt #4

In dialoging with your inner child, (please reference the reparenting the inner child webinar and worksheet); what does your inner child say about joy? Do they have specific ideas or stories about it? If you struggle with this, in the dialogue, can you validate that struggle with “of course, we struggle with feelings – look what happened to us.”

Directions

1. Start a dialogue with your inner child with the topic of depression in mind
2. Ask your inner child about what they think about joy and start of conversation if joy feels tricky and why?
3. Validate your inner child about what happened growing up and how it contributes to feeling down and disconnected. Of course it does.
4. From your inner adult, let your inner child know you’re trying to get out of it and get some buried feelings back. It is the work you’re doing in the membership or therapy.
5. Ask your inner child about what it might feel like if there wasn’t depression. Might that be energizing? Might that look scary? (sometimes there is comfort in being down as contradictory as that sounds).
6. Let your inner child know some specific things you’re doing to address the depression. (see list at end for ideas)
7. End the dialogue thanking them for discussing this with you.

Journal Prompt #5

Write about situations, dynamics, and history of your family that potentially contribute to struggling with depression. Again, it’s helpful to externalize if you get stuck, like imagine any child going through what you experienced growing up.

Examples

- “The divorce that no one told us about till a moving van showed up one day.”
- “My mother repeatedly told me she was going to leave my stepfather and never did.”
- “Nothing worked in my family; my parents were extremely immature and stuck.”
- “Never experiencing what my peers seemed to experience, such as regular dinners and the family enjoying each other.”
- “Going home from school to an oppressive neurotic religious father who grilled me for hours on sin.”

Some resources for depression.

You’ve probably tried many things at this point, but here are various things that can help.

- Joining a group and engaging with a good trauma therapist. Processing the family abuse can help.
- Medications (I know). I see meds as either a catalyst to shifting or something a person benefits from long-term. I don’t like them either, but sometimes a good anti-depressant helps.
- Alternative medications such as ketamine or mushroom-based therapies. Please consult with a medical professional trained in these. Make sure it is regulated and supervised.
- Rage work – getting in touch with how horrific we were treated and rocketing through the shutdown barrier was helpful to me.
- Look at it battling depression like a long game with some gains.
- If not ready for big things, joining this membership is a good start.