

Understanding the Impact of Early Trauma and How to Heal It

By Kate White



Caroline suffered. As a young woman, she had chronic anxiety that often led to depression. She had trouble sleeping and only felt her best when she had absolute control of her environment. She had difficulty with intimacy—she was unable to relax and trust that her partner was there for her. At age 32 she realized she needed more than traditional counseling. She was just not getting better.

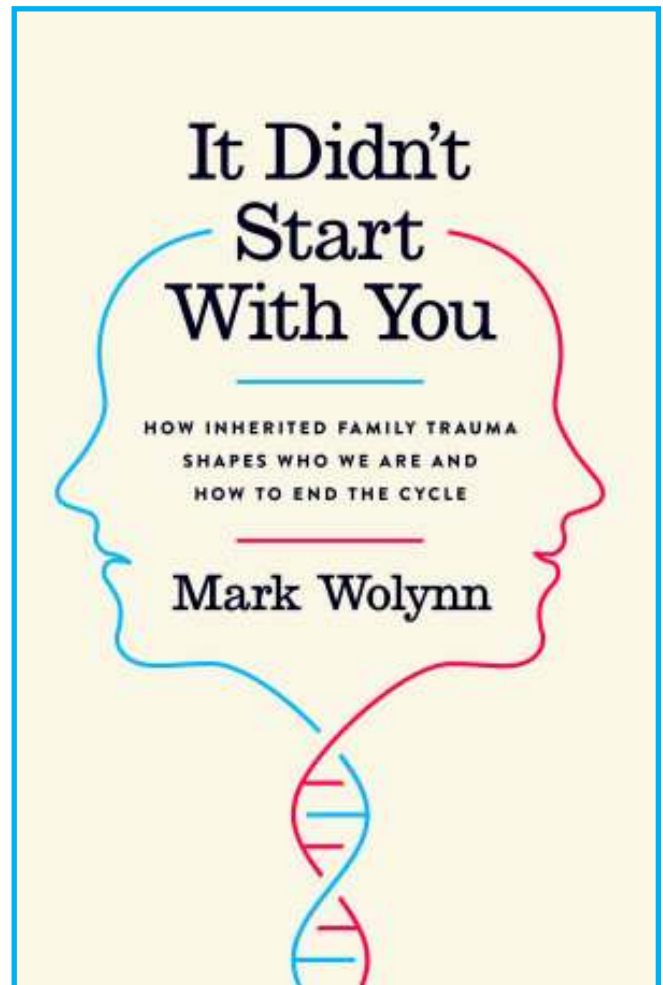
She sought professionals able to help her understand her body and nervous system using methodologies that allowed her to explore the impact of early trauma. Appropriately trained therapists included those trained in integrated approaches that include touch or somatic interventions. Sensitive touch is crucial to healing early trauma. Other therapies with good outcomes include hypnotherapy, music therapy, and mindfulness. Adults can be taught to recognize their own internal states and what to do to shift them from anxiety and overwhelming states to those that are more calm and centered. Caroline worked with practitioners trained in body-oriented therapies such as Somatic Experiencing®, Biodynamic Craniosacral Therapy, hypnotherapy, Body-Mind Centering®, as well as implementing a wide variety of integrated approaches.

Caroline discovered that her body tells a story, that deep in her nervous and muscular-skeletal systems, a pattern was laid down that hijacked her normal healthy rhythms of excitement and performance, and rest and relaxation, and interfered with her ability to connect to other people, she realized that she had choices.

Just how does this work?

The roots of early trauma can begin as early as two generations before conception. Research has shown that the experience of the grandmother, whose body was the home of the child who then became a mother or father, can set up just how genes get selected for future generations. This “epigenetic” reality or how the environment informs which genes are turned on or off has been proven through extensive studies of health records, in animal laboratories, and in twin research (PBS, 2007). Therapists who understand epigenetics are trained to listen to the stories of clients for clues to trans-generational or intergenerational trauma. Profound stories have come from people whose ancestors were exposed to genocide, war, starvation and severe trauma. We now know that high cortisol levels and the internal chemicals that come from severe stress and trauma can influence gene selection.

The next place where health roots are evident for humans is in conception, pregnancy, and birth. Cell biologists tell us that gene selection can be influenced by what is going on the lives of parents-to-be as early as three months before conception. Parents wanting to conceive can start by settling the conditions of their lives, influencing their bodies, introducing states of relaxation and excitement, bonding and connection. This connection lays the ground work for health and well-being in their children. Still, previous genetic code from the ancestors can influence conditions in a baby, especially anxiety. This condition is particularly “sticky” within generations and families. The good news is that families can create environments around sensitive children to help them thrive and grow. Therapists and educators can help parents see what needs to happen for families to give them the best possible start.



Pregnancy and birth truly matter. Research has shown that the internal states of a mother influence the life of the baby inside her, especially those created by chronic stress and overwhelming events (Weinstein, 2016). Caring for a baby inside the mother means more than proper nutrition; it involves helping the mother and her partner connect with the baby, and determining what supports that mother, in particular. Every baby needs two layers of support; for the inside baby, the mother is her world. She receives lots of information about the outside world just from sensing what is going inside the mother. Support for the mother is key for the health of her baby, and the future generations. Here, therapists, bodyworkers, good friends, sisters, other mothers, support circles of all kinds and most especially the father or partner can play this key role.

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Birth interventions can also disrupt natural cycles in humans. While often these interventions are necessary, they can be overused. Birth matters because of the birth sequence pays out a pattern that we see play out in life repeatedly. Therapists trained in understanding birth imprints know that this pattern is about a sequence of moves: intention, preparation, action, follow through, integration and rest. Sometimes called 'the cycle of satisfaction' this sequence can be seen in the way we do anything in our lives. How do we plan? How do we do the things we do? Do we take time to appreciate our actions and take them into our awareness? This pattern is most evident in birth as the baby, with his own awareness and intention at play, begins the passage into the world outside the mother to be received and acknowledged. Too often, this pattern is disrupted. Still, the best outcomes are when mom and baby are connected from the start of labor, realizing that they are laboring together for one outcome: healthy birth. It is optimal when the baby stays with the mother, skin-to-skin. Hospitals now know this and there are world-wide movements to support health birth and bonding: The Mother-Friendly and Baby-Friendly practices and hospital policies supported by the World Health Organization.

conceived. What her parents didn't know was that Caroline's grandmother was badly abused by her husband—Caroline's grandfather—who was also an alcoholic. He died before Caroline was born. He had been a child in a war-torn country and lived in chronic fear and deprivation most of his early life. His early trauma created the internal violence and alcoholism that terrified her grandmother. Caroline's mother had anxiety, inherited quite understandably from her mother and her own early life. Caroline then inherited this, too. Caroline's mother also did not know that she conceived twins. One twin did not survive past the first trimester. Caroline, developing normally next to her twin, was exposed to the life and death of another being, which put her into a fear state even in the first trimester of life. Then, Caroline's grandmother died before she was born, putting her mother into depression, as she was very close to her mother.

The support of a woman by her mother as she, herself becomes a mother can be so key. If there has been difficulty for a woman in life, having a baby can be transformational. It can be a time a great healing, all the more important that support for the newborn family be there. Caroline received a message inside the womb that life on the outside was full of loss. Naturally, her mother grieved. Caroline felt reluctant to be born. Her mother went past the due date. She, too was reluctant to have the baby, overwhelmed by grief. A long labor resulted in a C-section. Caroline had difficulty breathing and was isolated from her mother in a NICU, but just briefly. Bonding and breastfeeding were difficult. Caroline's father tried hard, but he, too was overwhelmed with caring for Caroline's mother and the baby.

The Teenage Years

After ancestral patterns, conception and birth, the roots of health and well-being appear in the lives of our teenagers. What they eat, how they take care of themselves, and what they experience in life as their bodies mature and come of age all play a role in the health of future generations.



So what was Caroline's story?

Caroline was a wanted baby. Her parents were in love and she was consciously

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Epigenetic studies have shown that high amounts of corn syrup from soda or chemicals such as bisphenol A, or BPA, found in plastics that leaks into food can disrupt the endocrine system and influence reproduction. Teens need to be supported to see their phase of life as preparation for the future, as well as a time for learning, growth, and coming of age. Historically, tribal people have had ceremonies to help young people realize the importance of this period. Communities supported these rituals. They were an integral part of life that children saw happening all the time, and it gave a felt sense of being held and nurtured by a greater force, a whole community of aunties, uncles and elders who were watching over them. This feeling still happens in some ways in more modern communities where extended family plays an important role, but many of our families are totally on their own without this kind of support.

Finally, optimal healthy patterns are at play in the relationships between mother, partner or father and baby. The science of attachment, the biological and psychological connections between parents and their children, has been studied for decades. Research shows that secure and insecure attachment patterns are often passed on without awareness. Parents can work to understand how they were parented, and how these patterns affect their nervous systems and world views. Very often, early trauma is about insecure and/or terrifying chronic situations in a child's life before cognition, or around the age of two. These stressful situations have a life or death feel to them because we are so dependent at that time of our lives. These situations get hardwired into our bodies. This is another layer of difficulty for humans. Research studies such as the Adverse Childhood

Experience study done by Kaiser Permanente (Felitti, 1998) show that early overwhelming experiences can be the root of conditions like addiction, heart disease, diabetes and more.

Therapeutic Choices

Caroline's family rallied. It took a while, but eventually they got back into a loving space. Caroline was a very loved little girl. Her parents doted on her, especially her mother, as she loved her own mother very much and highly valued the mother-daughter relationship. She did well in school. Her mother had another child, and this pregnancy and birth was easy. Still, at times, Caroline felt deep fear that she could not pinpoint and had high performance anxiety that she could not understand.

Therapy for her consisted of awareness of her body and ways to shift her internal state through mindfulness, bodywork, and education about the pre and perinatal period especially just what can happen to a baby. She connected with what worked in her life, where she felt health and connection and was oriented to that in a felt sense bodily way. Education also included how the nervous system works, conditions that helped her feel calm, and how to create them. Adults do not need to re-experience their past to heal; in fact, that can be retraumatizing. What is most healing is orienting to the present, education about what is possible, being made aware of what the pattern is that keeps that person in a less than optimal state, and discovering just what tools help. This can be the therapeutic process.

Transforming Procedural Memories: Body Based Patterns

All these experiences, starting with the ancestors, adolescence, conception,

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pregnancy, birth and the first 18 months of life happen before cognition. Scientists, researchers, therapists and educators call these early imprints in life “procedural memory,” or memories that are held in the body in the actual tissues. These early patterns, once a healthy response to an overwhelming situation, can cause havoc in the present when they are no longer needed and recapitulate over time. Therapists see these re-occurring patterns as recapitulations of early experiences sometimes caused by unavoidable conditions in the lives of their grandmothers and parents. The consequences of not addressing early patterns can be huge. The story is being told over and over through health conditions like chronic anxiety, depression, heart disease, diabetes, thyroid conditions, adrenal and chronic fatigue and more.

Yet, there is a health in our body that is always there and healing approaches need to have a somatic or body-oriented practice to access these early patterns and transform them should these patterns continue to play out in life. Somatic and movement oriented therapists appropriately trained can help stabilize and re-orient overwhelming experiences that are looping inside a person. The right kind of approach can be settling and empowering. Sometimes, it just takes a few sessions for awareness to come in and the health that is there takes over. Adults can be empowered to make a choice rather than stay in the old pattern. These choices need to be coupled with the body through sensation.

It works.

Families who had an overwhelming birth or who have a baby that is hard to settle and connect with can seek out therapists who understand birth and bonding. Baby massage and other somatic approaches are crucial here, as is support for the mom and father or partner. If I can help the mother feel good in her body, the baby does better. If I can help normalize the experience of birth for the mother and partner/father, then everyone feels better. And if the mother does not feel good, the father often doesn't either. Studies on postpartum depression show that if the mother suffers, so does the father.

Furthermore, families can be taught games to play with children to help them overcome early difficulties. They can develop their own way of being together around the children to create a healthy environment for that child in an “epigenetic” approach to being a family. Good education and trial and error come into play here. Birth can be supported through bonding prenatally and choosing conditions that will help as much as possible for the least amount of interventions. This, too, is unique and variable. Awareness, communication, support, and a calm, protective presence aid optimal birth.

Finally, our culture needs to shift. Cultural creatives in our midst are already hard at work in this effort. Mothers and fathers need more support; families that have difficult conditions also need more support; some cultural traditions and awareness of how important adolescence can be are also crucial elements to cultural change. At the very least, we as a culture can shift to see that we are spiritual beings first, conscious, sentient and aware before birth, and how positive feeling states in the body and present moment are useful elements of a complete recovery program from early trauma.

Kate White is Director of the Center for Prenatal and Perinatal Programs, owner of Belvedere Integrated Healing Arts and Director of Education for the Association for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health. You can see more about her at <http://www.ppncenter.com> or about prenatal and perinatal psychology at <http://www.birthpsychologyedu.com>.

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