

SUMMARY

IT DIDN'T START WITH YOU

MARK WOLYNN



Summary of “It Didn’t Start With You” by Mark Wolynn

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A guide to understanding how family trauma shapes
our personalities

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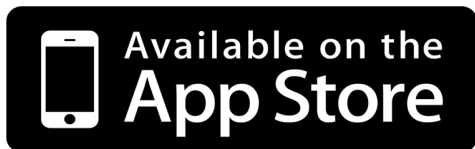


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Introduction

“Remember-- as far as anybody knows, we are a nice, normal family!” This phrase is often printed on doormats and wall-art as a humorous slogan that conjures images of playfully kooky families who don’t quite have it all together but have a great time anyway. Undoubtedly, that’s exactly why so many people cheerfully subscribe to the ideology behind this phrase and are happy to hang this type of decor in their homes. But what about the people whose childhoods weren’t necessarily abnormal in a cute way? What about childhood experiences that are fraught with trauma?

If the latter describes you, then you know the inner workings of trauma all too well. You know how it can hardwire your brain to think, feel, and process experiences differently. And that’s especially true if you suffered your trauma at the hands of a parent or caregiver. But unfortunately, the thing about trauma is that if you spend your life trying to repress it, it will only continue to haunt you. It may even seep through your life and infect your own children, no matter how much you want to avoid passing on that same pain. Fortunately, however, there is hope for people who want to break the cycle. And that’s exactly what we’re going to learn about over the course of the next few chapters.

What to Do When the Trauma Isn't Your Own

Everybody has some issues. No matter what it is or how severely they impact our lives, every single person on the planet has some type of struggle, fear, or insecurity. These often drive us to develop negative habits or behavior patterns that we struggle to relinquish and as we ensnare ourselves in the cycle, we often feel that something is deeply wrong with us. But that's not always the case. In fact, the assumption that we are the only source of our own turmoil is actually a very naive perspective.

Understanding the impact of inherited trauma can help us to trace the source of our struggles-- even if that means charting it back through several generations!

That might sound like a little bit of a stretch and you might wonder how something can impact you so profoundly if it didn't even happen to you. But that simply goes to show the devastating impact of unresolved trauma because if someone suffers a traumatic event, the fears and coping mechanisms they develop-- particularly the compulsion of living in "survival mode" (a stage many people never depart from-- can haunt their children and even grandchildren! For example, the author recounts a story of one patient he was seeing who was desperately afraid of dying.

Although she had never been in a life-threatening situation or experienced anything that would predispose her to an irrational fear of death, these fears haunted her to such an extent that she often experienced debilitating claustrophobia, as if these small spaces might intrinsically lead to death. This was initially mystifying to her, but after tracing her Jewish family history with the author, they uncovered the lost story of her mother's relatives who were gassed to death in a Nazi concentration camp. Because the surviving family had never dealt with the trauma of this loss-- or the constant threat of being herded into the gas chambers themselves-- this residual anxiety had been passed down through generations until it haunted this woman in the present day. So, with this case study in mind, let's take a closer look at the power and process of inherited trauma.

Trauma and Genetics

If you have a fraught relationship with your parents or grandparents, inherited trauma might be one possible explanation. That's because the impact of trauma isn't limited to our emotional connection with our families-- it can affect our biology as well. To look at an example of how this functions in practical application, let's consider a study conducted by psychiatrist Rachel Yehuda, the head of the Division of Traumatic Stress Studies at New York's Mount Sinai Medical Centre. Dr. Yehuda examined a sample group of 38 women who were pregnant during the attack on 9/11, with a particular focus on those who were working in the World Trade Centre at the time. She was especially interested in the cases of those who developed PTSD as a result of the attack and her study followed these women through their pregnancies until they gave birth.

To develop her results, Yehuda took saliva samples from the women who struggled with PTSD and then took samples from their babies as well. They then analyzed the levels of the cortisol hormone present in these samples and found that both the mothers and babies displayed levels of cortisol that were significantly lower than average. If you're not familiar with what cortisol does and why it's significant, the simple answer is that cortisol is a stress hormone; its job is to regulate our emotional responses to stressful events. In the early stages of a traumatic event, your cortisol levels might skyrocket as your body attempts to process and come to grips with this new stimuli. But after prolonged exposure to trauma, these levels actually plummet for survivors who develop PTSD.

This is a curious response because psychiatrists and neuroscientists who track cortisol levels in trauma survivors typically only see these drops when the trauma has been resolved and the patient has been successfully treated. But after further study, Dr. Yehuda and her team learned that these permanent levels of low cortisol develop when someone doesn't have enough cortisol at the time of the traumatic impact to regulate their fight-or-flight response. In short, that means that what should happen is that we

experience traumatic stimuli, our fight-or-flight response kicks in (along with our cortisol) and then we calm down as our body seeks to normalize what just happened and help us return to a stable state.

But if you don't have enough cortisol to begin with, that initial surge of the hormone may overwhelm us and cause it to drop dangerously low. This in turn can create or intensify "triggers"-- a form of psychological stimuli that reactivates a survivor's trauma. Although these triggers don't have to be inherently threatening, they are intrinsically connected to a traumatic memory and being triggered can cause survivors to relive their trauma all over again or be overwhelmed by intrusive thoughts. And after examining the impact of cortisol levels, traumatic memories, and triggers, psychiatrists like Yehuda and biologists like Brian Lipton of Stanford University can affirm that trauma "biochemically alters the genetic expression of... offspring."

When read in conjunction with Yehuda's study on the children of mothers with PTSD, we can conclude without a doubt that trauma is inherited by virtue of what Yehuda calls "intergenerational transmission." So, in short, if your mother experienced a significant trauma while pregnant, you may have literally inherited genetic trauma. And as a result, you might be predisposed to fear, nervousness, or anxiety. You might struggle with a nameless and seemingly sourceless sense of dread that confuses you. And likewise, if your grandparents-- or even great-grandparents-- suffered trauma of their own, such as surviving the Holocaust, their own unresolved trauma can be passed through generations by both emotional and genetic transmission.

Let's Talk About Your Feelings for Your Mother

Books and movies often portray that as the first question asked by psychiatrists and its repetitive frequency often renders the question laughable. As a result, we sometimes acquire the impression that all psychiatrists are Freudians, unwilling to believe that anyone has a healthy relationship with their parents or that our trauma could stem from any other source. But the truth is that there's more to this trope than meets the eye. Because whether we want to admit it or not, no early relationship impacts us like the one we have with our parents. Whether we love them, hate them, or found solace in caregivers who aren't related to us by blood, we can't really escape our parents' impact on our lives. And in cases where some form of childhood trauma is involved, unraveling our history with our parents is the most important step to resolving that trauma and moving forward. To help you learn more about this process, Wolynn describes four types of disruptions that can occur in a parent-child relationship called the Four Unconscious Themes.

These themes include such problems as a co-dependent relationship (in which you and your parent are abnormally or unhealthily close); rejecting a parent (in cases where your parent is toxic or abusive and the child feels the need to sever ties); a disrupted relationship with your mother (which occurs if you're separated from your mother before the age of three or have a history of being in foster care); and, once again, inherited trauma. So, let's take a closer look at these themes and how they function. The primary technique Wolynn recommends for exploring the role of the unconscious themes in your life is something called The Core Language Approach. Although it might be initially painful, you can use this approach to uncover repressed traumatic memories and triggers that are holding you back.

You can start with descriptive exercises that encourage you to verbalize your relationship with your parents and how you feel about them. So, if, for example, you start with a descriptor like, "My father was emotionally manipulative," you can then move on to discussing or writing about a

specific moment where you experienced manipulation and how it made you feel. These exercises can be helpful because they enable you to get to the root of your problems and identify core issues instead of walking around with a generic sense of trauma, abuse, or dread.

Learn to Verbalize Your Fears

Putting your fears into words is hard, especially when you suffer a trauma so significant that it seems to transcend all verbalization. But if you ever had the childhood experience of learning to face your fears-- like confronting a monster under the bed by turning on the lights-- then you know that you have to do the same with internalized trauma. As we discussed in the previous chapter, using your Core Language can help you identify the specific source of your trauma and break through it. So, let's take a closer look at how that works. For starters, your first step is identifying your Core Complaint.

Just like you used your Core Language in the last chapter to pinpoint a key characteristic of your trauma-- i.e. "My father was emotionally manipulative"-- your Core Complaint is going to take you one step further by helping you identify that trauma's impact on your life. You can use this tool to describe the biggest thing you're afraid of at the moment, like, "I'm afraid my trauma has made me a toxic person" or "I'm afraid I'm pushing everyone in my life away to avoid getting hurt again."

Once you've done this, your next step is to pin down your Core Sentence. This is connected to your Core Complaint because it's an outcome that you fear will happen as a result of your Core Complaint. For example, if you worry that you've internalized negative coping mechanisms or that your experience with trauma has caused you to engage in toxic behavior patterns, your Core Sentence might be, "I'm afraid that I'll hurt people I love" or "I'm afraid of losing my partner." It might be a little scary to dig this deep, but once you use this specific language to pinpoint the root of your trauma, you can properly begin to heal.

Trace the Source

In the previous chapters, we've examined some strategies for pinpointing the root of your personal trauma and identifying the fears and anxieties that characterize it. But now it's time to take a look at what you can do if your trauma is primarily inherited, as in the case of the patient whose claustrophobia stemmed from an inherited fear of death by gassing. In these cases, we need to take our Core Language practices one step further and use these new skills to trace the source of our family's trauma, not just our own. You can start by creating your personal Core Language Map to help you raise awareness of your symptoms and channel this new understanding into enlightening results.

According to the author, your Core Language Map should have four parts. These parts will include two of the first steps we've discussed already-- your Core Sentence and your Core Complaint-- along with two new parts called the Core Descriptors and Core Trauma. Each of these four steps are tools for investigating your family history and getting to the source of your inherited trauma. Not only will these steps help you uncover the underlying source of your fears, it will also give you a deeper understanding of why that particular fear holds such power in your life. You can start with a process that Wolynn calls "Bridging Questions" or asking questions that help you bridge the gap between your fear and your understanding of it.

So if, for example, you're afraid of losing your children or fear that your child might die unexpectedly, one of the first Bridging Questions you should ask is whether someone in your family lost a child. If your grandmother suffered the unexpected death of a child and blamed herself-- however unjustly-- for the loss, this could be a key to unlocking the source of your own fears. And if it helps to provide yourself with a visual map for charting your family's history of trauma, you can literally draw your family tree and make notations of the events that were traumatic for each member of your family. These events might include moments like surviving domestic violence, the sudden death of a child, a tragic or unexpected

injury, or larger-scale events like surviving the Holocaust or PTSD as a result of serving in a war. But don't limit yourself to tangible events like the ones described above; remember that psychological abuse, a painful breakup or betrayal are also valid forms of trauma and they have an equally powerful impact.

Moving Toward Peace

So, now that you've identified the history and patterns of your trauma, what are you going to do with it? For pretty much everyone, the ideal next step is making peace with it so you can move on. And that's exactly what we're going to examine in this chapter. As is the case with any situation where healing is required, recognizing that you have a problem is the first step, and by doing so, you've already made tremendous progress. Verbalizing your problem is the second vital step and you've already done that by using each component of your Core Language Map to put words to your trauma. This is effective whether you're working through trauma that stems from a tumultuous relationship with your parents or inherited trauma that goes back for generations.

However, your journey towards healing doesn't end with a simple identification or acknowledgement. The next and final step is to use the language tools we've already learned to sort of "reprogram" ourselves into a healing mentality. Just as words can help us identify the source of our trauma, they can also help us write healing messages for the future. So, now that you've found your Core Sentence, learn to write your healing sentence. This should be designed to challenge the thoughts you've previously struggled with. So if you've previously told yourself things like, "I'm worthless" or "I'll never get better," your healing sentence could attack that message with affirming rebuttals like, "I refuse to relive what happened to me," "I am not defined by my trauma," or "I will move forward and grow."

And although it doesn't work for everyone, sometimes a ceremonial act can help. It can take a different form for everybody, whether that looks like lighting a candle, writing a letter and then burning it, or putting a message in a balloon and letting it float away. Some people find that these physical acts help to solidify a sense of closure or breaking free and it just might be the same for you. So, whether you need to let someone go, relinquish your expectations of them, or accept that you'll always have to love them from a distance, a small healing ceremony might bring you peace. And whether

your trauma is inherited from generations past or more recently passed down to you through partners or parents, both of these steps can help.

Final Summary

If you're struggling with trauma, it can be easy to assume that you are somehow at fault or that something is "wrong" with you. But, as Mark Wolynn proves through this course of this book, your trauma didn't necessarily start with you and you're definitely not to blame! In fact, many forms of trauma are inherited through generations and you may be suffering from the effects of your mother, grandmother, or even great-grandmother's unresolved trauma.

Trauma can be passed down genetically as well as emotionally, which makes it even scarier, but fortunately, you always have hope. By creating a Core Language Map, you can learn how to identify and combat the source of your trauma. This will then enable you to transition from strategies like your Core Complaint and your Core Sentence to writing a healing sentence that you carry with you as you learn to make peace with your trauma and move forward.



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