

Milena Rodriguez - „What We Don't Know About Love“

In order to handle love problems, especially the most persistent ones, we must first find the reasons for them. And the answer is – the reasons are usually rooted in our childhood.

My clients often object: “Why do we always have to look into the past and not focus on more current issues?” Or else: “It’s the problems I’m having with my husband now that are causing me pain and making me lose sleep, not something that happened more than thirty years ago with my mother and father. Do we really have to go back to my childhood when I’ve already forgotten these things, I’ve forgiven them and I don’t want to look back.” Unfortunately, we are wrong when we think that way.

We must realize that it is during childhood that our brain is shaped into what it will be for the rest of our lives. Unless we intervene with some kind of therapy, or by personally working on ourselves with the help of exercises like the ones in this book, our brain will continue to function the way it did during our formative years.

What you think is who you are

We have all noticed that often the same thoughts repeatedly cross our minds. We usually realize that when those thoughts are thoughts of anxiety, fear, or self-depreciation. On certain subjects in life we are literally stuck on a single (negative) point of view.

These recurring thoughts are formed during childhood, even before we become conscious beings. Therefore, if in our present-day life, we keep going back to any given thought to the point of obsession, then it most probably originated much earlier. If, at 25-30 years of age, we think to ourselves: “Other men/women have more than I do, I didn’t succeed like they did,” or “Others are betterlooking, more attractive, etc.,” the problem was born many years earlier in the form of: “Other children are picked up from kindergarten before me, my mother is always late,” or “My parents prefer my little brother and they love him more than they love me...” The problem is that if we think others are more beautiful than we are, this will have a serious effect on our love life and not only. We will explain below exactly how and why this thought conditioning works.

If, for instance, there is a well-paid job in the small ads that someone is capable of doing, but thoughts of low selfesteem keep going through that person’s head every single day, they would probably never even apply for the job. Or, if they do apply, they will be so nervous that they will make a bad impression on their potential employers. That is to say, such thoughts build up inside of us and create behavioral models which stem from our childhood years.

What it really means to be a child

The childhood years are a very particular period in a person’s development, when their psyche has not yet been shaped like that of adults. Why do humans have such a long childhood? The baby antelope is already up and about a few minutes after its birth, while human beings need twenty years (it is now widely accepted that the social childhood period stretches to the age of 25, or even later) in order to become independent and provide for themselves.

Human beings are the biological species with the longest period of childhood on the planet in relation to the average life expectancy rate. What could be the reason for this?

As a species, we are neither the strongest, nor the biggest or fastest of animals. We do not see or hear as well as many other species, which surpass us in physical characteristics. Why then does the human species run this earth? Because human beings possess a feature which puts them a cut above rest, and that is their complicated, very refined psyche. In fact, nature has programmed us to have such a long period of childhood so that we can develop precisely that

biological advantage of ours – our psyche. Therefore, the first months and years of our lives are the time when different psychological qualities develop, for example handling objects, reasoning, imagination, speech, social skills, etc. This happens little by little and these skills start accumulating one after the other.

There are many things in a child's psyche which must build up gradually, while others are simply innate. When a child is born into the world, it has a perfectly formed limbic system, which means that it can experience feelings the same way an adult can. Anger, sorrow, joy, fear, pain, disappointment, enthusiasm, passion, etc. are all present in us from the very beginning, having developed during the embryonic stage. But when a child is born, its reasoning has not developed yet – it is missing the very quality that puts us apart from animals, making us the distinctive species of this planet.

Reasoning develops around a child's seventh year. The first seven years are called the most important formative years for a good reason. Before a child is old enough to go to school, it can feel all sorts of things, but cannot explain them the way an adult can. A child's perception is quite skewed from an adult's viewpoint. For example, if a baby's mother is in the room playing with it, the baby feels happy and loved, because the mother is giving it her attention. When the mother is not there, the baby feels anger and sorrow. The baby is incapable of explaining to itself that its mother has gone to prepare its food and is, in fact, taking care of the baby that way. The only thing it understands is: "If my mother is here, that means she loves me and I'm happy. If she's not here, that means I'm abandoned and she doesn't love me. I could die if she's gone." These are very powerful emotions, which literally engulf young children. Deep inside, they know their survival depends on their parents. Therefore, they are very attached to them and are extremely anxious, when the parents are away or react negatively towards the child.

The little one knows it cannot do many things and somehow understands it is at a stage where many of its faculties have not developed yet. That is the reason children often say, "When I grow up, I'll become this or that, I'll be able do this or that." They perceive adults as godlike, infallible creatures, who can do anything. Thus, if an adult does something to make a child feel pain and sadness, the child feels guilty that it has not done well. The young child does not have the reasoning of an adult.

Adults can say to themselves: "This person could be reacting negatively towards me today because something else made him angry, and that something probably has nothing to do with me." Children, on the other hand, do not have the ability to think like that. Thus, with their emotions fully developed, but no explanation available, children often end up in an emotional labyrinth with no way out. They enter a cycle of pain, of self-loathing, etc.

Whose fault is it if someone grows up unhappy?

Who is responsible for the certain kind of childhood somebody had, followed by a certain type of problems in their love life, their job and other areas? Many of my clients say: "It's my parents' fault, they should have been more educated, more mature; they should have had better parenting skills so I wouldn't suffer today." The truth is, even if our parents were well trained and did many things right, we must never forget that childhood is a very specific period in our development. In childhood, children must go down their own bumpy road and experience everything for themselves, even with the most loving and caring of parents. Of course, if a mother and father have good parenting skills and can show a love their child can understand in its own language, this would be a huge help. But a real childhood can never be completely free of the clashes, which could potentially sow the seeds of future negative situations. Simply because that is the way childhood is.

Of course, when the parents are unskilled, this has its consequences. Unfortunately, most of them are, not because they are bad people, but because being a parent is not easy. There are no universities where one can study how to be a parent, not to mention the fact that preparation classes in parenting are not readily available in most places. The science of child development as such is still relatively new, especially regarding the earliest and most important stages in a child's life. Thus, despite their good intentions, parents generally do not know how exactly to raise their children.

Until a mere 50 – 60 years ago, the only widely accepted method of upbringing was the authoritarian model, where it is considered that the child is incapable of deciding what is appropriate and the parent always knows best. There is a lot of talk nowadays about how children should declare their own needs and how parents should not impose on them when to go to bed, how much food to eat and what to wear.

Why do therapists look back at a person's childhood?

We must make it clear that psychologists and therapists look back into our childhood in search of parental mistakes and distorted childlike perceptions of reality not because they want to revive negative experiences and go over them again and again. They do that for a reason: our personality is formed during the first seven years of childhood, precisely when logical comprehension is lacking.

There are two ways to change what is coded in the brain of the former child. The first one is life experience, which teaches us a lot. Each one of us undergoes "life therapy" in one way or another. This type of learning process, however, can be quite slow and painful, because we have the tendency to repeat the same pattern of mistakes, internalized during childhood, many times over, before we realize things are not working. Most of the time, even when we see we are making the same mistake, we cannot do things differently, because we do not know how. We have not been exposed to a different kind of behavior. If, for example, someone has never seen members of their family speaking calmly, if they have grown up in a home where everybody was constantly yelling at one another, that person will be incapable of expressing their needs in a polite way. They will continue yelling and being rude, even when they see it upsets the others, their partner is leaving them, their children refuse to see them, their colleagues shun them, they never get promoted in their job because their temperament makes those around them feel uneasy, etc. That person understands this pattern of behavior is detrimental to them, but, either way, they do not know how to change it. They are unable to stop the yelling caused by the anger rising up from within. They are not capable of channeling this negative energy by simply saying in a more polite way that their feelings have been hurt. The other way we can learn to think, feel and act more efficiently is through therapy. We can rethink everything and come up with a completely new approach, simply because we have someone who can guide us through the process and give us helpful advice on what could be more beneficial for us.

Our biggest forgotten love

Who we are today depends, to a great extent, on our mother and father, our brothers and sisters, our grandparents... Of course, it depends most of all on our mother, since in the beginning she is the most important person in our lives. It is with her that we experience our first love story – the strongest love we will ever feel. We have forgotten it, because it has taken place during years we have no conscious recollection of. By the time we reach the age of three, this love story with our mother has developed with its own rules and key moments, which include the mother's presence or absence, normal or problematic breastfeeding, infant

formula, the mother or the infant falling ill, the birth of brothers or sisters, etc. What takes place during those first years leads us to believe that love is the way it was between us and our mother. This closeness stays with us forever like a blueprint, something which, although we may not remember it, will remain coded in our brain and will continue to operate. The fact that we can fall in love at all is something we owe to this early connection with our mother.

In experiments conducted with baby monkeys, the infants were separated from their mothers at birth and raised in isolated cages, with no contact with their own kind (Harlow HF, Dodsworth RO, Harlow MK. Total social isolation in monkeys, *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A*. 1965.) When the babies grow up and are placed among other monkeys, those monkeys kill them. The monkeys that grew up in isolation are so aggressive towards the others, they provoke the same aggressiveness. They have not developed a basic trust in their own kind, as they never had a mother who would be there for them and respond to their needs. Therefore they never learned that their own kind could be beneficial to them. They regard the other monkeys as nothing but a threat. Thus, the monkeys raised in isolation become so aggressive and hostile that the other monkeys kill them, since they cannot accept them as their own. The world has seen several cases of children being raised by animals. After the child's seventh year, it is no longer capable of developing human qualities and cannot fit in with humans at all after that. For this reason, the first seven years of a child's life are so important, because it is then that it learns to communicate with its own kind. A baby's behavior has been created by nature in a way that evokes contact with other human beings, so the infant can learn what communication is. At some point in the first months of its life, the baby starts to "smile," not because it thinks something is funny, but because it has this natural instinct. When it smiles, adults are immediately motivated to turn their attention towards the baby and smile back. If this connection with benevolent adults is not established at this tender age, after a certain period in the child's development it is no longer possible.

It is interesting that the monkeys raised in isolation do not exhibit sexual behavior. They lack sexuality altogether. This is because sexuality develops on the same type of basic trust. In order to perform a sexual act, we must trust the other person enough to allow them to come close to our body. If we never had a mother who raised us, we would not be familiar with this feeling and we would never let anyone near us. We would be completely ignorant as to what proximity is. Sexuality in itself is nurtured at a very early stage, during infancy. Not in a physical way or as sexual behavior, but as a possibility for it to exist at all. Therefore, it is the connection with the mother during those early stages that determines a person's future love life. If the mother is present, holding the baby in her arms, feeding and caring for it, something called basic trust is born and it allows for love to exist.

I have clients who cannot be approached during our consultations precisely because they lack basic trust. Something has happened during their early childhood and has deprived them of it. The psychological consulting I practice creates a certain closeness, which requires a minimum amount of trust towards the therapist. Of course, one can remain reserved towards their consulting psychologist, but opening up at least enough to have a conversation with them and building up a stable, regular exchange is of great importance.