



72 - Inner child work is NOT just about childhood wounds.

One of the most successful inner work tools that I have found in really helping people make big changes in their lives is “inner child work”. Inner child work takes on many shapes and forms and is also called different things by different practitioners. This work allows us to heal many of the pains and traumas we’ve been holding onto since our childhood and also to access the joy and innocence we experienced during that time.

Lately, however, inner child work has begun to receive a bad rap. It has started to become more and more trendy in the world of self-help and this has led to many coming out and issuing strong warnings to those involved in inner child work. The fear is that this work can be retraumatizing. That by doing inner child work it will cause a person to reopen old wounds and actually find themselves worse off than when they started. Many encourage only engaging in inner child work with a licensed therapist.

The way I have seen some people describe the process is that it cuts you open and all of your old wounds are out and exposed. The metaphor of cutting you open is like the idea of mixing the sediment back into the wine which I discussed in [podcast 70](#) - listen back for more insights. In such a circumstance, you now need a professional, the therapist, to sew you up.

I have to say that I completely agree with this. If that’s what inner child work is, please do it with a therapist, and frankly, maybe don’t do it at all. Is the only way to heal to be dissected and exposed? Certainly we should take note and be cautious before plunging deep into our psyches.

The downside of these warnings is that they deflate us. They scare us into never working on these things on our own or exploring this tool with a non-therapist. That ultimately means that most of us will end up not working on ourselves in ways that can be life changing. And that’s not only unfortunate, but also unnecessary. We can address all of the concerns that have been mentioned without nixing the whole process.

The bigger concern is that we are told that we cannot trust ourselves when it comes to healing. You can’t listen to your body because someone knows better than you. You can’t trust yourself in your marriage or your parenting because you are not an expert. You can’t heal your own wounds because you are not a therapist.

Clearly, there are times when you need a professional but that should not be against your intuitions. You are the expert of yourself and if you feel uncomfortable working with a

professional don't ignore it. That may be a sign that you need to rethink the approach you are taking or the professional you are doing it with.

You are capable of changing yourself for the better. You may want a professional to help you and guide you but not around the clock. Nor is that what's best for every person. The best work starts from within.

Now, let's deal with the real concerns that we mentioned.

First, when doing any inner work, never jump straight into the deep end. Inner work is challenging, and if we feel overwhelmed or defeated from the start we will accomplish very little and run the risk of retraumatizing ourselves.

Healing is something that happens in increments. When you learn to swim you start outside the pool. Then, you train in the kiddie pool. Slowly, you move to the shallow end. Some people can start further in, or jump through the increments more quickly, and that indicates that they don't have any trauma around this. If that's the case, great. For everyone else, we need to remind ourselves that you don't learn to swim by jumping into the ocean.

It's also important to realize that not everyone needs to even get to the deep end. Like everything in life, it's worthwhile to treat inner work with a - if it ain't broke, don't fix it - approach. If your challenges are upending your life, and the basic self-help work isn't working, consider going deeper. But if not, what for?

Next, we have to remind ourselves that inner work is about what goes on in our inner world. It's ours to conceal or reveal. Any inner work should never move deeper or faster than what you are ready for. A person should never come out of any inner work feeling like they've been torn open, with their problems tossed about. A person should also never leave a session with a professional in which they feel violated and ashamed. Your history is yours. It does not need to be displayed for everyone to poke at and analyze.

And this brings us to two very crucial points about inner child work.

First of all, we have to realize that inner child work doesn't mean digging around the attic pulling out painful memories from your childhood. Inner child work doesn't necessitate any going into your past at all, except to the extent to which the person doing the inner child work believes it will benefit them.

The point of it isn't to figure out when or how you were hurt or who did the hurting. It's not about criticizing parents or friends. The past is behind us. Inner child work is all about the here and now. We may use a past incident as a point of reference, but only in that it can inform us about what you are experiencing right now, not in order to stay stuck there. We use it in order to give yourself what you need today, not to rage against the challenges of the past.

So, if inner child work isn't about our childhood, what is it about?

We all started life as children. Children with needs and hopes that turned to the world to help us reach our goals. When we grow up, that child didn't just disappear. She's still with us, informing our decisions. If the world responded to her cruelly or indifferently, that affects our actions today. There's a child within all of us looking for guidance and support.

The world tells us to act like grown ups. To stop being so emotional or babyish or irresponsible. Pay your bills, raise your kids, get a job. We are meant to push through no matter what. But there's a part inside of us that feels we can't handle those responsibilities. There's a little girl within who's scared or anxious or needs a lot more support than being told, that's life, now grow up. When we don't take her needs into account she begins to tantrum. Those tantrums can be expressed as actual tantrums. Yes, grown ups have tantrums. It can be an anxiety attack or social avoidance. It can be a fridge raid or a shopping spree.

Your inner child needs to be nurtured and loved.

And that brings us to our second point. Inner child work is not done with a chainsaw and a blowtorch. At the end of the day, even though we are adults, we are dealing with a child, even if it's only our inner child. That means that in order to heal those wounds, we want to be careful and compassionate. We work on giving ourselves empathy and support. We allow our inner child to express herself in ways that are safe and appropriate.

Ironically, it is often those children who were held and supported and empathized with who are able to be all grown up. Not because they don't need the support the rest of us need but because in their childhood they learned to provide it for themselves by having it modeled by the adults around them.

If a person's inner child is traumatized...that's what we are dealing with. Our work isn't to recreate the upheaval that brought the inner child there in the first place. Rather, we work on giving that inner child what she needs in order to help her succeed in the world. To help her regain trust and optimism.

Here's a very basic example of what gentle inner child work that deals with the present looks like. A woman comes to me and shares, "I'm feeling overwhelmed about everything I need to do today." The first step is to ask yourself, "What's my inner child saying?" She thinks and responds, "My inner child feels like it's just too much to do! I can't do it all." Now ask yourself, "What does my inner child need?" She tunes in. "My inner child needs to be told she's okay. To feel like she's good enough even if she doesn't get everything done. She needs to feel safe." The final step is to then go ahead and tell her that. By giving her inner child what she needs, she's able to face her responsibilities in a healthy way.

So, yes, inner work can be traumatic if it is approached in a “too much too soon” way, whether a person is working on it at home, by themselves, or whether that occurs in a therapist's office.

However, a person can do inner child work with confidence as long as they remember to trust themselves on what is safe, not to start in the deep end, to not go unnecessarily delving into past traumas, and to work with care and compassion.

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