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BLAMING THE PAST MAY SEEM LIKE AN EASY GET-OUT WHEN CONFRONTING CURRENT DIFFICULTIES, BUT YOU'RE DOING YOURSELF MORE HARM THAN GOOD, SUGGESTS AMALIA CHRISTOFOROU



back

to the future

maybe you've chosen the wrong life partner... again, or maybe you've been repeatedly passed up for that promotion you've been dying for – and searching for self-respect by plundering pizza outlets or dousing yourself in margaritas doesn't seem to be helping.

"My mother never thought I was good enough," you wail at your friends. "And my father repeatedly cheated on her. No wonder my life's a mess! Not my fault, is it?"

But ask Dr Ian Opperman, and you'll get an impassioned contrary view. This clinical psychologist, clinical hypnotherapist and chairperson of the South African Society for Clinical Hypnosis, says, "No matter how terrible your past, you can do something about its effect on the present and future.

If you don't, then you become the one perpetrating the violation against yourself. If I am three years old and being sexually abused, there is nothing I can do. But when I am 30, and more powerful, I am aware of resources that can heal me."

BACK TO BIRTH

Through hypnotherapy, Opperman returns patients to distant memories. "Subconsciously rooted behaviour originates as early as during birth," he says.

"Take a patient whose husband beats her. She recalls being in the womb, knowing her mother does not really want her. She tells herself that she does not want to be born and does not deserve love," he explains. "The decision she makes there and then is to stay back, be hopeless, be

controlled by others, have no importance and be caged. So it makes sense that she attracts an abusive husband. She re-enacts that early subconscious decision in daily life and her husband fulfils the subconscious function of keeping her unloved."

Opperman recently treated a teenage juvenile delinquent. Under hypnosis, the boy recalled being in the womb while his father and mother argued his paternity. "A fight ensued and a blow to the stomach saw his mother go into early labour. As he was born he said I am unwanted by them. I will fight them with all I have," says Opperman.

None of us has escaped the past unscathed. We've learnt to protect ourselves by developing defensive personalities, preventing others from getting close enough to discover who we really are.

The arsenal is endless.

"While these tactics might make us feel safer, those hidden parts of ourselves still influence our behaviour on a daily basis," says Cari Corbet-Owen, clinical psychologist and a member of the *Shape* advisory board, in her forthcoming book *Mind Over Fatter Morsels* (Oshun). "Then, when we least expect it, something seemingly innocuous might happen and a side of us that we thought we had forgotten pops out, like a beach ball held under water."

FLAG DOWN THE PAST

Parents who push too hard could rear a child who strives for perfection or who gives up easily, knowing they will never measure up. A mother who is overweight may influence her daughter to forever restrict her eating or become overweight herself.

But, every moment is a chance to stop and ask, "What is really going on?"

"When you hear yourself repeatedly blaming the past and saying you cannot change, that's a flag to note," says clinical psychologist Karen Gubb. "Understand that some subconscious need you may not be aware of is driving you to repeat the same patterns. *'If I do this well enough this time, I will finally be good enough'*. Until you consciously understand the underlying reason for this behaviour, you'll always get the same result."

Sarah's life has been riddled with experiences that were completely out of her control. Her violently alcoholic father divorced her mom when she was nine. Her mother's boyfriend molested her until she was 15. Then, when she was 16 years old, her father died unexpectedly.

"Poor self-esteem, grief and the trauma of sexual abuse were catalytic in taking my first diet pill at age 14. I initiated a destructive obsession with weight loss and gain."

She went from 63kg at age 20 to 140kg after the birth of her second child. After 41 years of running from past demons, she opted for psychotherapy and gastric bypass surgery. "It does not matter how much you talk about change if you do not equip yourself with the information you need to take action," she says. "The past is what it is. It makes me. But I have learnt to acknowledge weaknesses and failures. I cannot blame who I am on my circumstances. But I can walk the first step to a new destination."

QUEEN OF THE CASTLE

We all know a highly competitive person, hard workers who are burning themselves out and suffering the symptoms of that global epidemic – perfectionitis.

"To be on top of the pile, we need to strive for perfection," adds Corbet-Owen. This obsession could indicate a vain attempt to smooth over the cracks of the past. But the cracks persist.

For Joanna, living for recognition as a businesswoman was ultimately a Pyrrhic victory. Growing up poor, Joanna convinced herself she would do better. Even when she married, work came before her husband.

"I would never have given myself respect or recognition if I had not achieved," she says. But years of stress took its toll.

"I ended up aged 40, desperate to be a mother and physically unable to have a baby," she says. "All my life I have been very dismissive of women who turned their backs on a career, got married and had children," she adds.

In accepting what's in the past and taking steps to change her behaviour, she's recently turned down a high-powered job in favour of renewed health, a new man and her quest to have a baby.

FILLING OUR FILES

As newborns, our first learning happens by association. "I learnt that if I cried, I'd get picked up. If I continued to cry, I'd probably get fed. As my brain developed, neural pathways were laid down reflecting my experiences," says Corbet-Owen.

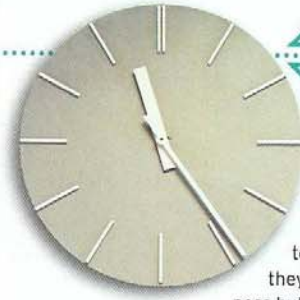
"What you saw growing up were the repetitive patterns of behaviour in your home. The more you were exposed to them, the more these conditions become your truth," she adds. As a result we are not necessarily responding to reality as much as our perception of reality. It's the subconscious filing system, where less easily accessible memories are stored, that determines much of our behaviour.

Clinical psychologist Neil Tuck, a performance consultant and member of the *Shape* advisory board, reminds us that we are actually in constant communication with ourselves.

"The nature of this self-talk results in our powerful mind becoming either our ally or worst enemy" he says. We need to remember that these conversations we have with ourselves, are influenced

emotional homework – put the past where it belongs

- ▶ Take time to reflect on your life from earliest recollections to current day.
- ▶ Consider the significant life events, circumstances and relationships that have coloured the picture of your life (both the highs and the lows).
- ▶ Make a list (positive and negative) of thoughts, emotions and behaviours that characterise you currently.
- ▶ Consider the life events and circumstances that you reflected on, and see if you can make any linkages.
- ▶ Be more conscious of instances where you find yourself attributing present negative behaviours, emotions and decisions to past experiences or circumstances.
- ▶ In these instances identify and practice more constructive self-talk, reassuring yourself that even though past experiences have influenced your thoughts, emotions and behaviour to date, you have the power and the right to stop them influencing your present and future.
- ▶ Remember that there is a difference between being intellectually aware, and emotionally processing and achieving closure on past experiences.
- ▶ Insight about where behaviour comes from is critical, but after insight is gained, you still have to actively modify the thoughts and behaviours that are not serving you well, until such time as they become extinct and no longer influence your life choices. If you tried to merely manipulate the behaviour without gaining insight into its origin, it is less likely that your attempts at changing will be sustainable.
- ▶ Practice a simple A, B, C approach:
 - Acknowledge – that the old thoughts are there and explore the reasons why
 - Believe – that you have the power to create thoughts, emotions and behaviours that are free from the shackles of the past
 - Commit – to "throwing away the old tapes" every time you hear them playing and replace them with new ones that you need and want to hear.
- ▶ Most importantly, remember that there are qualified and experienced professionals who can help you. Acknowledging the need for professional help is not a weakness, but a show of strength and courage.



by many factors including our upbringing and past experiences. "Some people are fully aware of the sources of their idiosyncrasies, but seem unable to change them. In some cases they may have an intellectual awareness but have not processed their experiences at an emotional level. Others have not made the connection and the sources of behaviour remain buried in the subconscious." Until such time as we do our emotional homework, the past will continue to dominate us.

The first step is to take time to gently probe connections between present behaviours and past experience. Much as we'd like to think of it as remedial, retail therapy doesn't count! Write a journal. Talk to a trusted friend or relative. Read a good self-help book. Or engage a registered professional to aid you in gaining insight.

On its own, this insight will not alter conditioned behaviours that are 20 or 30 years in the making. We must follow daily rituals of self-examination, checking for old behaviour patterns and letting new ones replace them.

"We don't need to wait to reach crisis or breaking point to go on the journey of connecting past experience and present behaviour," says Tuck. It is healthy to ask these questions of ourselves.

Remember that taking stock in this way allows one not only to understand where negative behaviours and emotions come from, but also to focus on the positive ones which you would want to cherish and take full ownership of.

VICTIM VICTORIOUS

There are many examples of people who have famously risen above their past traumas. Oprah Winfrey has opened up about her rape as a child without allowing it to colour her life. Despite persecution and the hardship he endured as a political prisoner, Nelson Mandela doesn't seem to know the meaning of bitterness.

Another renowned South African survivor is Alison Botha, who was abducted, raped, stabbed repeatedly and disembowelled by two men who then slit her throat and left her for dead. But she clung to life, crawling 90 meters to find help.

Despite the life sentences meted out to her attackers, she sank into a desolate depression "that I felt I was entitled to. But then an inner voice said, 'Why did you fight so hard to hang onto life if this is how you choose to live it?'" Alison explored various therapies and forced herself to accept all social invitations – meeting her husband, Tienie, as a result.

"Tragedies are less about the event as about the emotions we carry from them into daily life as a result. I cannot undo that night. It was not my choice," she says. "My response to live with happiness was my choice". Today she is a motivational speaker and her book, *I Have Life – Alison's Journey* (Penguin), has sold over 60 000 copies and has been translated into seven languages. On November 23, 2006, Alison gave birth to her second child.

We owe it to ourselves to gather energy and resources and actively manage the role we allow the past to play in our present. It takes a very brave person to take an honest look at themselves, fly in the face of old habits, ask prickly questions, and swim upstream.

"In doing this we work towards the ultimate goal," says Opperman, "self-love." ⑤

Names have been changed