

Childhood Patterns & How To Break Unhealthy Patterns

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Wellness



Breaking Up With Harmful Childhood Patterns

For years now, we've heard accounts of friends having transformational life experiences at the Hoffman Institute, a stay-based center in Northern California's wine country (sadly, no wine), that's dedicated to resolving unresolved traumas from childhood. Over the course of a week, attendees participate in a series of sessions and workshops where they begin to identify harmful patterns imprinted before the rational mind was even formed (age 7)—and how those patterns might be limiting their lives now.

Intrigued, we asked *goop* staffer Kevin if he wanted to go. Abandoned by his father in childhood, Kevin has always refused to acknowledge that this even bothered him, brushing off hurt with humor, and limiting his own exposure to pain and connection by keeping

anyone with the potential to cause it at a safe distance. Nervous and intrigued, he drove north, turned off his iPhone, and spent a week unpacking the “subconscious resentment” he’s been carrying around for years. While he was vague on details (what happens at the Hoffman Institute stays at the Hoffman Institute, since nobody wants to ruin the experience for people who want to go), but he acknowledged that many of the life-long beliefs he’s held against himself—that he’s unworthy, unlovable, stupid—were passed down by his parents, who learned them in their own childhood. When he emerged, Kevin was a different person—lighter, happier, and less inclined to reach for his shielding patterns.

“I learned that life is all about choices,” he explains. “You make choices all of the time, though most choices are just reactions. I’ve slowed down, and taken the time to figure out the way I really want to respond, and what feels true to me, all while having love and compassion for others, and most importantly self-love and compassion.” He went on to explain that his week at Hoffman changed the dynamic of how he views his family. “I’m choosing to live my life, and I’ve let go of the resentment that I felt. How I want to live, and how I want to be, is how I have to act—I just need to be my true self.” Kevin also emerged with dozens of new friends—intensely bonded, they have regular check-in calls as they navigate the transformations that they’re making in their lives. Below, Liza Ingrassi, the CEO of Hoffman, explains more.

A Q&A with Liza Ingrassi

Q

How can you tell if you’re negatively affected by patterns from childhood? And are all patterns bad, or are some good?

A

Humans are born absolutely helpless and dependent on their parents and caregivers for survival. In childhood, to know that we will be taken care of, we bond with them emotionally. In order to feel love and belonging we indiscriminately absorb their ways of feeling and behaving and make them our own. Out of our need for love, we emotionally bonded with them in whatever experiences they offered up. No matter how much our parents may have loved us, they were by no means perfect; they had their own patterned ways of being that they learned in childhood. And, unfortunately, we bonded with them in their counter-productive negativity as well as what was life-affirming. These negative ways of feeling, thinking, and behaving are what we call “patterns.” Patterns are always inauthentic and result in unwanted consequences.

They include beliefs, perceptions, judgments, needs and desires about:

- How to get love and approval
- What life is about
- How to relate to others
- What is spirituality
- The role of work and family

We often find later in life that these parental patterns (i.e., rules and ways of being which we soaked up like a sponge in childhood) end up working against us as adults.

For instance, in one family, smiling and being nice may be the acceptable way of being. But later in life, when it's time to tell a difficult truth or to stand up for ourselves, we revert to "being nice" as our default. While there is nothing "wrong" with being nice, done compulsively, it is an inauthentic pattern. We abandon our true self and manifest behavior that, while it may get us approval, leaves us feeling hollow and powerless.

Here are a few other examples:

- Acting nice instead of honestly facing a conflict.
- Being so compulsively organized that spontaneity is sacrificed.
- Putting so much focus on logic that emotional connection is lost.

People come to the Hoffman Process because they have patterns they need to change. For example: they keep getting into relationships but can't commit, or become needy, domineering, critical, or hyper-controlling.

In the Hoffman Process participants come to see that what they are essentially repeating a parent's way of being—or rebelling against it. Perhaps the person who can't commit had a parent who abandoned the family or had affairs. If they become needy in relationships they may have seen that same dynamic between their parents, etc.

In the Hoffman Process, we look at the behaviors and ways of being that cause suffering. For example, if being needy is a problem, the Process helps the person become curious about that.

- From whom did I learn to be this way?
- Who was like that in my childhood?
- What did I observe between my parents?
- Were my needs so overlooked as a child, that I'm going through life, looking for love but continually only finding people who abandon me—just like my parents did? Do I abandon myself and/or others?

In the Hoffman Process, we are looking for our patterns that cause suffering and negative consequences to ourselves and others, and that have been there throughout our lives. The goal is not to get rid of all our patterns, but to diminish their power over us and to increase

our choice and will to act. Being nice, and being organized are great skills, but not if those are our only options, and not if we are doing them compulsively and at the expense of our relationships and vitality.

To be whole, we need to experience connection to all aspects of ourselves—emotions, intellect, body, and spiritual essence.

Q

How can you mindfully parent and protect your own children from inheriting some of these harmful patterns?

A

Obviously, mature and loving adults make more mature and loving parents. The best way to raise loving, productive, authentic, spontaneous children to adulthood is to model these ways of being. Our children do what we do, not what we say. Are we modeling healthy boundaries, strength, and compassion, or are we modeling denial, stress, addiction, secrecy, and self-neglect? We all know what it's like to see our kids follow in our footsteps. The good news is that we can change our footsteps. This can be a great motivation to do this kind of work.

Q

For those who are unable to go to the Hoffman Institute and do the work there, are there practices that you can do yourself to help exercise these patterns of harmful thinking?

A

Mindfulness, awareness, gratitude, meditation, prayer, and service are all practices that can reduce the effects of pattern-driven behavior. There is a variety of ways to learn these things.

One advantage to doing deep emotional work in a setting such as the Hoffman Process is that it clears the path to taking on such life-affirming practices. When the past isn't clogging up the works, there is more space for behaving in a way that is deeply positive and satisfying.

Q

How can you begin to identify patterns from your parents, and then separate yourself, particularly if they're not serving you?

A

The place to start is by asking yourself some tough questions to increase your awareness:

- In what areas of my life am I suffering? How do I feel about myself, in my relationships or in my career?
- What feelings do I have around it? Is it sadness, worry, guilt, or anger?
- What is blocking me from being the person I want to be?
- Where in my family of origin did I observe this way of being as a child?
- What are the consequences today, in my life, in continuing to be this way?
- Why do I want to change?
- What is my vision for my life in concrete terms? How will I feel and be in that vision?

In the Hoffman Process, we take people through a four-step experience with each pattern: awareness, expression, forgiveness, and new behavior. Awareness of where you are now and where you want to be in the future is the first step to transforming a patterned way of being.

Q

Are there examples of positive pattern, i.e., ones that are good to pass on to our children?

A

“Patterns,” as we use the term in the Hoffman Process, always have negative consequences. If a behavior “looks good” on the outside, but is causing suffering to ourselves or others, it’s a pattern.

We hope to teach people that what they are modeling deeply impacts their kids. So, what do you want to model? It’s our hope to inspire people to model love, compassion, spontaneity, creativity, forgiveness, maturity, strength, courage, choice, and authenticity, versus patterns and compulsive ways of being.

Q

What sort of changes do people who come to Hoffman experience? Is it subtle or transformational?

A

Published university research on the Hoffman Process shows lasting decreases in depression, anxiety, and hostility coupled with lasting increases in emotional intelligence, forgiveness, spirituality, and compassion. People come out of the Process with a deep experience of their own resilience, a greater sense of life’s possibilities, and a richer expression of aliveness. They have found healing and forgiveness around the hurts and anger of the past, and they have more freedom and courage to act from love. They shift from being run by fears and patterns to being more present and able to make their unique contribution to the world. They have a newfound sense of wholeness.

Certainly, there are people who come to Hoffman who are already in the midst of a major life transition—a career change, divorce, marriage, or health challenge. Their intention is often to discover what they really want. While that often happens, we always recommend that people not make major changes for at least 60-90 days after the Process. It's wise to see the difference that a transformed "you" makes in life. We support people making changes that are healthy and grounded, rather than impulsive and reactive.

Not all the transformational changes people experience from the Process are immediately obvious, many are subtle. Often people say things like, "After the Process, I didn't feel the need to watch as much TV," or "After the Process, I just felt moved to begin a meditation practice." Changes arise that feel natural and deep. This comes from being more at peace with ourselves and connected more deeply to our own authenticity.