



Therapy-At-Home Workbooks® (Mini Guides)

Family of Origin Work: Untangle your Unhealthy Roots Identify, Understand and Resolve your Issues

Lisa Brookes Kift, MFT

A mini guide by a therapist to help *you* think like a therapist.

Happiness is emotional and
relationship health
LoveAndLifeToolbox.com



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Thank you.

Published by Lisa Brookes Kift, MFT

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Introduction

Thank you for your interest in my Therapy-At-Home Workbooks (Mini Guides) series for individual use, a condensed version of my more comprehensive workbooks for couples. This is for the person interested in trying to work through his or her own issues or get a jump-start in working with a therapist.

My name is Lisa Brookes Kift, I am a practicing psychotherapist and a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist in the state of California, and I have helped hundreds of individuals and couples feeling blocked emotionally or in their relationships. This series was created to provide a practical, clear and efficient roadmap to understand, identify and resolve what has been blocking you. It is not a replacement to therapy but rather a supplement, though some of you might find it to be enough.

If you find yourself anxious or emotionally overwhelmed while working through it or feel more guidance is needed, please seek help from a local therapist and use this mini guide as a starting point to share what you have learned about yourself so far.

When you have worked through this guide, you will understand yourself better and how to create deeper level of change or at least have a solid framework around your particular situation so that you can begin the therapy process ahead of where you would have started without doing this prep work.

This mini guide will walk you through a similar line of questioning for consideration and discussion that may occur during a session with me. My goal is to provide a framework for *you* to think like a therapist by asking yourself some very key questions.

I will help you to:

Identify where your issues might lie.

Understand why you struggle the way you do.

Resolve your issues and create a lasting, deeper level change.

Lastly, check the additional resources provided at the end; supportive articles, books and other tools for you to do more exploration of the topics that interest you.

This is *Family of Origin: Untangle Your Unhealthy Roots*.

IDENTIFY:

How do you know if you have a tangled and unhealthy root system?

If you struggle repeatedly in your relationships or with your sense of self, it's possible you have an unhealthy root system that can benefit from untangling, and possibly, replanting. Perhaps you learned things from your family of origin (or from other places) about yourself or how you think others will relate to you that are simply inaccurate. These false truths can wreak havoc on your self-esteem, your relationships with others and how you relate to the world.

Family of origin work is a specific intentional exploration of your history; the quality of your parental relationships, your environment, the existence of traumatic experiences and how you were shaped as a child and upward. This type of therapy then serves as a guide to challenge unhealthy belief systems, questions your coping strategies and defense mechanisms for improving emotional and relationship health.

Your functioning in intimate relationships ties to your experiences with your primary caregivers because of the similarity of need in those relationships. Your lessons learned in the earliest experiences of life carry forth in the way your brain is wired showing up as vulnerabilities – or strengths.

The first step to “think like a therapist” is to identify that there is a problem with the way you operate individually or in relationships. Perhaps you are clear about that, but possibly not. It might begin with a vague intuition around something not feeling right or there are unhealthy patterns repeating themselves.

Self-Quiz: Signs of Family of Origin Issues

Read the following statements and answer True or False.

- - - -

- I carry an underlying sense of not being good enough. _____
- Feelings of anger, sadness or fear sometimes overwhelms me. _____
- I repeat unhealthy relationship patterns. _____
- I struggle/have struggled with addiction. _____
- I have trust issues that show up in my relationships. _____
- I fear that people will leave me. _____
- I feel very differently on the inside than I appear on the outside. _____
- I feel lonely whether I'm actually alone or not. _____
- I don't feel excited for the future. _____
- I use food, alcohol, drugs or other unhealthy activities to self-soothe. _____

- - - -

All of these statements are possible indicators that you have unresolved issues or unhealthy, tangled roots at your source. If you answered "true" to any of the above (and possibly more than one), contemplate the following:

- Is there a pattern?
- Are you vulnerable in ways you hadn't noticed?
- Why would you feel the way you do?

The following section offers an opportunity to journal about anything that came up in this section.

- - - -

Notes

Thoughts, Aha Moments, Ideas

What are possible problematic seeds planted in your childhood?

If it became clear to you that there is work to be done here, it's important to understand what led you to self esteem problems, self doubt, lack of trust or reliance upon relationships or whatever is crystalizing for you at this point. Often, these problems stem from childhood when the "little you" might have assigned an incorrect meaning to your situation. Unhealthy seeds of experience have a tendency to become tangled and unhealthy roots into adulthood. The goal is to untangle, tend to and regrow these for a deep, heartfelt understanding that you are actually ok!

Self-Quiz: Signs of Unhealthy Seeds

Read the following statements and answer True or False.

- - - -

There were high levels of conflict between family members in my home. _____

My parent(s) were absent or abandoning in their behavior towards me. _____

My parent(s) were present but emotionally unavailable. _____

My parent(s) were abusive or highly critical. _____

My parent(s) were mentally ill or I suspect they were but went undiagnosed. _____

My parent(s) had addiction issues; alcohol, drug, food, gambling or other. _____

My basic needs were often not met, like food and shelter. _____

I've always been really uncomfortable around my parent(s) and don't know why. _____

- - - -

All of these statements are indicators that unhealthy seeds could have been inadvertently planted from your family of origin. If you answered "true" to any of the above (and possibly more than one), use the following space below to take notes.

- - - -

Notes

Thoughts, Aha Moments, Ideas

What are the belief systems or narratives you developed?

Your story is unique to you. It can be told by stringing factual data points along a timeline, but what’s more important are your perceptions about the things that happened. What do they mean to you? Positive, secure experiences tend to encourage positive belief systems around self, others and the world. Unfortunately, problematic experiences can create negative stories and beliefs in the same way.

Assessment: My Belief Systems

Note “unhealthy seeds” or problematic experiences identified in the last self-quiz. Consider the belief system(s) that might have arisen from that situation. Consider the examples for reference but be sure your responses truly resonate with you.

EXAMPLE

Experience: My basic needs were often not met, like food and shelter.
Possible Belief(s): I am not safe. The world isn’t safe.

EXAMPLE

Experience: My parents were abusive or highly critical.
Possible Belief(s): I am unlovable; people can’t be trusted.

Experience:

Possible Beliefs:

Experience:

Possible Beliefs:

Experience:

Possible Beliefs:

Notes

Thoughts, Aha Moments, Ideas

UNDERSTAND:

How did you cope or adapt to your situation?

Now that you've looked at what unhealthy root systems can look like, how problematic seeds might have been planted and the belief systems you possibly internalized, the next step is to *understand* how you adapted to your situation.

Children are highly skilled at finding ways, without even realizing it, to survive or make the best of their surroundings, and to get their needs met. Coping strategies are used to do this but it's these very strategies that might not currently serve you emotionally and/or in your relationships.

Self-Quiz: Possible Coping Mechanisms

Read the following statements and answer True or False.

- - - -

As a child, I got attention for my grades, achievements and other accolades. _____

As a child, I got attention (even if negative) for bad behavior; I got in trouble a lot. _____

I've had a hard life but it's in the past, there's nothing I can do about it anyway. _____

When I'm stressed I sometimes won't get out of bed or want to deal with it. _____

I tend to easily lose track of time, have a poor memory and sometimes feel numb. _____

It's hard for me to express anger or dissatisfaction with others. _____

I often try to please people but often at a cost to myself (and I'm resentful). _____

As a child I often escaped into fantasy and I still do when under stress. _____

I don't let people in too close to me. Emotional distance is safer. _____

I have physical pains or other ailments that are mysterious or without diagnosis. _____

- - - -

Notes

Thoughts, Aha Moments, Ideas

Do your current adaptations negatively impact your emotional and/or relationship health?

Now we’re reflecting upon how your coping strategies show up in your life now. The things that helped you earlier may now hinder, especially as you became an adult navigating through your inner life and relationships. The wounds you carry and the way you deal with them might be inadvertently setting you up for challenges. Once you understand what the issues are and how they began, you will more easily be able to make changes and improve how you feel and relate to others.

Self-Quiz: Possible Ways My Coping Strategies Are Problematic

Read the following statements and answer True or False.

- - - -

I am very perfectionistic, work hard and struggle to relax. _____

I have addiction tendencies; alcohol, drugs, shopping, sex, video games, gambling, etc. _____

I tend to minimize or blow off problems in a way that it can make matters worse. _____

Friends or partners have told me I’m emotionally unavailable. _____

My difficulty expressing anger or negative emotions impacts me/my relationships. _____

I have been taken advantage of because of my drive to please others. _____

I have repeated unhealthy relationship patterns; abusive, critical, unhappy, etc. _____

As a child I often escaped into fantasy and I still do when under stress. _____

I don’t let people in too close to me. Emotional distance is safer. _____

It’s hard for me to see a positive future so often I think, “What’s the point?” _____

Reflect honestly about what you marked as true. Are these the blocks you might be looking for? Spend some time noting your thoughts in the next section.

- - - -

Notes

Thoughts, Aha Moments, Ideas

RESOLVE:

What are further action steps you can take to work through your issues?

You have identified and understand some of your issues, so now what? You want your life to change for the better! Only you have the power to make that happen. I tell my clients all the time, “If I had a magic wand under my chair I could use it but the reality is, when you leave this room it’s up to *you* to *do something different*.”

My hope is that you are feeling more empowered to *think like a therapist* in order to make the emotional and relationship health changes you need to bring more happiness, life satisfaction and peace. But some of you will need further assistance as this can be challenging, troubling and painful work. Please seek further support if needed.

Action Steps: Powerful Tools to Help Facilitate Change

The following suggestions are all strategies I use in my therapy practice to help clients cross the bridge from understanding to resolution of their issues. The **action steps** and related information are an introduction to the recommended tools, a taste to help get you on your way. I’ve included some follow-up resources for you to begin, via links to relevant articles or books.

- **Do something different**
 - An integral part of your personal growth is *actively changing* the way you think and behave which inherently can change the way you feel. Sometimes doing something different can be scary but if you go towards your fear vs. away you will conquer that fear by learning it’s not so scary. You must walk to the edge of your own comfort zone and stick your toe over it. Doing one scary thing a day, in fact, can actually build the brain’s capacity for resilience.
- **Notice (thinking, behaviors, patterns, red flags)**
 - In order to make the changes you need to be able to notice what’s happening in the first place. Much of our daily existence happens automatically and without awareness. Slow it down by stopping to reflect upon your thoughts, behaviors, patterns and even red flags in relationships that you might have missed before.
 - ✦ What just happened?
 - ✦ What meaning did you assign to it?
 - ✦ How did you react?
 - ✦ Could you have gotten it wrong?
 - ✦ Are you engaged in unhealthy patterns of self and others?
 - ✦ What red flags might you notice to break these patterns in the future?
- **Practice mindfulness**
 - To help facilitate the ability to “notice” learning to be mindful or in the moment is a powerful tool. Mindfulness can help you see more clearly, regulate your nervous system and literally rewire your brain.
- **Take in the good**

It takes practice to learn to focus on what goes well equally, if not more than, what doesn’t. Prior experiences can dictate how strong our negativity bias is. “Taking in the good” helps buffer against stress and negativity. It also helps build resilience.

- **Practice self-compassion**
 - Having the ability to give yourself a break is really important, especially if you have the tendency to beat yourself up. Give yourself the kindness you might give to a good friend.
- **Re-parent your inner child**
 - If you didn't have the most stable, attuned, loving parental guides as a child, it's time to make up for lost time and learn to live your inner boy or girl. Imagine your inner child as being a part of you who gets emotionally triggered when vulnerable. Get educated about who he/she is, what unhealthy belief systems he/she still carries and where his/her vulnerabilities are. Connect with your inner child.
- **Practice self-care**
 - Life can be stressful. I recommend everyone incorporate some kind of self-care routine into his or her busy lives. What allows you to relax? What do you enjoy? What are ways you de-stress? What feels nourishing for your body, mind and soul? When you are doing the deeper kind of emotional work you are here, it's particularly important to be clear on what feels good and make an effort to do it! It's an act of kindness and compassion towards yourself.
- **Seek support from family and friends**
 - Whether it's a small few or a larger group, enlist others who care about you. Revisiting painful memories can stir up a lot and having trusted others aware of what you're up to is important. Having a support team can also help when you're trying to implement change in your life.
- **Seek therapy if needed**
 - The personal material you've explored here can be challenging. It is commendable that you are attempting to take this on by yourself but keep in mind, opening the lid on painful experiences might be simply too much for you to do without professional help. A therapist can create a safe space to help guide you through this work. At the bare minimum, the work you have done so far in this guide will put you ahead in your therapy work.

Conclusion

I hope this mini guide has, at the very least, put you on the road to identifying, understanding and resolving your family of origin issues. Faulty belief systems and/or trauma can create countless obstacles for people in their lives, individually and in their relationships. I am passionate about family of origin work and its ability to create deep and lasting changes in how you view yourself, others and the world.

I strongly encourage you to take a look at the resources provided; quick read articles from my site [LoveAndLifeToolbox.com](#), links to books on Amazon and a fantastic video on mindfulness. The combination of this mini guide and the resources provided might be enough for you make the changes you seek. But it's also possible it won't be.

If you have a significant trauma history, you might benefit from connecting with a therapist at this point. Seek someone with an education in attachment, neuroscience and trauma if available. It might be useful to show your therapist what you've accomplished so far. At the very least, you will have a starting point for further exploration and healing.

I wish you continued growth emotionally and in your relationships!

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Quick Reads

- o [Do One Scary Thing a Day](#)
- o [Do Positive Experiences Stick to Your Ribs? Take in the Good](#)
- o [Self-Compassion Trumps Self-Esteem](#)
- o [Love Your Inner Child](#)

Video from HuffPost Good News (Facebook)

- o [How You Can Meditate Everywhere, Anytime. It's Not as Complicated as you Think](#)

Books on Amazon

- o [Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time by Rick Hanson, PhD](#)
- o [Bouncing Back: Rewiring Your Brain for Maximum Resilience and Well-Being by Linda Graham, MFT](#)
- o [Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself by Kristin Neff, PhD](#)
- o [Home Coming: Reclaiming and Championing Your Inner Child by John Bradshaw](#)
- o [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel van der Kolk, MD](#)
- o [The Kind Self-Healing Book: Raise Yourself Up with Curiosity and Compassion by Amy Eden](#)
- o [Wired for Love: How Understanding Your Partner's Brain and Attachment Style Can Help You Defuse Conflict and Build a Secure Relationship by Stan Tatkin, PsyD, MFT](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Lisa Brookes Kift is the founder of LoveAndLifeToolbox.com and creator of Therapy-At-Home Workbooks®, a do-it-yourself, therapist guided, counseling alternative. She is a Marriage and Family Therapist (MFT) in private practice working with individuals and couples in Marin County, California and offers telehealth options (video conference, phone and chat) to those outside of her area via California Online Therapy <http://www.onlinetherapyandcounseling.com/>.

Lisa has written extensively about topics related to marriage, relationship and emotional health. She is a frequent consultant for the media having appeared in CNN.com, HuffingtonPost.com, MensHealth.com and others.

