

THIS IS HOW WE HEAL FROM PAINFUL CHILDHOODS:

A Practical Guide for Healing Past
Intergenerational Stress and Trauma



ERNEST ELLENDER, PHD

Copyright © 2024 by Ernest Ellender, PhD

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the author. The only exceptions are brief quotations in printed reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Printed in the United States of America.

ISBN: 979-8-9888012-0-7 (paperback)

ISBN: 979-8-9888012-2-1 (hardcover)

ISBN: 979-8-9888012-1-4 (ebook)

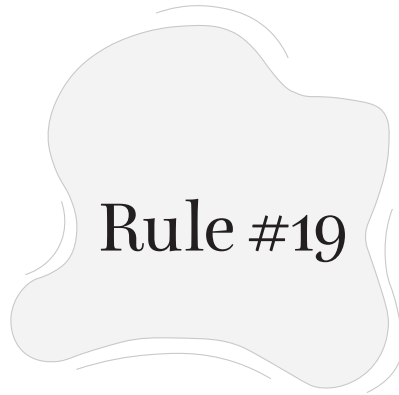
This is a work of nonfiction. Nonetheless, some of the names and personal characteristics of the individuals involved have been changed in order to disguise their identities. Any resulting resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental and unintentional.

The ideas, procedures, and suggestions contained in this book are intended to supplement—not replace—the advice of trained health professionals. If expert assistance or counseling is needed, the services of a competent professional should be sought. The author of this book is not engaged in rendering professional advice or psychological services to the individual reader, and therefore shall not be liable or responsible for any loss or damage allegedly arising from any information or suggestion in this book.



Contents

Introduction	9
Rule #1 Thrive or survive: You decide.	18
Rule #2 Who you are in sympathetic is not who you are in parasympathetic.	33
Rule #3 Trauma Lies are just that... LIES!	50
Rule #4 We must slow down to speed up.	67
Rule #5 Healing requires training, education, and empathy... for all.	80
Rule #6 Control is good... especially good control.	95
Rule #7 Remove shame, learn from guilt, show remorse, and build esteem.	106
Rule #8 Practice treating yourself in a self-loving and self-respecting fashion.	122
Rule #9 The pendulum effect is a natural response to trauma.	137
Rule #10 Anger begets anger, violence begets violence, and love begets love. ...	148
Rule #11 We are responsible for the decisions that we are aware of.	159
Rule #12 It's us against trauma world.	172
Rule #13 Secrets destroy!	178
Rule #14 Boundaries are confusing, so keep practicing better boundaries.	187
Rule #15 Center of the Universe is not a compliment!	198
Rule #16 Overindulgent dynamics are bad... period.	210
Rule #17 Addictions = Intimacy Disorders.	222
Rule #18 Will versus skill... <i>both</i> are necessary.	235
Rule #19 It's not a contest. Trauma is just bad... and sad.	247
Rule #20 Make it normal.	255
Cognitive Distortions by Category	264
References	267
Acknowledgments	270



**It's not a contest.
Trauma is just bad... and sad.**

The competitive comparison of traumas is a fruitless and potentially damaging waste of time. Traumas of all flavors are just bad... and sad. When trauma occurs, it is far more constructive to simply start addressing it instead of trying to judge whether it is atrocious enough to justify attention. Rule #19—“It’s not a contest. Trauma is just bad... and sad”—became necessary in my clinical practice due to the prevalence of intergenerational trauma dynamics on both sides of many couples’ families. Adult intergenerational trauma Survivors select partners from similar family environments, likely because the dysfunctional dynamics seem normal to both individuals. At some point, these partners begin comparing their trauma histories, and often they mistakenly conceptualize their histories in competitive ways.

Pet Peeves

Two statements have always evoked an immediate, visceral response in me, even as a child: “Been there, done that,” and “Must be nice.” These two statements suggest that one’s experiences, thoughts, and emotions are not worthy of recognition, as though human suffering is a competition in which whoever suffered the most wins the right to have their painful experiences validated.

“Been there, done that” implies that I should stop talking about my experience because it is not unique. Finishing their line of reasoning might sound like, “Been there, done that. I already experienced that, so I know what you are talking about, and you can stop talking now. Your hardship is nothing more than anything I have experienced, so you can ask me for guidance here since I am more experienced, wiser, and tougher than you.”

“Must be nice,” would go on to something like, “It must be nice to have it so easy like you do, living it up on Easy Street. I, on the other hand, have it rougher. I suffer more than you in my life and circumstances, so you should look up to me as more valid through my greater suffering. If you understood my suffering, you would be embarrassed by your luxuriously easy experience here and keep your mouth shut.”

Both these common sayings are built on the assumption that human suffering is a contest and that those who suffer most deserve more pity, apologies, support, love, or value. They come from the speaker’s need to be the center of attention and admiration, exposing skills deficits in the realms of empathy and communication.

When responding to these invalidating statements, I practice the rules presented in this book. I resist the urge to express my reactive aggression and sarcasm, which might have sounded something like, “Yes, I am just enjoying my life here on Easy Street, where everything was handed to me on a silver platter. I never had to work, study, or earn anything. I’ll shut up now and let you and the other Ultimate Sufferers speak.” Instead of giving in to my anger, I practice more loving or educational responses as part of “education and empathy for all.”

My favorite response is to use the power of silence! After hearing, “Been there, done that,” I respond with silence lasting long enough for my counterpart to recognize that their statement has shut me down. The awkward silence typically leads them to clumsily backpedal as they try to restart the conversation. They ask questions and listen more respectfully, to which I graciously respond with sincere answers. This approach is the gentlest way of moving toward my counterpart rather than away from them.

Upon hearing, “Must be nice,” I typically respond slowly, directly, and honestly. The slowed pace of my speech suggests to the other person that something weird is going on when I say, “In many ways, it is... very nice.” I then explain in what ways my situation is, from my sincere perspective, quite nice. This enables me to deal with my own fears of being perceived as “having it easy” and helps me avoid functioning as though trauma is a contest. I know that my personal history includes both fortunate circumstances (born in the United States to loving parents in the late 20th century) and a lot of hard work that got me where I

am today. Do I want or need this person's sympathy? Do I want to self-identify through my experience of suffering? I check my pride and then try to have an honest and thoughtful discussion with my counterpart. This typically goes over well when my body language suggests that I am not competing for the Ultimate Sufferer award and instead trying to connect purposefully.

As we apply rule #19 and work deliberately to eliminate competition from trauma experience discussions, we focus on shifting to validating phrases that encourage our counterpart to open up rather than shut down. We can replace the phrase, "Must be nice," with an expression of curiosity or a request for elaboration such as, "What was that like for you?"

Rule #19 is important, for example, when considering the damaging effects of childhood physical abuse versus neglect. Survivors who suffered from neglect often have little insight into the severely damaging effects of their experience, so they discount their own struggles in comparison with someone who was "actually abused." This self-invalidating evaluation shuts down or prevents therapeutic discussions that could help in personal education and healing.

Many therapists speak of 'little t' traumas versus 'big T' traumas. This can be helpful when deciding what to address first, but the distinction is not intended to suggest that 'little t' traumas are insignificant or to be ignored. 'Little t' traumas, too, cause damage and influence our behaviors, thus warranting therapeutic attention. Also, neglect in the world of intergenerational trauma is considered a 'big T' trauma that requires significant therapeutic interventions to address, despite many Survivors' discounting of its damaging effects.

When two Survivors in a relationship (friends, siblings, partners, spouses) do not understand rule #19, they often go through an inner dialogue that discounts their own trauma compared to their counterpart's because it was "not as bad as theirs." This discounting of personal trauma often directs Survivors to refrain from discussing their trauma, leading to consequences similar to those of keeping secrets (see Chapter 13). These negative consequences include failures to address the trauma, access support, and practice self-empathy. The unfavorable, competitive comparison makes it difficult for each person to treat themselves in a self-loving and self-respecting fashion.

The opposite competitive inner (or spoken) dialogue also often occurs: "Your trauma was nothing compared to mine," which resembles the invalidating statements discussed above. This comparison shuts your counterpart down in their own embarrassment, shame, or anger. A competitive approach to trauma isolates individuals instead of bringing them together in greater engagement and intimacy.

“Trauma is just bad...”

While people admirably use their intelligence and optimism to gain wisdom—even inspiration—from their traumatic experiences, this process is the equivalent of turning lemons into lemonade. The best anyone can do is make the most of a terrible situation. Abuse, neglect, and violence destroy the body and mind... they are simply bad. You can live past it, surviving and transforming yourself into a wiser, thriving human being, but those things you experienced were not good for you!

The saying, “I would not want to change a thing from my past, otherwise I would not be who I am now,” is an example of making lemonade from lemons. I must respectfully disagree with the sentiment for several reasons. First, much of the attraction to your current circumstances is that they are known to you, and therefore not as scary as the unknown. Recall that humans fear the unknown and are soothed by the familiar, even if the familiar is painful or dysfunctional. Purposefully and honestly imagining how things might have been without past traumas would likely challenge this concept of gratitude.

Second, there can be a sacrificial component to accepting that traumas were okay for you to experience but not others. With this gratitude for your traumatic experiences, would you like to offer those experiences to your child or loved ones? I have not yet had one parent answer “yes” to that question. When dealing with intergenerational trauma, I ask such a question because it is important to be honest with ourselves so the mind can know the truth, which is ultimately more satisfying than a fairy tale. Once we accept that trauma is just bad for the human experience, we can accept that it happened and then move toward healing and retraining. That is much healthier than trying to repackage it somehow as a ‘gift’ (that you would never give to a loved one), or part of a higher plan, or something similarly wonderful.

The third reason I disagree with the “I wouldn’t change a thing about my past” sentiment was brought to the fore recently whilst I went through a major upheaval in my personal life. Like most others, I would choose the blissful ignorance of not knowing certain aggressions over the wisdom ‘earned’ through such experiences. I am highly empathic with a strong desire to improve the lot of others—often to the point of overindulgence. This has assisted me greatly in the healing professions of psychology and coaching, but it also left me vulnerable in my romantic relationships as I naïvely gave of myself to those who did not, through lack of will or skill, give back. In recent years, I learned what it feels like to be the prey of savvy predators and manipulative individuals in my life. Legally, it takes years (and a small fortune) to defend yourself against absurd or false allegations. The experience of being

betrayed, stalked, and attacked by people with no regard for the truth or personal accountability has been excruciating. It has challenged me to follow my own rules here, especially “anger begets anger, violence begets violence, and love begets love.” How do I continue to live in love after experiencing such predatory, deceptive, and cowardly behaviors while being legally forced for years to sit there and take it?

I have repeated the “anger begets anger” rule thousands of times in my mind to quell the rage and growing hatred I never knew before. These experiences have given me insight into the experiences of my clients who grew up among dishonest or predatory people whose betrayal and dysfunction negatively affected them. I am deeply grateful that I experienced the firm foundation of a loving, safe (enough) childhood in the care of devoted and skilled parents before facing these recent, prolonged aggressions. This is a foundation that most of my clients, and most readers of this book, lack. Additionally, it has been fascinating, both demoralizing and exultant, to see how the people around me have responded to my strife. I have never felt so grateful for and close to my true, strong friends, nor more relieved to excuse the rest from my life.

Though I now feel tested and victorious in refusing to live in anger and hatred, I would rather not have experienced this challenge. I am a different person now—harder and less trusting, though not hateful. I would have been fine without this hard-earned wisdom. I do not wish my newfound wisdom on my nieces or nephews; I would prefer they never experience such people. Because “trauma is just bad,” even if we are superb at making lemonade!

There is an important corollary to this rule: where trauma is concerned, practice does not make perfect. Stacking trauma upon trauma continues to break down the system, focusing all attention on survival instead of thriving in love, gratifying work, and satisfying connectivity. Quality training, much like weight lifting with good technique, strengthens the system through the body’s adaptive response to healthy, controlled stress. Trauma, on the other hand, is like lifting heavy weights with terrible technique—it breaks the system down through unhealthy stress. The Adverse Childhood Experiences study showed mathematically that more trauma equals more damage, more medical disorders, and more money spent on medical and mental health over a person’s lifetime. Where trauma is concerned, practice does not make perfect!

Thanks to our remarkable adaptability, traumas do not necessarily shut a person down, but they do wear on the human body and mind over time. Our goal here with the 20 rules is not only to repair the damage done, but to train protective skills and education that prevent or reduce the damaging effects of future traumas for yourself and generations to come.

“...and sad.”

The “sad” part of rule #19, “It’s not a contest. Trauma is just bad... and sad,” has come to mean a lot to me after three decades of working with trauma Survivors. The emotion that ultimately kept surfacing for me was sadness—raw, unfiltered, straightforward, and unavoidable sadness. It took a while for me to learn how to simply sit in the moment with my client’s suffering and my responding sadness. My first response was to try to ‘rescue’ clients, which in practice meant hurrying past their unacceptable emotions of sadness and hopelessness. I could not ‘cure’ my client in that moment, remove their history, erase their memories, or fix their brokenness. I practiced sitting with them in the almost overwhelming sadness and destruction of it all, asking questions only to better understand their experiences. Eventually, we would apply these rules, understand things differently, gain hope, and validate their experiences with other therapeutic thoughts, but only after the sadness had been allowed to exist, breathe, and be experienced in our shared presence.

Rule Corollary: “Trauma therapy is also not a contest.”

Throughout my career as a clinical psychologist, I had the gratifying experience of working with many hardworking, willful couples who sought to thrive in their relationships by deeply engaging in therapy together. It was helpful to offer these clients realistic expectations from the very beginning, such as the timeline of three to five years of heavy therapy required to develop the skills and education to thrive past their extensive intergenerational trauma.

Let that timeline sink in. Three to five years.

Another realistic expectation to discuss early in therapy is that it is impossible for any two people to learn the same materials at the same pace, and therefore it is ludicrous and downright unhelpful to perceive therapy as a contest! Competition between partners in therapy will only slow their individual and collective progress down. Husbands, wives, and partners each move at different paces as each struggles with insights, concepts, and weaknesses, using personal strengths in therapy, confronting rough challenges, and many more complex issues. These are things to remember:

- Some partners acquire certain skills or educational components faster than others.
- Breaks, lulls, or slowing down will look different for each individual.

- Gaining insight into the peculiar details of an individual family's trauma history is best done with collaboration, frequent breaks, and education. Not with a competitive pace or pressure.

Instead of competitive approaches to trauma therapy for a couple, we would prefer to see the couple develop a supportive, soothing interaction style—ideally within 3–6 months of starting therapy. Learning the fundamental skills of self-soothing, slowing down, and being purposeful is difficult enough. This becomes exponentially more difficult when your partner or spouse is your biggest trauma trigger!!! It takes a while to achieve, but here is what a mutually supportive dynamic might look like...

Partners are discussing a difficult topic at home when one of them grows frustrated and raises their voice. This triggers the other partner into sympathetic mode. The goal here is for each partner to recognize that they have been triggered, or that their partner has been triggered, and to then purposefully slow down to address these sympathetic spikes... together. Once significantly triggered, partners are unlikely to make real progress on an issue.

Whoever first recognizes the sympathetic activation speaks up immediately: “We’re getting amped up. I can feel the adrenaline. Let’s breathe a moment.” As a team, “us against trauma world,” both partners breathe together, get a glass of water, or do whatever else they have learned helps them achieve parasympathetic mode. They may decide to resume the discussion in a more appropriate setting in order to minimize distractions and time constraints. Once ready, the team then sits down to continue the discussion more mindfully. Each partner is advised to shift into question-asking mode to better understand what triggered their counterpart in that moment.

Humor and Healthy Competition

Some people respond well to healthy competition, so we do not want to exclude potentially beneficial therapy approaches. The key will be to recognize healthy versus unhealthy types of competition discussed throughout this chapter. Even if you’d like to experiment with competition, be cautious and keep it limited if you are new to therapy, as initial sensitivities and vulnerability carry a risk.

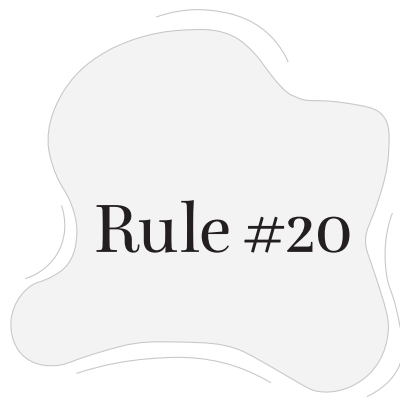
Humorous competition can be a wonderful way to make some aspects of therapy more enjoyable and efficient. Humor alone can provide welcome relief from the heaviness of therapy. As we know, many skills require extensive repetition to master, which can become tiresome.

Drills & Skills: Experiment with Humor and Healthy Competition

Experiment 1: Design a lighthearted competition with your partner (or self) for the number of therapeutic repetitions completed weekly. For example, repping controlled breathing practice throughout the week can be a nerdy competition that fosters more practice. “Whoever gets more reps this week earns a 20-minute shoulder massage.”

Experiment 2: Design a team competition against weekly goals instead of against one another. “If we meet our goal of doing 10 minutes of controlled breathing together on 5 occasions this week, then we will treat ourselves to a fancy dinner Saturday night. If we fail, then we have to eat cereal instead. Let’s earn our dinner!”

Beware: Mocking the loser of the week’s repetition contest can rapidly discourage future progress, so be careful and communicative about whether these competition experiments are helpful for both partners. Ask yourself, “Is this competitive game bringing us closer, or is it pushing us farther apart?” So long as all enjoy the competitive camaraderie, go ahead and have fun!



Rule #20

Make it normal.

Some things will start to feel remarkably normal to you in a short period. Some things, in all honesty, will never feel normal. But even for the things that will never feel normal, you will normalize the discipline necessary to manage them. Behaviors practiced every day look and feel more normal and more natural to your children (or the next generation). This gives us the best chance of reducing the transference of trauma to the next generation. Thus, rule #20 is “Make it normal.”

Educational insight into boundaries concepts, effective boundary setting with self and others, genuine and effective communication, addressing family secrets one at a time, enhanced self-care habits, advanced behavioral parenting skills, and “us against trauma world” strategies—all combine to help shift from Center of the Universe dynamics to the more stable Ideal Family Structure dynamics. The timeline for executing such a complex shift is the rest of your life, but significant gains in competence and confidence typically occur in the first three to five years.

Three years of applying yourself to the concepts presented here will drastically reduce much of the personal and familial chaos, dysfunction, and ongoing stress you experience in your daily life. The increasing normalcy of personal parasymphathetic functioning and interpersonal harmony finally delivers the real control that children raised in safe, supportive, loving environments have had the good fortune to enjoy all along. Through education, training, and personal responsibility, the Thriver can take back this control from the traumas that originally ripped it away from their young, victimized self.