



BECOMING A PERSON

more

Gray Line  
of Basilford

This section of the *The Mind Gymnasium* started life as an article for students and clients and for people who, while insisting that ‘they personally have no problems’, were curious to discover what ‘personal development’ might be about. I had long wanted some way of outlining the main influences that shape our personality and behaviour as we become persons; while trying to show how they connect to the human assets and deficits, preferences and inhibitions that contribute to making us who and what we are. Why do love and affection often seem so elusive? Why do so many capable, effective people also lack confidence? How is it that some of us behave at times like volcanoes, erupting into anger? Why do we so often meet people who seem frozen—human icebergs? Why are so many people addicted to substances, or other people?

The conceptual basis of both my work as a psychopractitioner and of *The Mind Gymnasium* is learning and unlearning—though other schemes and models cluster round this. The notion that we learn to be who and how we are, and by implication can unlearn problematic patterns of belief and behaviour, provides a cross-disciplinary way of linking the personal with the political and eventually the transpersonal aspects of life. It also side-steps the professionalized obscurity of some of the currently dominant theories about personal development. Like co-counselling it deals with the deepest human concerns, and has proven to be very accessible

Is this over-ambitious? Perhaps. A feeling for the intrinsic value of human life, and life in general, brings with it a sense of vast irreducible mystery. Too little respect for this mystery

The mysteries are what is wild in us, what can't be quantified or contained..... the mysteries are also what is most common to us all: blood, breath, heartbeat, the sprouting of seed, the waxing and waning of the moon, the turning of the earth around the sun, birth, death, growth, renewal...

...the core of the mysteries is the understanding that truth is always deeper and richer than any description of it.

STARHAWK:TRUTH OR DARE 1989

[more](#)

can lead to a spurious clarity that lacks compassion, yet too great a respect for mystery can create a fog of mysticism. That said, there does seem to be a lot of unnecessary mystification around the process of becoming a person, and like the rest of *The Mind Gymnasium* this section attempts to demystify what need not be unnecessarily obscured.

If you like to 'browse', or start at the end, try the Contents opposite. But I recommend you first look at the **Overview** animation.

**more**

## Becoming a person: contents

### Introduction

### Overview

### Inner and outer

### Favourable learning

### Unfavourable Learning

#### Omitted learning

#### Distorted learning

#### Distressed learning

### Consequences of unfavourable learning

#### Lack of confidence

#### Damaged self esteem

#### Re-stimulation

#### Constriction and rigidity

#### Comfort zones

#### Ungrounded projection and fantasy life

### Unlearning and other possibilities

#### Free yourself from your redundant past

#### Develop favourable learning

#### Deal with unfavourable learning

## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

### Contents

from our earliest  
moments...



## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

### Contents

from our earliest moments...



we engage with the events and challenges of daily life

## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

### Contents



## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

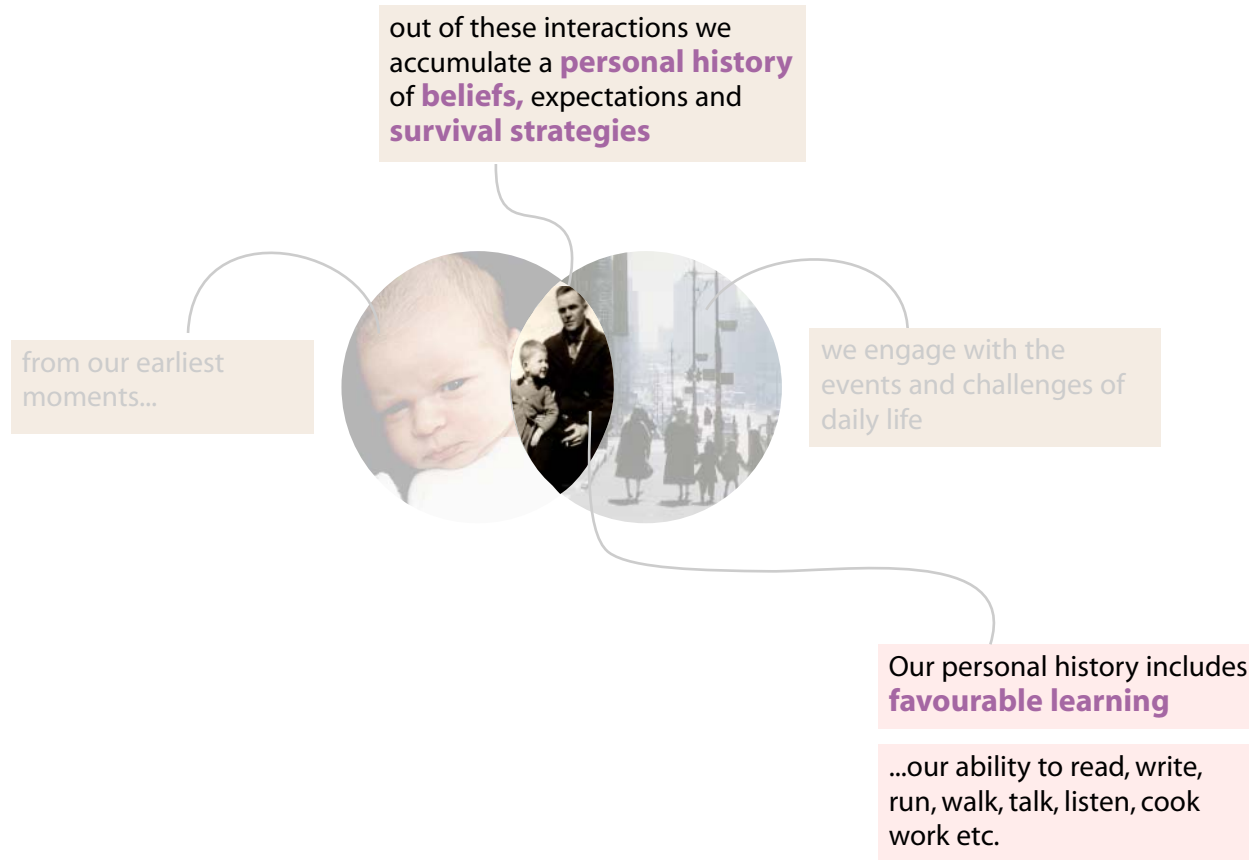
### Contents



## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

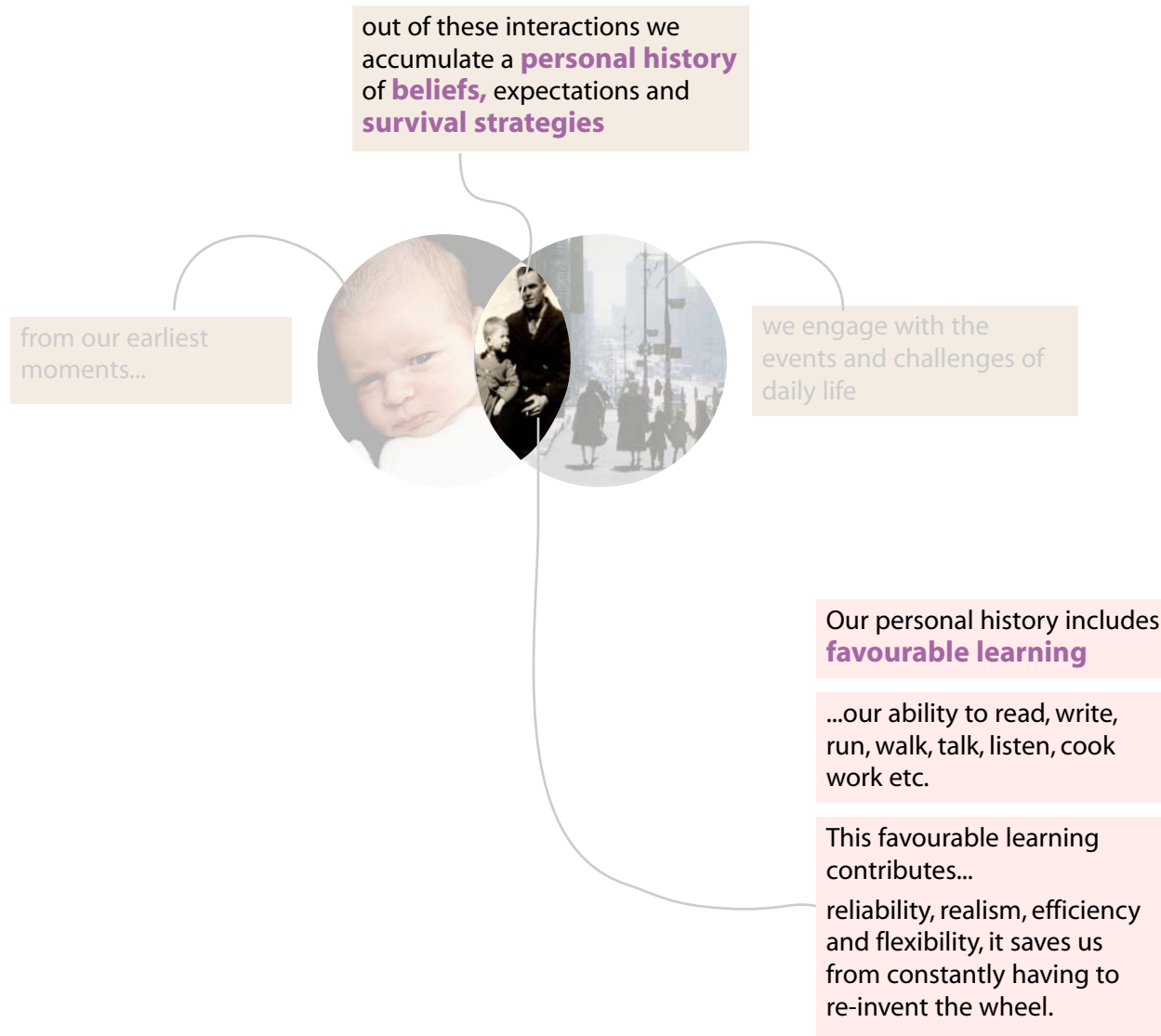
### Contents



## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

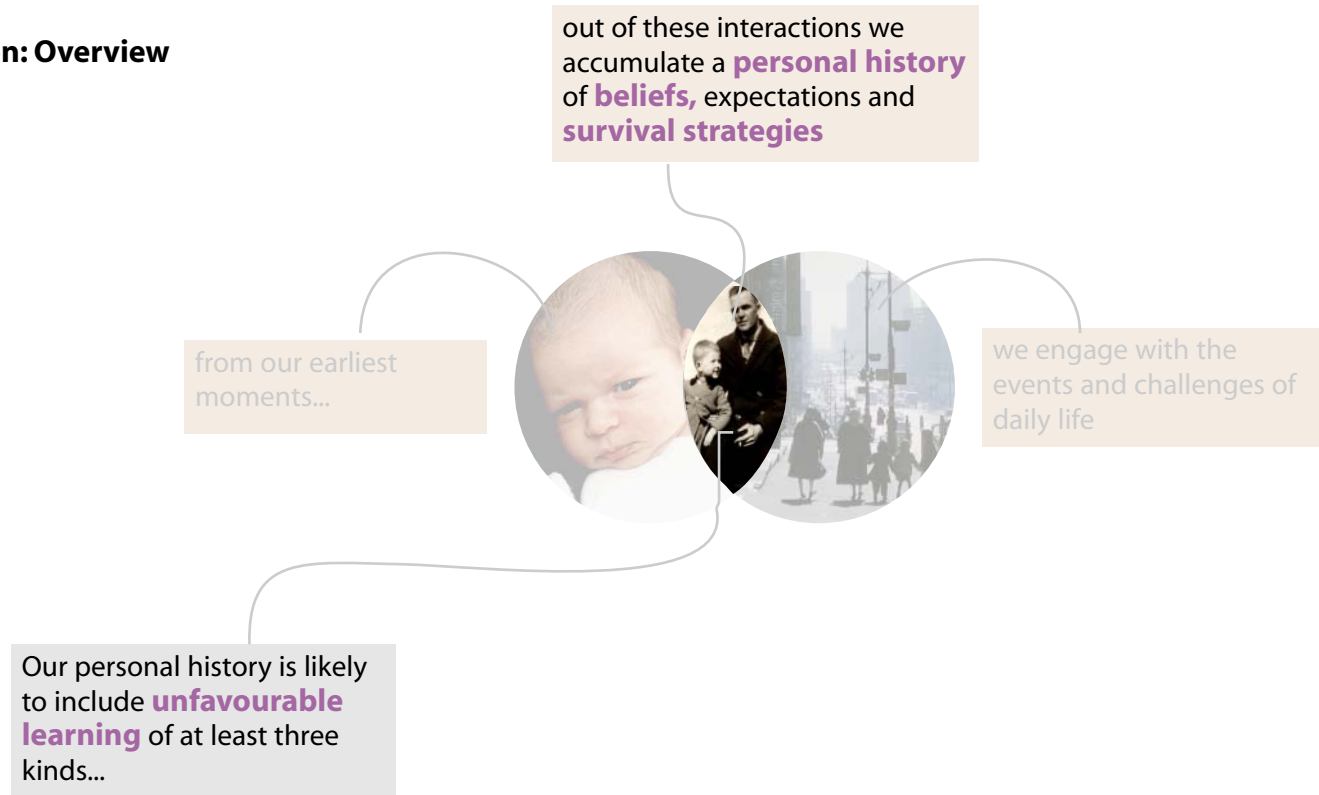
### Contents



## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction

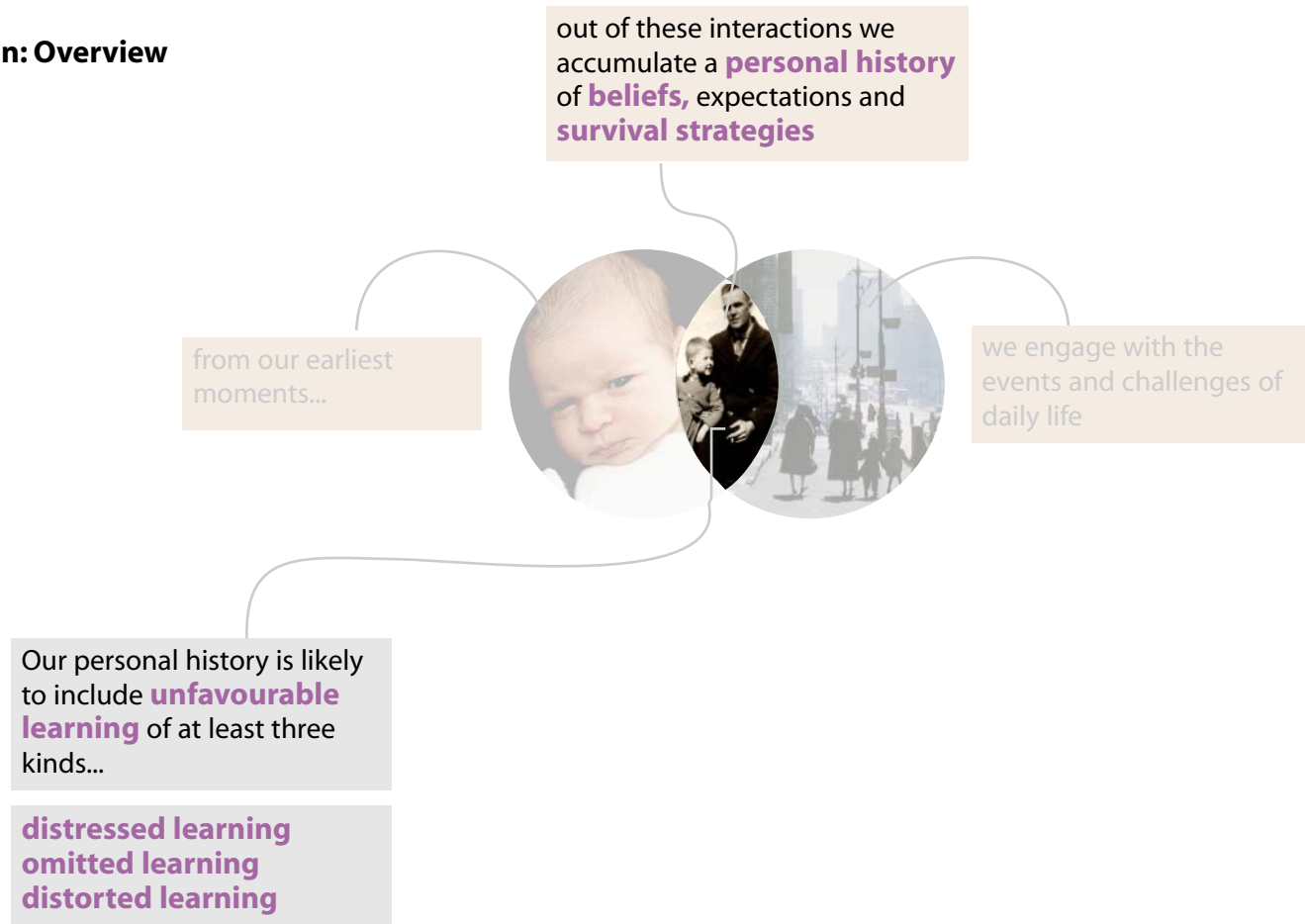
### Contents



## Becoming a person: Overview

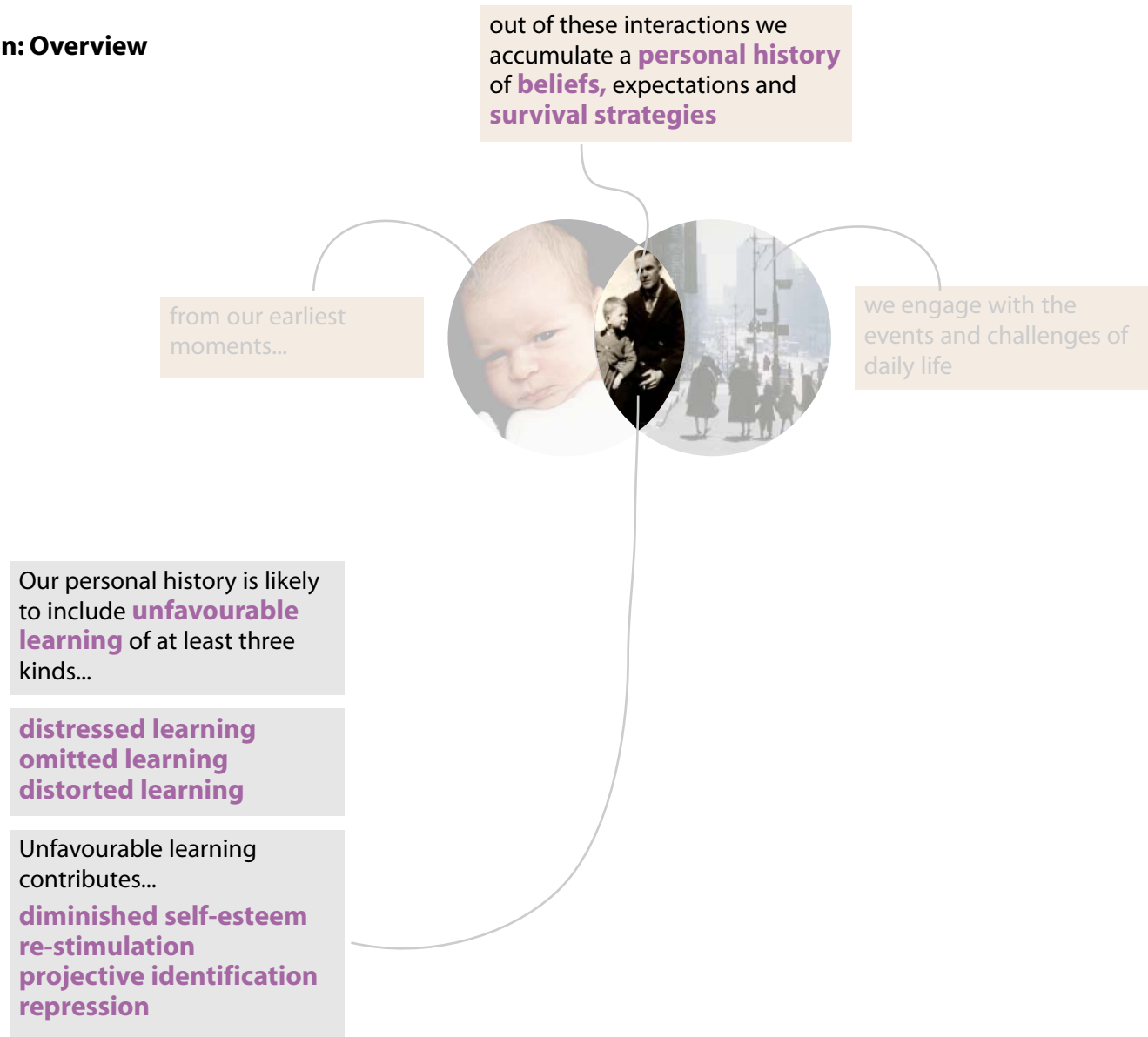
### Introduction

### Contents



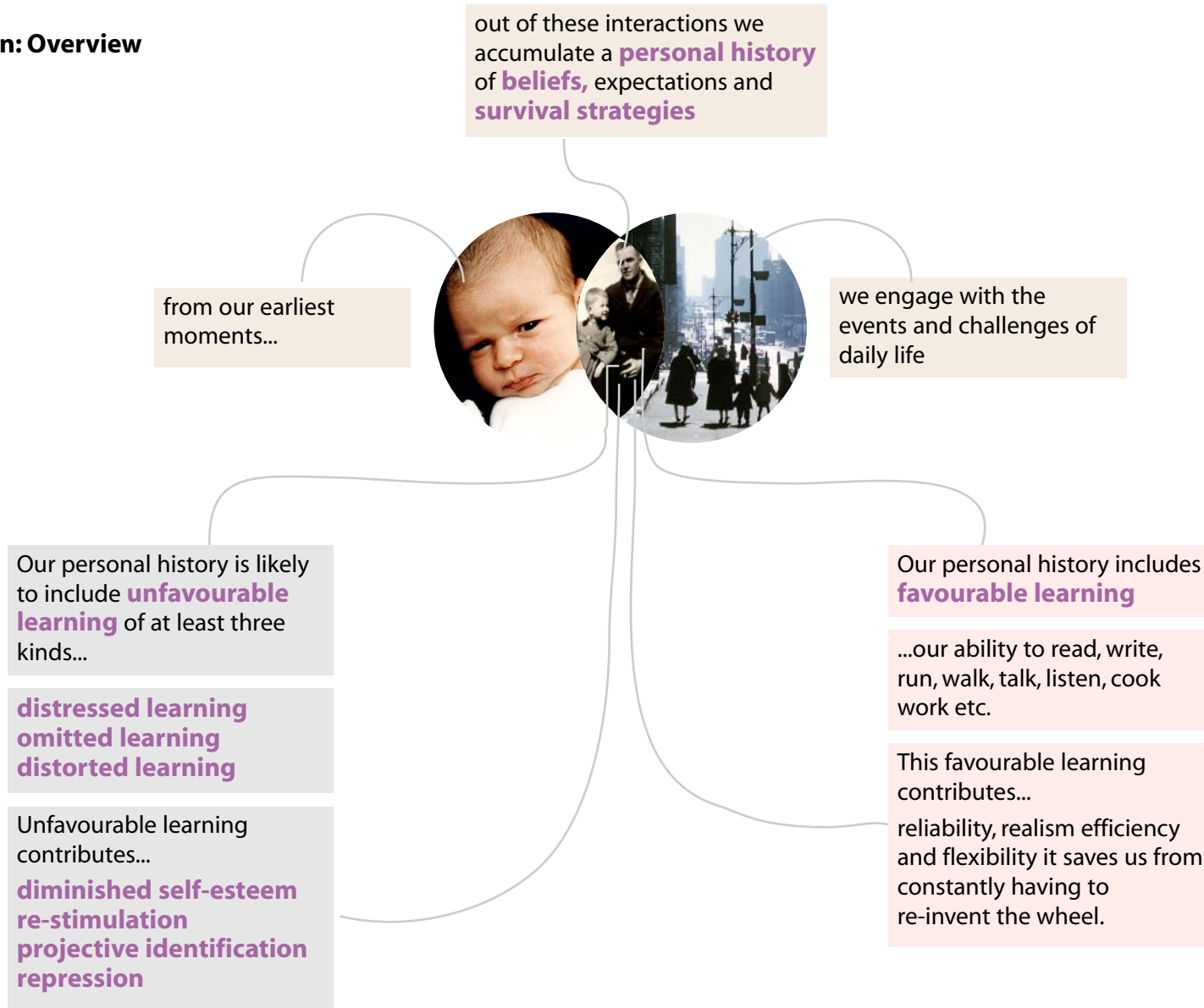
## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction Contents



## Becoming a person: Overview

### Introduction Contents



## Inner and Outer

As I move through the world, my inner universe meets the outer universe of other people and events. I feel tired, you want to walk the long way home. You feel delighted and tell a joke, I laugh.

In our outer universe, there may be rain, or sunshine, or traffic gridlock. In my inner universe there are perhaps feelings of longing, or belonging; bodily pleasure, daydreams and insights, choices to be made, offers to consider, actions to plan. I also meet all of these, and more, in the outer universe of other people.

These inner and outer ingredients form a collective 'soup' in which the whole history of humankind lives on in and around us. Yet within this incredibly rich broth of shared human experience, you and I are distinct flavours. We may share the same evolutionary history, the same culture, even the same family, and we are also separate and unique. This is because we each have personal history that is embodied, we hold it in our bodyminds. Because we each have separate and unique bodyminds, we also have a distinct personal identity.

My sense of identity may wax and wane. When outer events impinge, I may feel worried, or excited and moved. I accommodate. I resist. I run with the herd, or I sit by myself. Above all I learn. My sense of identity, of who I am becoming as a person, is the accumulation of my learning. I believe that learning from the interplay of the outer and inner universes is inevitable, it's unavoidable, though we may not be aware of what we learn.

This learning occurs across the whole of our life span, from conception to the present day, and continues until we die. This is the starting point of the story I want to tell here.

[more](#)

In all the unfolding moments of present time, as our inner universe meets the outer universe of people and events, we respond to these sights, sounds, and sensations through what we have learned.

I bring to the outer universe what I have learned about surviving, fighting, pleasure, love, danger, and delight. This learning is a pair of spectacles that I cannot remove.

The quality of my life-long learning necessarily shapes how I meet the outer world. Contrary to the popular belief that associates 'learning' only with school, learning goes on all the time. I'm talking here about any form of learning, from changing a diaper to giving a party.

What sorts of learning am I likely to discover if I take a look into my personal history, and unpick and unpack what I find? The more I have done this myself and helped others to do it, the more I believe that what matters is what counts as favourable and unfavourable learning. Favourable learning enhances, facilitates and supports, and clarifies, Unfavourable learning undermines, disables, restricts, and confuses.

*Becoming a person* is intended to support self-appraisal. It should be relevant for anyone, anywhere, so long as you decide what is favourable or unfavourable for you. This is not to say that other people may not have something to contribute to your evaluation, but in this scheme it is your view that matters.

[more](#)

[See also ▾](#)

## Favourable learning

What I mean here by favourable learning is any learning which, in present time, supports realism, effectiveness, and survival. It's learning that keeps me in rapport with the person I'm next to, or which helps keep my mind on what I'm doing; or that means I can make accurate guesses about the future.

Favourable learning is learning that supports accurate, realistic, high-quality decisions. It supports loving and being loved; understanding and being understood; and choosing and being chosen. If I am to grow up with enough, or adequate, favourable learning, what are some of the things that need to happen?

My short-list of what is likely to be important includes:

**Being carried as a foetus by a well nourished, well loved and supported mother; I learn about well-being.**

**Being born without undue delay or interference; I learn that effort and struggle are rewarded.**

**Having an adequate opportunity to bond with my parents; I learn to belong.**

**'Good-enough' continuity and quality of care; I learn to give and receive love.**

**Sufficient sensory and intellectual stimulation; I learn to reach out and to absorb.**

**Learning to talk and walk and play; I learn to explore, communicate and create.**

**Learning to relate to other people; I learn to value myself and others.**

[more](#)

**Learning to be persistent, tolerant and orderly;**  
**I learn to persevere and carry out tasks.**

**Learning to manage feelings and emotions; I learn**  
**about joy, zest, sadness, anxiety and anger.**

**Learning to manage economic life; I learn the value**  
**of work.**

**Learning how to learn; I learn how to exercise power**  
**and solve my own problems.**

You may want to add to, or delete items from, this list: I see it as suggestive, rather than exhaustive.

So far as sufficient favourable learning is in place, my inner universe seems likely to be capable of meeting the challenges and opportunities which present-time events introduce. I am likely to be flexible, spontaneous, creative, cooperative, open and respectful of myself and others. I will have solidly grounded self-esteem and I'll resist attempts to compromise it. I'll be responsible, realistic, and effective in what I undertake, refusing or delegating tasks or roles that are out of my range, or experience, or that are abusive or health damaging.

Some items in the catalogue of favourable learning have broader or deeper effects than others. I believe that the earlier the learning, the more global and substantial is its contribution to our present-time capability. I've seen how a child who was deeply and comprehensively loved for the first six years of her life was later able to survive tremendous adversity. I also believe that if I am to be able to recover from errors of judgement, or economic perils, and navigate well through the ebb and flow of personal and social life, **learning how to learn** is a vital skill.

However, sadly, alongside the experiences that support realism, and creative engagement with daily life, there is likely also to be **unfavourable learning**.

**more**

## Unfavourable learning

Unhappily, as our inner and outer worlds unfold, alongside the accumulation of favourable learning there is also unfavourable learning. What I mean by unfavourable learning is anything that undermines my realism, accuracy, resilience, or effectiveness as I go about my life and especially my capacity for survival.

Unfavourable learning can be so general that nothing seems to go well. Or it can exist in pockets, or, to change the metaphor, as trip-wires in an inter-personal minefield.

Of course what counts as favourable learning in one life situation may shift in value, or even reverse, if the world changes round me, or if I move somewhere else. For example, the accuracy, orderliness, and scrupulous attention to detail that belong with a successful banking career may be a poor basis for the entrepreneurial task of starting up and building a small business. In the interests of simplicity and accessibility, in what follows I am going to set aside concerns with reversals due to change of circumstances.

I have come to recognize three kinds of unfavourable learning,

**omissions**

**distortions**

**distress**

But before you look at them, check out **favourable learning** if you haven't already.

**more**

## Omitted learning

By omitted learning I mean any learning that we would reasonably expect in a child or young adult but that is missing.

An example I often give is that of a child who moved schools in London at the age of six. The move was from one good school to another, better one. Because the same educational authority ran both schools, his parents assumed that they were compatible. In many ways they were. However, in the year after the move, the child began to feel very distressed about some aspects of school, especially mathematics. He was doing poorly and increasingly didn't like going to school.

When the parents and his teachers investigated, they found that, in moving schools, the child had missed a whole year of mathematics. The schools were not year on year, directly comparable. The child, who was bright and well supported at home, had made this difficult jump very well. Except that the missing mathematics meant that he had omitted a year of really fundamental material; for example, fractions were a complete mystery to him. Once his parents had identified all this, they could remedy the omitted learning and his distress about school faded.

I believe that all of us necessarily have some areas of omitted learning. Some seem relatively trivial. For example, around the age of 12, I was absent on the day that the school announced a lunch-time violin class. I found out about it weeks afterwards, but too late to join. I still count it a loss.

But suppose that while still a youngster:

**I suffer the loss of one or both parents; I'll miss their love, care, and commitment.**

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**I have a serious illness with or without hospitalization; I'll miss the peer group culture of friends, relatives and school.**

**I take over the running of a home and bring up younger sisters and brothers; I'll miss the chance to learn what matters for me at my own pace.**

**I am never able to play freely or make friends of my own choosing; I'll miss learning how to choose and be chosen.**

These examples point to omitted learning that is vitally important for adult life. The scale of omission, particularly if it includes any of the items in the catalogue of favourable learning in the earlier section above, will decisively affect the inner 'spectacles' through which we relate to the outer world.

These inner 'spectacles' are also affected by **distorted learning** and **distressed learning**. If you've already looked at them, it's time to move on to the **consequences of unfavourable learning**

**more**

## Distorted Learning

Distorted learning arises when I consistently receive a view of my abilities, value, or destiny that is inaccurate, perverted (deliberately malicious), ignorant of my reality, or simply wrong. This is especially problematic in so far as the view that I receive refers to 'me' as a person, as opposed to what I do.

If you tell me that I am clumsy, I am bad, brilliant, lazy, too kind, selfish, wonderful, slow, or whatever, this may come to define who I believe I am. If I hear this often enough, my whole sense of identity may become preoccupied with living up to, or down to, this distorted learning about myself.

Distorted learning usually benefits someone else, not me. For me to be clever, or stupid, or 'good', solves someone else's problem, or massages someone else's guilt. My value becomes conditional on others' approval. I am encouraged to deny my inherent value as a human being.

If I take it on board, this distorted view of myself becomes either a perpetual daily problem, because I can't live it, or because I succeed in living it very well, it may be buried at an out-of-reach, subterranean level. I only know about it through nagging dissatisfaction, hostility, melancholy, or illness.

But who knows? You may have had consistently loving and accurate reflections of yourself as you grew up, that would be great. If that's how it seems, check out **distressed learning** and, if you passed over it, **omitted learning**. Otherwise it's time to move on to **the consequences of unfavourable learning**.

[more](#)

## Distressed Learning

Distressed learning means learning accompanied by anything that caused me physical or psychological pain, i.e. injury; deprivation, including sensory and food deprivation; torture; separation; punishment; humiliation; arbitrary, inconsistent, or excessive demands, or demands that were outside my capabilities. The point is that the learning took place in a condition of bodymind distress.

I have come to distinguish two kinds of distressed learning depending on whether or not the bodymind insult drove bodily reactions to life-threatening levels.

Levels of bodymind distress below the survival threshold, e.g. where the bodymind is severely challenged but not to life-threatening levels, seem to create a highly aversive but accessible memory. For example, the distressed learning from regular beatings may be powerlessness, or excessive compliance, that 'authority must be obeyed'.

Some very severe insults push the bodymind—heart-rate, breathing, blood pressure to levels that would result in death if they continued. The human organism survives by splitting off the bodymind learning from conscious awareness. Trauma sufficient to cause this splitting include: protracted, or forceps birth, sexual or physical abuse and accidents.

I know someone who as child had a very serious illness. This involved hospitalization and invasive and painful treatment. The person had no adult memory of the hospital experience. They survived the trauma by 'splitting off' the pain. This distressed learning then lay fallow and forgotten in the body, surfacing intermittently in adult life as panic attacks, extreme bodily tension, aversion to touch and trance-like staring into space.

[more](#)

An example of the first, aversive kind of distressed learning is my experience of learning to play the piano. For several years from the age of eight, my parents insisted that I play the piano every day for an hour. 'Playing by ear', i.e. for fun, was taboo. Practice was all. I had to play by myself, for myself. I never recall anyone ever listening. I do recall being constantly in distress, angry and tearful and hating all of it.

The outcome of this was that I learned to play the piano but I didn't learn to make music. Today my capacity for playing for an audience is limited. When I do play, the early distressed learning often surfaces and I lose the musical thread.

There are as many versions of distressed learning as there are people. I give these examples to point you toward any similar events in your own life.

Omitted learning is a hole in our capabilities; distorted learning warps our beliefs and expectations; distressed learning endows some aspects of our capabilities with a tremendous emotional charge. It speaks the language of extremes: always and never, life or death, I must or I can't. It is learning engraved on our very heart and soul.

Historically, distressed learning has been the method *par excellence* recommended for bringing up children, see **parenting styles**. Happily there seems to be evidence that other, better ways of delivering child-care are emerging and being used more widely. Anything other than slow progress in this direction seems unlikely, and economic, ethnic, or social upheaval may yet reverse it.

If you haven't looked at **omitted learning**, or **distorted learning**, check them out. Otherwise it's time to move on to the **consequences of unfavourable learning**.

[more](#)

What is at  
first a cup  
of sorrow  
becomes  
at last  
immortal  
wine

GITA

## Consequences of unfavourable learning

In its most extreme forms, unfavourable learning burdens some aspects of our capabilities with a tremendous emotional charge. It speaks the language of extremes: always and never, life or death, I must or I can't.

Omitted learning is a hole in our capabilities distorted learning warps our beliefs and expectations; distressed learning is damage and hurt engraved in our very heart and soul.

However it affects us, unfavourable human learning has myriad consequences for shaping the spectacles through which we view ourselves, how we meet other people and how we behave. Among them are:

**Lack of confidence**

**Damaged self-esteem**

**Physical and mental constriction and rigidity**

**Creation and maintenance of 'comfort zones'**

**Re-stimulation of repressed painful memories**

**Ungrounded projection and fantasy life**

When you've had a browse through these, take a look at **Freeing yourself from your redundant past.**

[more](#)

## Lack of confidence

If I have a broad and varied range of favourable learning, particularly if it includes learning how to learn, then in situations where this learning is relevant I will generally be confident. However, in so far as I have omitted to learn something, through failure or neglect, or never having had the opportunity, then I will lack confidence if called upon to do it. This may seem obvious and it is, from the outside. The trouble is that I don't miss what I never had.

Two examples. I worked a while ago with two people who were suffering from panic attacks, and general emotional chaos when faced with criticism and conflict.

Jeanette is a confident, capable administrator. Her company promoted her into a job where she had to make a lot of presentations. In the new job her confidence ebbed away, the presentations were a continual nightmare; she was often hesitant and tongue-tied. When we investigated her lack of confidence, we found two things: first she had had no training in presenting and, secondly, that being the centre of attention while presenting brought up her distressed learning of being punished and humiliated in class at school. Either on their own would contribute to unconfident behaviour, together they called for substantial remedial action.

Bill's design work didn't much involve other people and he felt very confident as long as he was relating to a screen or a drawing board. However, he had difficulty in talking to senior people, almost any contact with authority made him freeze. He felt demolished by even modest amounts of criticism from his boss. When we looked into this, the origin of the unconfident relationship with authority quickly emerged.

[more](#)

Bill's step-father had been very autocratic and had constantly beaten him throughout his later childhood, while his mother had never come to his aid. The distressed learning of fear and mistrust from this treatment severely undermined his confidence in older people.

If any of my learning took place in a state of sustained, repeated, or extreme distress, especially if it meant humiliation and submission, then I am unlikely to be confident with persons who are, or seem to be, in authority, or who might appear to have the power to punish, judge, or harm me.

Distorted learning also undermines confidence. If you tell me repeatedly that 'I'll never be any good at sport', I'll be unlikely to approach it with confidence.

See also:

**Damaged self-esteem**

**Physical and mental constriction and rigidity**

**Creation and maintenance of 'comfort zones'**

**Re-stimulation of repressed painful memories**

**Ungrounded projection and fantasy life**

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**more**

## Damaged self-esteem

Inevitably there will be some holes in my learning. Experiences people usually have are missing. Perhaps these omissions are accompanied by a collection of episodes of distressed learning. I perhaps also have some distorted learning about my capabilities, or lack of them.

If all this is true, then I am unlikely to have a well-grounded sense of my own intrinsic value. Suppose for example that I have learned that 'I have to obey authority'. If so, then I will also be likely to have internalized a parallel distortion; that my value as a person depends on the opinions of others. My self-esteem will then be likely to reflect the 'emotional weather' of the moods and attitudes of the people I live and work with.

By contrast, if my favourable learning has been deep and broad, I am likely to have a sense that I am inherently valuable, that I matter as a person. I won't be 'big-headed', my self-esteem will be well-founded and realistic. I'll have firm foundations from which to manage events or situations where my capabilities are inadequate or marginal and I'm likely to have a good sense of my limitations.

If you haven't already seen them, check out:

**Lack of confidence**

**Physical and mental constriction and rigidity**

**Creation and maintenance of 'comfort zones'**

**Re-stimulation of repressed painful memories**

**Ungrounded projection and fantasy life**

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**more**

## 'Re-stimulation' - constriction and rigidity

So far as I have a history of distressed learning, I will have a collection of bodymind memories of hurt, pain, humiliation, punishment, deprivation, etc.

Such bodymind memories can be re-stimulated by present-time events that reproduce, or echo the original learning. When this occurs, what we are usually mostly aware of is the emotional charge that the original event evoked. We feel unaccountably bad, ill, upset, angry, irritable, and so on.

You can tell when re-stimulation is around because your reactions are often out of proportion to what triggered them. Because the re-stimulated emotional states are often unpleasant, give rise to embarrassment, and tend to be associated with being out of control, we are likely to be very attracted to ways of keeping them quiet.

'Freezing', holding ourselves aloof, being supercool, rigidity of style or habits or attitude, and body armouring, excess muscle, or fat, all these are common ways of keeping a painful emotional history quiet.

Another way of looking at this is to notice how far we are preoccupied with constructing and maintaining

### Comfort Zones

If you haven't already seen them, check out:

**Lack of confidence**

**Damaged self-esteem**

**More on re-stimulation**

**Ungrounded projection and fantasy life**

When you've had a browse through these, take a look at

**Freeing yourself from your redundant past.**

[more](#)

## More on re-stimulation

A reminder of what the **first screen** on re-stimulation had to say—so far as I have a history of distressed learning—body-mind memories of hurt, pain, humiliation, punishment, deprivation—these can be re-stimulated by present-time events that reproduce or echo the original learning—we feel unaccountably bad, ill, upset, angry, irritable, and so on.

To use another piano-playing example, a while back someone told me about how, when they were learning to play the piano, if they made a mistake the teacher would hit their knuckles hard with a ruler. Due to the pain, they learned very well ‘not to make mistakes’ but as an adult they found that the teaching method seriously undermined their musical performances. Giving a concert so re-stimulated the distressed learning, they became so desperate and panicky at the possibility of making mistakes, that playing publicly wasn’t a viable proposition.

In almost any situation where our reactions are out of proportion to the stimulus to which they are a response, look for re-stimulation of early distressed learning. For example, I often have out of proportion reactions around eating and food, though they trouble me much less today than they did some years ago.

As an adult, I can rapidly find myself becoming agitated and feeling desperate in almost any situation where I am expecting to be able to eat but where I find the restaurant closed, or full, or there is nothing that I like on the menu. After looking into this at some length I have now got a sense that my present-time feelings of panic about food are the re-stimulated feelings of infant hunger and desperation.

[more](#)

Following a difficult birth, I couldn't feed as a new-born baby and for the best part of two weeks I starved, indeed nearly starved to death.

Distressed learning lurking in the bodymind resembles a **dragon in the cellar** of our lives. We may not smell its fire and brimstone very often but at a subtle level we are likely to be aware of its potential for disruption and mayhem. Because of this, we take care to keep it securely locked away.

Since the monster is alive within us, keeping it under control usually means one or another kind of rigidity and constriction, speaking with a very quiet, level voice, talking continually, keeping our jaw muscles tight, holding ourselves tightly. English has lots of expression that reflect this 'up-tightness': 'stiff-necked', 'stiff-upper lip', 'tight-arsed', etc. All these can help keep quiet the monster of distressed learning imprisoned within us, but we pay a price for it in head-aches, back pain, and stiff joints.

You may feel that this is too extreme and you don't recognize it in yourself. If so, perhaps your way of keeping silent the pain of distressed learning takes the softer form of the design, maintenance, and upkeep of '**comfort zones**'. These are places within ourselves and our lives to which the monster in the basement cannot gain access.

If you haven't already seen them, check out:

**Lack of confidence**

**Damaged self-esteem**

**Physical and mental constriction and rigidity**

**Creation and maintenance of 'comfort zones'**

**Ungrounded projection and fantasy life**

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**more**

## Comfort zones

The purpose of comfort zones is to keep us out of reach of our painful history.

We build comfort zones out of: avoiding surprise and change, familiar food, eating too much, eating too little, compulsively regular habits and procrastination; distancing, not getting involved, ‘objectivity’, narrow rigid beliefs, being apolitical; distraction, sport, games, exercise, sex; living in hope, being overly devoted to aims, goals, and targets, ambition, devotion to political, religious, and economic beliefs and charismatic leaders; not being here, daydreaming, talking at people, not listening, sleeping, reading, watching TV.

One of the most universal ways of keep our dragon of unfavorable learning quiet in its cellar, is the use of drugs, both prescription and otherwise—plus alcohol and tobacco.

The price we pay for our ‘comfort zones’, and our rigidity and constriction, is often exhaustion, confusion, and ill-health. However, our defensive manoeuvres deserve respect. Due to them, we survived, we are here now. Nevertheless, they often belong to another time and another place, they disable us in the present, they narrow and limit our potential. With work and support we can let go of them.

If you haven’t already seen them, check out:

**Lack of confidence**

**Damaged self-esteem**

**Physical and mental constriction and rigidity**

**Re-stimulation of repressed painful memories**

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[more](#)

## Projection and fantasy life

Whatever the combination of favourable and unfavourable learning that I have accumulated, this forms a lens through which I perceive the world. How I see the world dominates how I act in it. It is a window with a unique perspective. My perspective. The feelings and emotions, imagery and ideas, and language and skills that this perspective brings to the world, also have the effect of making it so. I can't avoid 'projecting' out on to the external universe the formative shape of my inner expectations and preferences, delights and aversions.

If I am lucky enough to have adequate favourable learning, I will be likely to try to distinguish between what belongs to the present and what belongs to my history. Even though projections of my inner universe onto the outer world of people and events are continual and unavoidable, I will actively try to test, check out, or withdraw what is coming from my unfavourable learning. I'll ask questions about the content of the other's universe; I'll check out other people's intentions and aspirations; I'll test my assumptions; seek to negotiate choices; I'll actively learn from experience; I'll seek help with that which I don't understand or can't handle.

If unfavourable learning is predominant then the outer universe of people, things, and events will tend to mirror my accumulation of distortions, omissions, and distress. They will be projected on to it. If this is so, I may tend to blame the outer for the inner. I will tend to blame others for the emotional pain due to distressed learning within me. Worse, I may feel justified in acting it out on them through sarcasm, spiteful gossip, wounding remarks, aggres-

sion, or even violence, though this is not to deny the often overwhelming intensity of anger, fear and grief arising from current injustice, threat, or loss.

If you haven't already seen them, check out:

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**more**

## Freeing yourself from your redundant past

How can we let go of redundant learning?

Which you lean on first depends on what, if anything, you perceive as problematic in your life. Here are some general rules of thumb that reflect my personal and professional experience.

There are two obvious strategies. One is to actively work at **developing favourable learning**, extending its range and depth. The second is to take on the task of **dealing with your unfavourable learning**, unlearning it, or at least the significant elements of it.

[more](#)

The promised  
land always  
lies on the  
other side of  
the wilderness

HAVELOCK ELLIS

## Developing favourable learning

What can any of us do about all this?

Firstly, actively work at developing favourable learning, extending its range and depth.

So, supposing you are long gone from school, and you have no intention of sitting in class again. How do you develop favourable learning?

You can do it by consolidation, first deepening the base you already have.

Make a list of what you do well—how could you consolidate this? By joining up with other like-minded people in sport or leisure pursuits? Or joining professional or occupational associations? This means that if you are a good cook, cook more and better, If you play sport, play harder, longer, better. Above all it means increasingly knowing your strength and playing from your strength; knowing where and how you are competent, capable, and effective. The See also menu (right) has pointers to a series of exercises that will help you with this task.

You can also build favourable learning through extending these basic strengths. Reach out in new directions. Take a few risks. Form new acquaintances, sign up for a class, take up a new hobby, travel. But do it with an eye on your limitations, on what you can presently handle, in other words what you can learn from.

[more](#)

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## Dealing with unfavourable learning

If this approach I outline here interests you, what can you do?

Firstly, get to work on the task of unlearning the key elements of your unfavourable learning. You can do quite a lot on your own but ultimately this may mean getting some help from a counsellor or a therapist or joining with others who have this need. If you can't afford to pay for help, then try co-counselling, or re-evaluation counseling. The See also menu (right) has pointers to a series of exercises that will help you with this task.

The earliest/most painful, distressed learning almost inevitably has the most impregnable forms of 'comfort zone'. Unpicking and unpacking it has the greatest liberating effect on present time life. If you want to do it safely, there is a lot to be said for deepening and consolidating your favourable learning first. If we too quickly demolish or erode the 'comfort zones', there is a some danger that the inner monster of unworked distress may take possession of us—in the so-called 'nervous breakdown'.

Working backward, from the most recent to the earliest distressed learning, has a lot to recommend it. We gain experience of how to unlearn, what there is to find, and how to take the new degrees of freedom into our daily life.

Unlearning distortion seems to me to need a steady, consistent process of support, feedback, and challenge that seeks to dislodge the distortion. A support group will eventually be essential, I suspect. Working through the **Self-assessment** sections will kick off the unlearning. They help you to replace the distorted learning by a more accurate self-appraisal. This

[more](#)

process takes root and flourishes especially well when there is loving contact with other people similarly engaged.

The omissions in our learning vary in their susceptibility to remedy, according to how early or late they didn't occur. If I feel disabled because I never learned to drive, I can probably deal with that very directly by contacting a driving school and booking lessons. If I never learned to read, then that is more problematic but again it's susceptible to effort and perseverance. If I never learned to play as a child, then with help that too is likely to be recoverable.

If, as a child, no-one ever held me, or if I never felt loved, if I had no father, or mother, or both were missing, then remedying the omission is much more difficult. The problem with omitted learning, such as never having been loved, is that we don't know what we've missed. Cruel and unusual punishment we are likely to know about; a lack of love is just that, a lack.

We'll often need to do a great deal of patient detective work, checking our own experience with that of other people, before we even recognize what we missed. From then on it can be just a matter of getting on with it—finding ways of building into the fabric of our daily life the play, love, music, conversation, touch, or whatever else it was that we missed.

Two final points. People often say to me 'I am not naturally confident' or that 'it's not in my nature to say what I feel', or 'so and so (unlike me) has always been naturally aggressive, or creative, or spontaneous'. Genetic endowment clearly matters—singing and sport for instance, obviously rely on it but I am now very sceptical of talk about 'natural' abilities or the lack of them. I believe that 'naturalizing' my own

[more](#)

or other people's talents or deficiencies in this way often builds another 'comfort zone'. It means that I can either avoid taking responsibility for myself or that I can avoid, or put off, essential change. See the last paragraph of [Pre-birth memories and identity](#) for a little more on instinct.

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