

Table of Contents

Introduction

1. City Map: Intergenerational Learning
2. An Individual Narrative
3. Big Themes in a Life
4. Exploring Schemas as a Path to Emotional Learning
5. Disconnection and Rejection Domain
6. Impaired Autonomy and Performance Domain
7. The Impaired Limits Domain
8. The Other Directed Domain
9. Over-vigilance and Inhibition Domain
10. What Street? What You Do Always Makes Sense
11. The House (at last!)
12. The Pro-symptom and Anti-symptom Paradox
13. Memory Reconsolidation and Transformational Change
14. A Spiritual Dimension to Emotional Learning?

References

Appendix A. Worksheet

Introduction

Romance is exciting; love is essential. But...

Relationships can go wrong. Easily. We behave in surprising, irrational and even self-destructive ways. It seems almost universal. A lover can act without regard for anyone else's feelings, heedless of consequences, and with brutal intent. We might think we are free to find happiness, then why is it so elusive?

Britta thought she had finally found 'Mr Right'. Six months and no conflict, intense attraction and seeming compatibility. What could go wrong? But then he made a sexual move on her best friend.

There is this one thing: Emotional Learning (EL). In this book I will argue that this is the source of what goes wrong in relationships. You might ask, "Why haven't I heard about this?" And "Why is it so important?" Good questions.

The importance of EL is just beginning to be seen by relationship therapists. It is hinted at in many current theories but as yet not fully explored – it is almost completely absent from self-help books.

Principle 1: Everything we do makes deep emotional sense, even when the why is outside our awareness (Ticic, et al., 2015).

To understand EL we need to return to our psychological beginnings. Our earliest assumptions about people and the way things are. We begin to speak at about 18 months old. But even then we are not a 'blank slate'. There is much that we have learnt by that age. This learning may lack words but many lessons are mastered in the first years of life.

Robbie had a disturbed childhood. His father was a violent alcoholic; his mother was submissive, ineffectual, and a perpetual victim of the father's drunken rages. Robbie was slow to learn to speak, well after two years old, but he had learnt much about how families work. Of course nearly all of his EL was dysfunctional.

Emotional Learning is learning that does not have words. Not yet. It is the point of this book.

Reflect: What do you think Robbie learnt about male and female relationships? Who is more powerful? Whose needs get met? How? If Robbie acts on this learning what kind of partner or husband do you think he will be?

Kylie was Robbie's younger sister. She grew up in the same home. When she was 15 she became pregnant to the high school 'bad boy'. He did drugs and was increasing violent on methamphetamines. He kept asking her to 'look out for him' when he burgled houses to support his habit. Kylie had low self-esteem but something stopped her agreeing to be a criminal accomplice. She sought counselling and this helped her think more clearly about the future she wanted for herself and her child.

Principle 2: Emotional Learning is first unconscious, without words, but might later be expressed.

In this we can begin to see the lifetime legacy of Emotional Learning. For both Robbie and Kylie their understanding 'about the way things are' had been laid down like railway tracks before words formed in their mind. This is unconscious learning. It is simply a way of learning what is 'normal' in life, how to act and how to treat others.

Robbie had a de facto relationship in his early twenties. He was violent to her. She escaped to a women's refuge and he was later charged for assault. Kylie got into trouble with her 'bad boy'. How do we make sense of these poor choices in relationships? Both did things from a 'sense of what is right' but the source was outside of their awareness in early EL.

Reflect: A disturbing question to consider. We can assume that both Robbie and Kylie had moments of feeling loved, but how much was it entangled with painful experiences in childhood? How much, for example, does Kylie associate being loved with suffering? This can be seen in her forming a relationship with the 'bad boy'. This reflects an aspect of her early EL – one that got her into difficulties. And it will continue until she sees the pattern.

Principle 3: As long as Emotional Learning remains unconscious, it will determine how we behave as adults.

Brain Detour: Another way of understanding Emotional Learning is in terms of how the brain works. We now know more about where we think. Conscious thought is carried out in the frontal cortex, the folded part of the brain that is nearly 2/3rds of what fills our brain cavity. The frontal cortex is what makes us both rational and creative. This is where our capacity for language is found. But there are other parts of the brain from the 'reptile' stem

through to the ‘mammalian’ mid-brain. This includes the limbic system which is important for our emotions. This is where ‘limbic learning’ is found or as you might have guessed EL. At the simplest level EL is learning about what causes pain or pleasure, which naturally enough is learnt at every level of the brain.

Reflect: I am assuming you have thought a lot about relationships. Perhaps you have read self-help books. A few or many. This is of course important, but now you have an opportunity to think about what you have not yet been put into words. Now you can appreciate why our thoughts often go around in circles and never get anywhere. There is missing data. EL is the key to unlock the most important insights about your relationship.

The challenge in this book for you to be a detective. You will need to discover hidden truths that do not make sense on the ‘surface’. You will need to follow the clues of your family and life history. Only in this way can you find the very specific EL that has shaped your life and relationships.

Challenge: The easiest thing to do is to skim read a book like this. It is hard to actually engage with the content and do the exercises. Maybe it seems too much like ‘homework’. And some insights may be painful. So your reluctance makes sense. But it is best to acknowledge the difficulty of the first step. Would you be willing to make a contract with yourself? Something like: I will make understanding Emotional Learning a top priority in my life for the next three months. Sign and date this statement if helps. You will need something like this level of commitment to get the most out of reading this book.

This book is about you going on a journey. It provides a map. Discovering your EL is like arriving at the address of a house. I would like it to be as easy as typing the address into Google Maps, but at the moment the address is blank. So we have to work our way there. We will start with your family. That is like the city you live in and the city provides your context since birth. We will look at this map with the genogram and your autobiography introduced in the next couple of chapters, then five chapters on schemas which are like your suburb and then more specific EL, the street, and finally we hope to arrive at your house. Once you are there you can do something different which will change your life. Let the surprises begin...

To Read Further

The term Emotional Learning, in the way I am using it in this book, comes from Coherence Therapy (Ecker, et al., 1996, 2012). Also Ticic and colleagues (2015). *What’s really going on here?* See References. EL can also be used in the sense of teaching emotional skills such as how a child might learn to regulate emotions, but that is not the meaning of the term in this book.

1. City Map: Intergenerational Learning

Family. We join through birth. But it is like arriving two hours late for a party. Almost everything important has already happened and we see ‘second hand’ through the effects on those around us. And often we can only guess at what is *really* happening.

How do we come to terms with this? If you are to understand such dynamics then you will need some tools such as the genogram, which is a way of mapping your family over the generations. This will be the focus of this chapter. The next chapter will introduce an autobiography of relationships and the attachment model.

Why all this Self-focus?

Socrates, one of the greatest of ancient philosophers, said, “Know yourself.” The importance of this has echoed through the centuries. It is still relevant for living and especially for relationships. This book is written with the belief that this is the most important of all life goals, but unfortunately difficult to attain with any depth of insight. The following are reasons to gain such self-knowledge.

A lack:

- Leaves you open to mistaken ambitions.
- Can result in choosing the wrong romantic partner because you don’t know your own emotional needs.
- Leads to repeating painful patterns from childhood.
- Foolishness in spending money, because we don’t know what we really want.
- ‘Being in the dark’ about your own values and principles to guide your life.

With self-knowledge:

- You can avoid mistakes in dealing with other people.
- Have a better basis for making life choices including career and spending money.
- You can form more conscious relationships, making sure that there is a healthy balance of getting your needs met and being responsible for someone else.
- You can respect others and yourself.

But insight is a difficult process. This is because we are often vague about ourselves, the sources of insight are unconscious, and it is painful to acknowledge our faults. Generally it is in an intimate relationship that our difficulties become most obvious, certainly to our partners, but if we are honest to ourselves as well.

Reflect: Think about the messages you commonly receive about yourself. What do your friends say? Generally they are too polite. Your spouse or partner? These are useful but mixed. After all he or she may be a ‘competitor’ for scarce resources. Your enemies? They say too much.

To Do: Look at the website <http://www.thebookoflife.com> which has great resources for relationships. Start with the chapter Know Yourself.

This journey of self-insight is what will occupy the rest of this book and of course be the reason for the suggested exercises. A lot of work, to be sure, but with benefits more than you can imagine. Now to the big picture of your family.

The Genogram

The genogram gives a picture of your family over three generations. The symbols create a kind of 'family tree'. The genogram was developed in family therapy, but is now widely used. It is helpful in maintaining an overall perspective, including the influence of individuals on each other and identifying repetitive dynamics.

In the following genogram we see that both Tom and Nancy grew up in alcoholic homes. Tom had a previous marriage to Jane, which ended in divorce and later Jane died of breast cancer. Nancy lives much closer to her immediate family and tends to get involved in their dramas. In 1986, the year after the stillbirth of her daughter Ann, she had multiple stresses following the death of her mother: her father increased his drinking and her younger brother was admitted to hospital with a diagnosis of schizophrenia. This might explain her need for additional support which she sought in the brief affair with Joe. Tom and Nancy have relationship counselling because Tom is 'having feelings' for Sue, a temporary administration assistant in his accountancy firm. Nancy complains that Tom works long hours, neglecting his family and household tasks.

The symbols are seen in the following diagram (such as squares for males, circles for females, dotted lines for a relationship, line for a marriage, one cutting line for a separation, two for a divorce, crossed out for death, etc.). The symbols are flexible and can be adapted to what interests you about your family history.

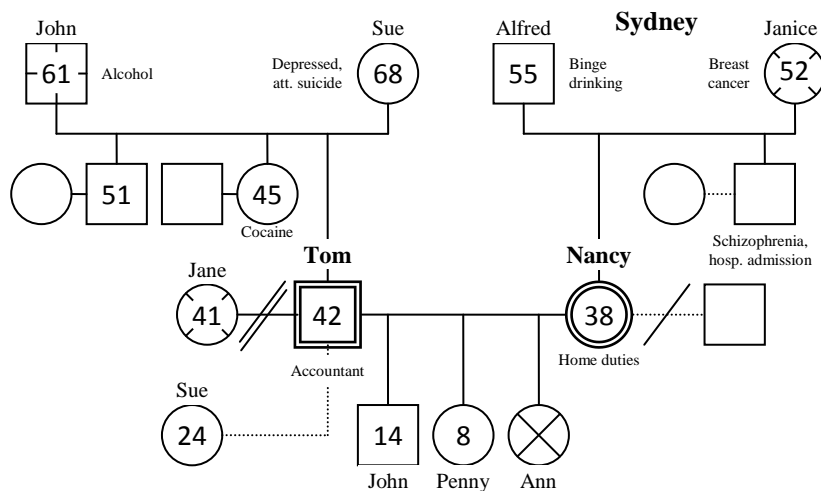


Figure 1: Genogram of Tom and Nancy

Identifying Emotional Learning. Reflect on what leads to what? In the example we see a lot of relational consequences. This includes Nancy's affair and Tom's feelings for Sue. Join me in some creative speculation. We can start thinking about possible EL. There is no right or wrong, speculate, though eventually you can develop possibilities about what EL might look like in your family.

If we take a 'step back' from Tom and Nancy's relationship there are some recent events such as the death of Ann their daughter. This will have intense meaning, for example Tom might believe after the death of his first wife "people who love me will die". If this was a belief of Tom it could have been reinforced by the death of his child. This has a characteristic of being slightly irrational but you can see some 'emotional logic' which is typical of EL. When Nancy was young her brother had a psychiatric admission after a psychotic episode. This might play out in various ways. For example, she could be overly rigid since anything unexpected could have terrible consequences including admission to a hospital. Any reminder of craziness is frightening. A step further back would locate the child of both Tom and Nancy in alcoholic homes. What roles did this create in family life? Who were permitted to be child-like or impulsive? Who were carers? What are the attitudes towards addiction? Of course EL would be more specific for both Tom and Nancy, some possibly similar and others very different. A good question for Tom to think about is why he works so hard? This would certainly reveal some EL. This might include working hard brings respect and rewards, work is 'my space' where "I can escape tensions at home." This may also show early learning about male and female roles in the home.

As I have illustrated with Tom and Nancy, this is just 'scratching the surface' of potential ELs. Your family is far more complex and will generate many possibilities. The genogram and some of the tools that follow can provide lens to look and see your family from different perspectives.

Your Family in a Picture

Draw your own genogram and include the following:

1. *Names*, age, highest level of education, occupation, and any significant problems.
2. *Indicate relationship status* whether single, married, de facto, separated, or divorced.
3. *Transitions* Dates of birth, death, marriages, divorces, separations (anniversaries tend to raise anxiety or cause sadness), any other significant stressors or transitions: accidents, illness, change of job, moving house; especially note these if any have occurred just before an event such as work related stress, separation or an injury.
4. *Geographical location* of parents and other family members, patterns of migration.
5. *Ethnic* and religious affiliations.

Now add the same for your spouse or partner. Don't worry if you have to re-draw it to fit everyone on the one page. Everyone makes a mess of their first attempt at a genogram.

Now include Family Problems

Identify any problems including: alcohol abuse, addictions, genetic defects, suicide, violence, accidents, job instability, betrayal, gambling, sexual abuse, criminal behaviour, drug addiction and mental illness or psycho-somatic disorders. It is easy to have a short-hand symbol such as @ for alcoholism, but make up your own for any theme that you think might be significant.

If all this provides the bones, then the flesh is the emotional patterns. Think about anyone who might be enmeshed or over-involved, or not talking to who (emotional cut-offs), and any triangles (two people close at the expense of a more distant third person). Who are the success stories in the family? By what criteria (business success, academic, sport, or financial)? Are there clear gender roles? How important are sibling positions? Who are the 'black sheep' or 'scapegoats'? Who are the failures (and how is this judged)? What are the family rules, taboos, hot issues, secrets, and family scripts? Or anything that interests you. These all point to a legacy of what is assumed in the family. And that might point to EL.

The wider context can also be considered. What historical forces have shaped each generation? What wars, economic conditions, birth-rate changes, cultural forces and new technologies were influential? Have notions about gender changed or remained the same? If there was a migration, what differences in culture were introduced? One cultural value that influences self-care is selflessness versus self-consideration. Did this change in the family? How has the meaning of work changed through the generations? Use the genogram to think about your family history.

At this point it probably raises more questions than answers. But a good question is a good place to start.

Practical Application

Doing a genogram is very useful because:

1. *Represent* The genogram can visually represent of a lot of information. It allows you to see the generations and to notice, perhaps for the first time, distinctive family patterns.

2. *Context* It provides a context for any problem including difficult relationships. Think about any relationship difficulties in terms of what was modelled by your parents. We can see family history, which may give an indication of stresses on a generation and the possible impact of traumas such as war or forced migration.
3. *Themes* You can identify dysfunctional themes that run through a family including antisocial behaviour, violence, neglect, physical or sexual abuse and addictions. Do you notice this repeating in subsequent generations? Were your needs met as a child? What strengths can you identify either in people or family groups? What is the contribution to the family of people who joined through marriage or relationship? Do you notice anything surprising?
4. *Problems* Think about who has a problem such as being anxious or easily stressed. Is this an inter-generational problem 'handed down' in the family? How does the problem influence others?
5. *Track* You can track emotional patterns. What emotions were expressed; what repressed? Who were close? Who were distant? Did anyone 'escape' the family never to return? When you are in a low mood, or unreasonably angry, can you see the origins of such emotions in your childhood.
6. *Analyse* Choose a different colour to overlay your genogram with some indications of the quality of relationships. You can use a zig-zag line $\wedge\wedge\wedge$ to indicate a conflicted relationship, three parallel lines to indicate an enmeshed relationship and -| |- to show an emotional cut-off. Again be creative and think up your own symbols to indicate different kinds of relationship on your genogram.
7. *Predict* You can predict how difficult it will be to recover from problems. If there are strong inter-generational themes of dysfunction, you can assume any improvement will be slow. This may also be an indication of personality disorder or serious mental health issues.
8. *Think* about what your parents modelled to the children of your generation. Consider patterns of nurture. After reading the section about attachment styles, you might consider patterns in your family. What beliefs were most obvious for people and in each generation?
9. *Spirituality* Identify those with a religious faith. Who would you consider a good role model? Any who you would consider 'hypocritical'? Can you see patterns in the spiritual commitments in your family? Or does unbelief, perhaps atheism, run through the generations?

Reflect: Draw your own genogram and reflect upon family themes. Interview the elders in your family. Often they are the 'keepers' of the oral history, sometimes knowing the family secrets, and this help you to understand themes and patterns that have shaped the family over the generations. It is a good idea to interview the oldest members of your family before they become senile or die suddenly.

Why are patterns important? If we think about such patterns in terms of EL it is highly suggestive. A pattern can show common EL of a number of individuals expressed in patterns in family life. This can be functional, such as taking responsibility, or negative in terms of dysfunctional behaviour such as violence or criminal acts.

Principle 4: A pattern in a family suggests the same or similar Emotional Learning.

Summary

This chapter has introduced the genogram. It is an important tool to assist you to understand some of the ways your family have shaped you as an adult. Remember to sketch out your own genogram and see family patterns for yourself.

To Read Further

Monica McGoldrick and Randy Gerson's (1985) book *Genograms in Family Assessment* is very useful. While this book is now slightly dated it shows what can be understood from a genogram. Also look at the website <http://www.thebookoflife.com>

2. An Individual Narrative

The story of my life. What happens when I tell my story? Who do I tell it to?

This introduces the potential of a therapeutic autobiography since it presents a unique opportunity to understand yourself. If you listen to yourself carefully, you will find important clues for Emotional Learning.

Reflect: Do you tell your story or do others (speak about you)?

First Memory and Autobiography

This exercise is about you. There are many aspects to who you are. Think in terms of relationships, formative experiences, values and your search for meaning.

To Do: Your first memory. What kind of memory is it?

Matt recalled finger painting. He thought he was in kindergarten. It was a pleasant experience of being with his peers and being creative.

Cindy remembered feeling frightened that she could not wake up her mother. Later she realised her mother was not like her friends' parents, she was addicted to heroin, often "nodding off".

These experiences are very different. Matt recalled a warm pleasant experience; Cindy was back feeling helpless and frightened. What EL is embedded in each experience? A first memory can reveal a life trajectory. Could your first memory be an indication of emotional learning that has shaped your life?

What about your relationships? We are shaped by our experiences with people, good and bad. Usually this begins with your parents, the foundational relationship, but include experiences of 'first love' or early attraction, group dating, pairing off, first kiss, first committed relationship, de facto or marital experiences. Write it with a focus on your emotional 'highs and lows' and try to get a sense of repeating patterns.

Principle 5: We are shaped more by earlier than later experiences, but both are important.

Relationships are where we hear messages about who we are. As infants, soon after birth, we can only see ourselves through the responsiveness of a parent or care-giver. Think about an infant delighting in a game of 'peek-a-boo' or tickles. The child is seen and sees him or herself through the response of the parent or carer. Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1971) called this 'the looking glass self'.

Reflect: What messages did you hear from your parents? What was not said but was 'in the air'? Such input can become part of your Emotional Learning. It is not a question of 'right or wrong', everything is believable when you are young and dependent on others.

Time Line of Significant Events

What events were important to you? Make a time line marking off the years you have lived. I need a long line with 65 years. As you look back think about each year. Include any transitions:

I would include first going to school. Leaving USA and coming to Australia in 1960. Finishing high school. Becoming engaged. Married. Four children. And so on.

Start with the 'bare bones' of significant events. Then add anything that occurs to you. Include successes and failures. How did you adapt to early responsibilities? Continue until the present.

Reflect: Sometimes our lives are profoundly affected by chance events. These can be fortunate or tragic in consequences. What happened 'out of the blue'? Have you added such things to your time line?

Sally was raped when after a school disco. She was just 16 and recalled having a few drinks, but "I didn't deserve that!" Fortunately she had a reasonably healthy childhood with many assurances that she was loved. After the incident she suffered for a number of years with nightmares and reacting to reminders, but she did not conclude that she was worthless because she had been treated badly.

You might not have Sally's healthy childhood. But like her did you have traumatic experiences? If you had early trauma, did later events confirm how you felt about yourself? Repeated trauma can reinforce early EL with tragic consequences.

To Do: Make sure you record such traumas on your time line. It is best to know the extent of what you are dealing with. Only then can you come to understand early learning, no matter how tragic, and begin to find a way to recover.

Reflect: Think about the people you have been attracted to. What are some of the good things about them? Sketch a type you find attractive. What have been the consequences in your life? See the website <http://www.thebookoflife.com> In their view "love is a skill to be learnt, not an impulse that can just be followed".