

Helping Families Heal



a summary of the Helping Families Heal program
devised and co-ordinated by Christabel Chamarette

How This Book Came About

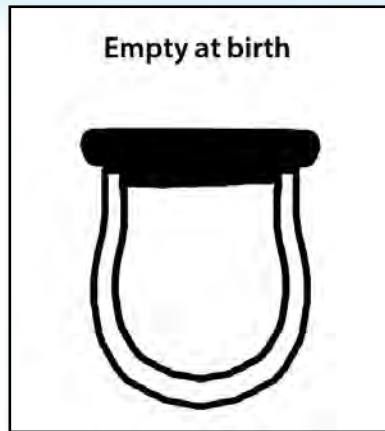
My name is Christabel. While my training at University to become a Clinical Psychologist was extremely valuable, my real learning has derived from the men and women I have worked with over the years who have told me their life stories, their problems and what I offered that was useful to them. Having decided when I turned 60 years old that my life task from now on is to pass on anything useful that I have learned to anyone who is interested, I wondered if my way of working would be of help within Aboriginal communities. Fremantle Prison was the first place where I met and made friends with Aboriginal people and I learned about their stories. When I made the journey to Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek I was pleased to find that my ways of working on healing the long-term effects of adversity and trauma in childhood were felt to be relevant and compatible with traditional ways and culture. I shared my simple 5 diagrams to help people understand why members of their families were hurting and in trouble, and I was asked to produce some information sheets and descriptions of what I do so that people could be reminded of what they had learned and be able to share and pass on how it had helped them to others in their families.

About Christabel Chamarette

I am a Clinical Psychologist with 44 years of experience in counselling people in crisis and with people who have suffered trauma in their early lives – 10 years with men in Fremantle Prison, 8 years with women who were adult survivors of child sexual abuse, violence and neglect. For 12 years I was also Director of *SafeCare*, a family counselling service which ran from 1989 – 2009 and provided counselling for all family members (men, women and children) who were coping child sexual abuse. Since May 2013, I have spent half my time in private practice in Fremantle and the other half in the Kimberley region of WA at the *Marninwarntikura Women's Resource Centre* in Fitzroy Crossing and Yura *Yungi Aboriginal Medical Service* in Halls Creek.

The Feelings Jar

The Feelings Jar is simply one way of talking about how people feel and manage their emotions.

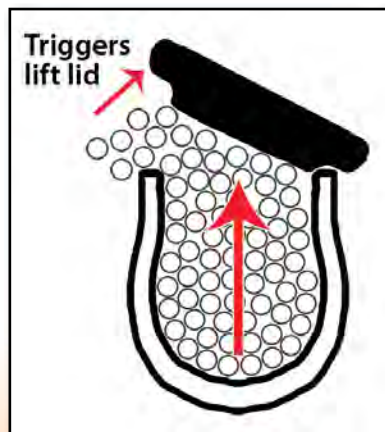
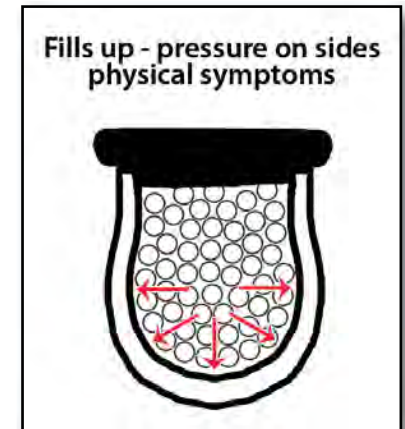


When we are born, our Feelings Jar is empty because a baby doesn't bottle-up any emotions. A baby has a feeling until that feeling is finished and then it moves on to the next one.

As we are growing-up, as things hit us, we don't know how to handle our emotions and it sometimes doesn't seem safe to express them, so we put them in the Jar, close the lid and act like nothing has happened. This works well because the Jar has started off empty and there is plenty of room.

But if we keep doing this, sooner or later, the Jar fills up and can become like a pressure cooker without a steam valve. The pressure pushes on the sides of the Jar, which represents our physical body where we hold our emotions, and on the lid of the Jar, which represents our relationships with other people and the outside world.

Some people might have a full Jar by the time they are seven years old, and that is bad news because it means that a lot of things may have happened in their life and they haven't been able to express their feelings. When a child has things go wrong in their life and they keep their feelings bottled-up, they don't go round saying "I am having a really bad childhood," or "I am depressed." They just feel sick or express their distress through their physical body. Often they might have tummy aches, chest pains or headaches or might have problems with wetting the bed or soiling. Things that show the stress in little children are not the same things that show up in adults. Other people might have a full jar by the time they are seventy years old and that is also bad news, because if they have been keeping things inside their bodies for seventy years it can be difficult to do it differently.



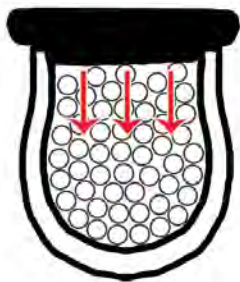
Somewhere between seven and seventy we all reach the point where the Jar is too full. This shows up when somebody, often an innocent bystander, comes along and says something or does something which triggers an old emotion, the lid on the Jar lifts up and out pours the stuff from inside that we didn't even realise was in there.

This causes two reactions. One, the person who flicked the lid may be really shocked and feel they don't deserve the reaction, even though they might deserve a little bit of it. Two, we might feel guilty and ashamed of our over-reaction and quickly stuff all our emotions back inside the Jar. This leaves the jar still being too full, even though we may feel better for a short period because of the short release of our bad feelings.

People find for themselves short-term ways of coping with all the bad feelings in the Jar. There are some activities which lift and give more space in the Jar. These are things like taking alcohol and drugs, gambling, over-eating, sex, fighting; any

activity that gives a temporary escape from how we feel deep down. But when we stop the activity the lid drops and the pressure begins to rise again, so we get addicted to the activity that makes us feel better. Like all addictions, over time, it takes more and more for smaller and smaller result.

**Some addictions tighten lid
dull the pain temporarily**



Another way which helps in the short-term but not the long-term is doing things that strengthen the lid so it doesn't lift up. These are things like taking prescription medication, exercise, smoking cigarettes, being a workaholic, keeping busy.

The best long-term solution is to empty the pent-up feelings out of the Jar. We need to "drill holes" in the lid and go fishing for these emotions in small manageable chunks. This is what counselling and therapy sessions do where we fish around in the Jar for past unexpressed feelings and memories that a person may have forgotten or not even realised have happened.

In my counselling sessions, I go through a person's life in five-year blocks and ask about what was happening when they were those ages to them and in their family. I ask them to think about how they felt when, say, they were five years old. Gradually we will hit emotions that they have buried deep inside, and they can feel these emotions.

They can feel sad, angry and upset, but are now in a safe place where they can fully feel the emotion and deal with it for the first time. Some people think that hitting things and saying how they feel is the way to deal with these feelings, but this can be a distraction. The best way is to truly "feel the feelings", such as hurt, anger, confusion or sadness, just like a baby, until the feeling finishes. This empties the Jar; allowing us to re-feel or revisit parts of our lives where we bottled up our feelings in the past. 'Feeling the feeling' is the only effective long-term way of releasing the pressure in the Jar. We also need to learn how not to put new stuff in the Jar but to feel it straight away.

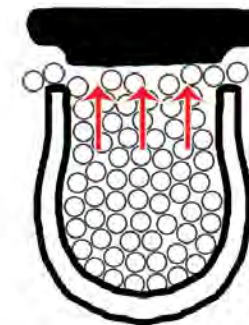
We know we have dealt with some damage when we no longer feel it. We can remember how we felt, but can no longer feel it. If a person can still feel it then it has not been fully expressed, or it may be about some other related damage still inside the Jar and we need to continue fishing in the Jar for more buried feelings.

Some people don't want to go back to the past but rather to look to the future. But I say if you don't go back to those 'buried feelings' then you carry them with you as baggage. The best way to let go of them is to get them out of the jar.

There are two encouragements I give:

- You won't meet anything worse than you have already survived
- Emptying the bad feelings you have locked away will get you in touch with good feelings you have also locked out.

**Some addictions lift lid
ease pressure temporarily**



5 to 10
10 to 15
15 to 20
20 to 25

**Make openings in lid
go fishing for feelings**

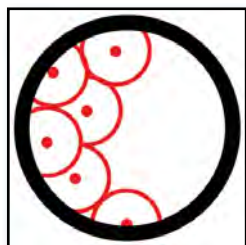
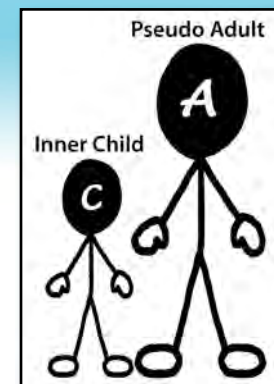


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The Child / Adult Diagram

When we are young we are physically, socially and emotionally small, and then as our bodies grow we look, talk and act like adults. But if things have gone wrong in our lives as we are growing up, those negative things as children can act on us in ways we don't realise, and part of us can stay stuck at the age that these things happened to us. I call that part the 'Emotional Child' or the 'Inner Child'.

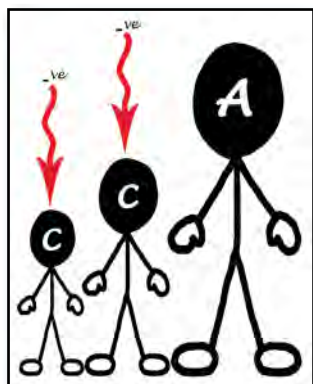
The adult part I call the 'Pseudo Adult', because it looks, talks and acts like an adult, but under certain conditions that are similar to the person's experiences as a child, instead of an adult response, out comes the child response. The behaviour that comes out can be totally out of proportion to what is happening in the present, or does not really make any sense unless we understand that it is the person's inner child that is reacting to the situation, not the adult.



Remember the Emotions Jar we discussed earlier, and look at the Jar from above; if something bad happens to a child when they are growing up that hurts them or they do not understand, they lock it away and forget that it has happened. If it happens again, they do not think "Oh, that is the same thing happening a second time," because they don't remember, it but just lock the new things away too, and more and more things get locked away. Each of these damaged areas from our past is like an Inner Child that needs to be healed. When we are young there is no harm in doing this; in fact it is quite a good survival response, which allows the child to get on with the next thing they need to learn or cope with.

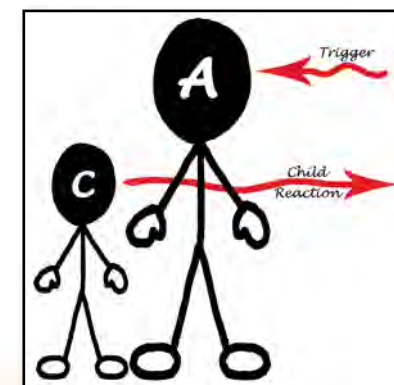


But as we get older, it becomes unhealthy to have too much bottled up inside our bodies, because we spend too much energy keeping everything in, and as we encounter similar things happening in the present, those feelings from inside start leaking out. It is good to realise that when this happens it is an opportunity to let things out and relook at our Inner Child. Often this is part of us is letting us know that we are ready to heal that damaged part of our past.



People often see this more clearly in other people's behaviour than in our own. So, for people wanting to help someone who is acting childishly, the best thing to do is to give recognition to the person's Inner Child and acceptance, not of the bad behaviour, but acceptance that there must be good reasons why the person is reacting the way they are. This helps people understand why they act the way they do in certain situations, but it is not transformative. The thing that changes people is when they start copying the new behaviour of recognition and acceptance themselves. Instead of rejecting the feelings, blocking them out and locking them away, it is much healthier

if the person starts recognising what their feelings are about and where they come from both in the present and in the past and to accept that there are reasons for their behaviour. They need to learn this new way of looking at themselves before they can start growing.

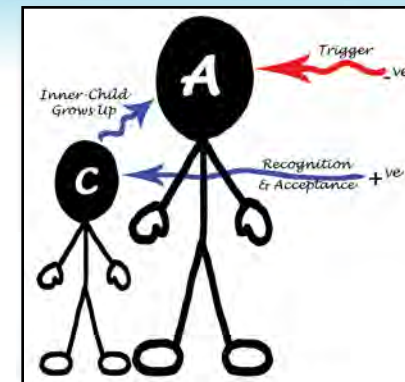




As soon as the Inner Child is recognised and accepted it starts to grow and over time the 'True Adult' emerges. The True Adult is the grown-up child; made up of the three parts the Pseudo Adult (P), the True Adult (A) and the Inner Child (C). The True Adult acts like the umpire between the voices of the Pseudo Adult and the Inner Child.

This integration of the child and the adult allows us to heal from a lot of childhood trauma and to actually grow-up into the True Adult. The psychological theory called Transactional Analysis or TA calls these three parts Parent (P), Adult (A) and Child (C).

The types of things that can happen in a child's life that can have a negative effect include physical, verbal, sexual and emotional abuse and seeing violence and parental break-up, but one that is even more traumatic than these is neglect, because, where the other experiences occur within relationships even if they are wrong and bad, neglect means there is no relationship at all. People often feel very alone, but don't consider their childhood was too bad because they didn't suffer some direct form of abuse. They don't recognise that, even if they grew up in a family with lots of other kids, they may not have received the parenting care they needed from adults.



Other things that can have a negative effect on children include:

- Changing where you live and who you live with, because it disrupts your primary caring relationships;
- Death, suicide or loss of a family member or pet, and the grief that goes with it; and
- Bullying, racism and similar harms.

Nobody has the perfect childhood, everybody has things that go wrong. However when we experience difficulties in our adult life we need to understand that it is not just what is happening in the present that is causing all the distress, but what is happening now may be triggering memories or experiences from the past that we have not dealt with yet. Our reaction is a signal that there is some deep emotional hurt which needs healing.

Change is a 3 Stage Process

The first stage is Awareness. When we grow-up it is as though we are growing-up in a dark room and the lights have not been turned on and we keep tripping over things. If someone turns on the lights, even very briefly, we understand where we are. As we learn about ourselves we are increasing our awareness. The second stage is Choice. Without awareness we just react in a particular way, but with awareness we now have

choices about how we respond in particular situations. It may be that we continue to react in the same way as we always have, but this does not mean that awareness is wasted. Each time we are rehearsing for the third stage. The third stage is Change, which is when we finally act differently and it works so well that we change and say, "That is the way I want to be, not the old way." So real change only occurs by going through the three stages of awareness (reflecting on what you are doing), seeing that you have real choices and then making the change.

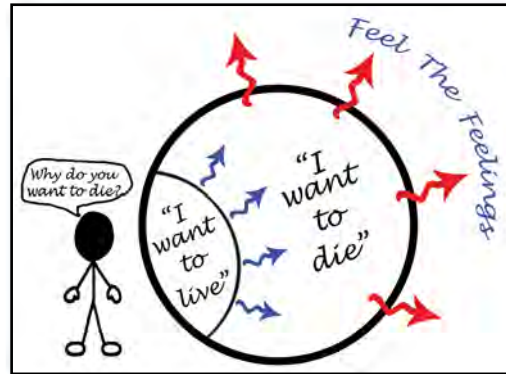


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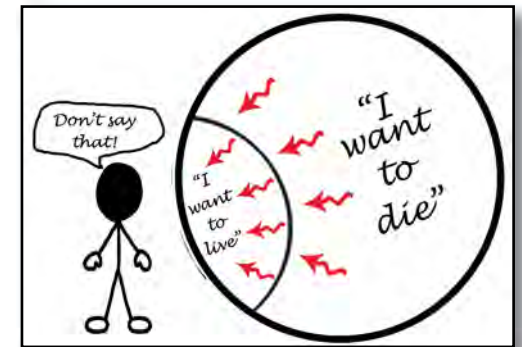
Suicide

Having someone close to you commit suicide is devastating. We can also find it puzzling and are taken aback, because we do not understand why it has happened. The person may not have shown that they were unhappy and upset. Obviously, the need for healing comes a long way before someone feeling that they do not want to live anymore.

Often, long before they express anything, there are little signals that people have feelings that need to be expressed. If someone expresses that they want to die then it is important that we understand that part of them still wants to live. If there is not a part of them that wants to live then they would not say anything and just go and kill themselves.



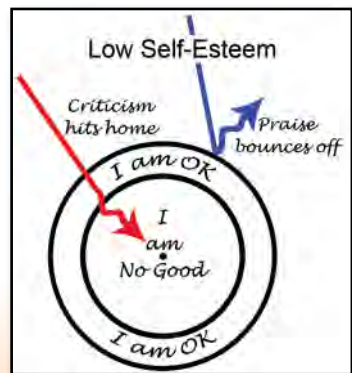
When someone tells you they feel they want to commit suicide, then it is very important that we encourage the person to express how they feel. We should ask them why they feel this way, how long they have felt suicidal, "What has happened that makes you feel this?" By doing this we are helping them express the feeling: 'feeling the feelings'. Even if they are still feeling suicidal at the end of the conversation, if they have had a good chance to express how they feel, then that the part of them that wants to live can get bigger. The opposite can happen if they don't talk about it and shut down. This sounds paradoxical. People often think



that if somebody talks about suicide then they are more likely to do it, but actually, if they have an opportunity to talk about it and their feelings, then they are more likely to realise that they have a choice and decide to live. That is why phone help-lines like LifeLine can be very important.

Low Self-Esteem Diagram

When we are born we are wonderful, marvellous and unique, but soon, if things start going wrong in our lives, we begin to think that we are no good, because a child does not think, "oh, it's someone else's fault." They assume they are to blame, but they cannot cope with feeling bad about themselves, so they build a shell around themselves, maybe with a bit of bravado, saying, "I'm ok."



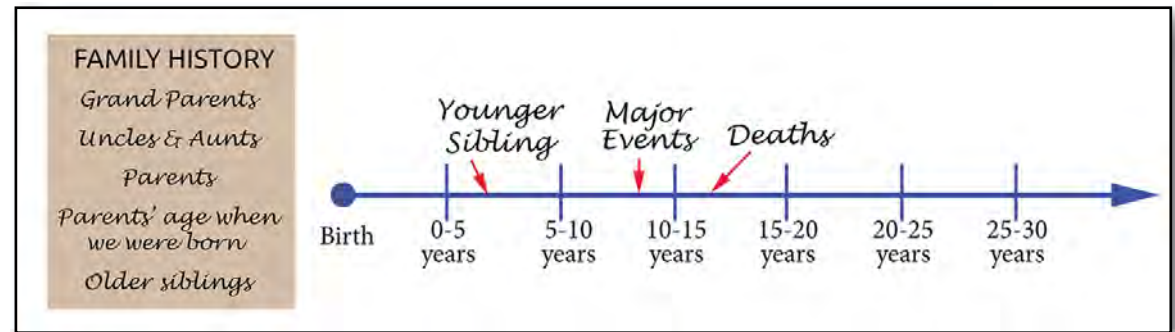
But the problem is that they don't feel ok inside, they have low self-esteem. You can tell if someone has low self-esteem, because if you praise them, the praise just seems to bounce off; they don't believe it. They do not believe the praise because they don't feel that way about themselves. They think "he/she is just a nice person" or "they don't really know how bad I am." If, however, you say anything negative they take it to heart straight away and it feeds their own sense of worthlessness. People with healthy self-esteem take in some praise and some criticism, depending on what they feel is valid.



Life Stories

Telling a person's Life Story is an exercise that we do right at the end of the Helping Families Heal sessions when the group has got to know each other and feel safe enough to share details of their lives. We draw a timeline from when they are born until now and mark it off in five year chunks. If we are working in a group then we choose one person to share their life story with the group as an example. If we have enough time then each person has a turn to share their story. It is important when working in a group to say that nobody has to tell anything they don't want to say. They can say to the group there are more things they could say, e.g. "That was a difficult time in my life but I don't want to say too much about it." It is not good to force someone to say something they do not want to say.

We always start before the person was born and find out as much as we can about the person's parents and their families such as their grandparents, aunties, uncles and brother and sisters. We ask them what age the person's parents when they got together. We always think of our parents as being older than us, but often one's parents were only teenagers when they started out together and so recollecting this is a wonderful way of recalling that once our parents were younger than we are now. We ask what age the parents were when the person was born, how many older brothers and sisters they have and how many younger ones. This all helps the person reflect on what might be important events in their life, like them not being happy when their baby sister or brother arrived because they stopped being the major focus of their mother's attention. Other questions that are relevant include: what is their earliest memory, anything that went wrong like a death of a family member, any accidents, school bullying, new relationship and break-ups and when the person had any children. All this gets recorded on the Life Story Timeline.



The next part of the exercise is to go round the circle and get other group members' feedback about what strikes them about the person's life story: the highs and lows and any patterns or other insights group members may have. This can be a transformative process for the particular person involved as they have never had the opportunity to set out their life in such a linear way and been able to reflect on and honour their life story. It can be a moment when the person gets insights and compassion for themselves, a recognition of their survival, how powerful their lives have been and how they have got to this point. This can be where deep things come up for discussion, such as suicide, deaths, being taken away. Other group members often see how similar tragedies or events have occurred in their own lives and how it has affected them. Telling their life story using the Timeline helps people connect the different parts of their lives. Getting to reconnect with the person we were born to be can be a real strength for us as we work through the difficult periods of our lives and what we have survived.

MARNINWARRANTIKURA



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As the Psychologist who has produced this Helping Families Heal resource booklet to summarise my therapeutic approach, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge my many and varied sources including Freud, Erikson, Transactional Analysis, Inner Child work as well as all my clients and colleagues over the past 40 years. Helping Families Heal draws inspiration from and is a much shortened version of the SafeCare Childhood Issues Module.

For the opportunity to present this work within the Aboriginal community and the towns of Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing I am indebted to Darrell Henry, Barbara Biggs, the *Halls Creek Healing Task Force*, *Yura Yungi Aboriginal Medical Service*, Maggie White, Mima Comrie, June Oscar, Emily Carter and *Marninwarrantikura Women's Resource Centre*.

This booklet was produced by Cathcart Weatherly with funds provided by *Marninwarrantikura Family Violence Prevention Legal Unit*. It would not have been produced without the encouragement of Eva, Jane and Michelle who kept requesting notes that would assist them to remember and pass on what they had learnt to other family members and the wider Aboriginal community. Thank you to all who have contributed to and participated in *Helping Families Heal* since its small beginnings in May 2013.