

How unresolved childhood trauma haunts marriages

A child's mental map of the world is shaped by the emotional pain they have been through, like seeing parents fight, being abandoned, being treated unfairly, or being verbally neglected. Individuals often view the world through the lens of their "core beliefs," which stem from the nature of the childhood disciplinary process, be it proper or improper.



For them, the mental map, which was meant to help them deal with the unstable nature of their first relationships, shapes how they later understand love, trust, and loyalty. This mental map does not just go away when they become an adult. They come back slowly but surely, trying to fit the complicated nature of marriage into patterns set up decades ago, often when the mind was too young to fully understand the world.

EARLY MARRIAGE

The initial stages of marriage are often perceived as a period of optimism by couples. A honeymoon period; the culmination of dreams, plans, and endless conversations, during which it appears feasible to build a future that is untainted by the past. However, untreated old wounds slowly but surely return.

A partner speaking to their colleague may spark disproportionate anxiety. Over time, this conveys to some that their partner has stopped choosing them. That childhood fear of being left behind comes back without knocking.

A minor disagreement over dinner plans could suddenly escalate into a defensive argument. What to others may seem like trivial misunderstandings, to someone carrying unresolved childhood trauma, feels like the terrifying possibility of rejection, abandonment, or loss of identity all over again.

Dr Abdul Hamid, a noted psychotherapist at the MONOBKASH Foundation, explains this phenomenon through the lens of "mental mapping." According to him, unresolved trauma quietly steers emotional reactions, often at a subconscious level.

"People try to adjust the new relationship to fit the old mental map created by past experiences," he says. The trauma of yesterday finds new battlegrounds in today's marital disagreements, pushing couples into cycles of conflict that feel strangely familiar, yet painfully confusing.

The struggle is not always apparent from the outside. In a city such as Dhaka, where societal expectations are significant and the extended family's opinion can frequently intrude on the seclusion of a couple's relationship, acknowledging emotional vulnerability can feel similar to conceding defeat.

A significant number of individuals continue to persist, concealing their increasing distance behind the mundane responsibilities of daily life, such as keeping face in front of relatives, doing household chores and paying bills, and taking children to school.

Emotional isolation is frequently the result of the mute character of these struggles. Not out of a sense of distrust, but rather out of a desperate, almost infantile need for reassurance, one partner may demand access to the other's social media passwords and phones to achieve hyper-

transparency.

Mouni, a boutique owner, shares her dismay, "I never asked for much from Ali (husband), we were getting by and were quite comfortable until his new job came in between us. He became different, and I felt like I was no longer his top priority. We fought on repeat. I had to assert my right over him as his wife. The day I gave him an ultimatum is the day we separated."

After their separation, Mouni sought professional help for depression. "It shatters me to admit that I harbour severe abandonment issues. The way I clung to the paranoia, the need to be everything to him, all of it traced back to that moment my mother left. I was still that child, only older, louder, and

more desperate. I tried to hold Ali close to me as much as I could; my childhood-induced insecurities drove him away," she orates.

The other partner, who is oblivious to the invisible wounds they are handling, may withdraw, perceiving these behaviours as controlling or suffocating.

Dr Hamid points out, "control, transparency, or hyper-visibility in the relationship becomes proof of love" for those battling insecurity rooted in early life abandonment or neglect. What begins as a plea for closeness turns into a war zone with locked phones, cold stares, and long nights where both partners sleep inches away but worlds apart.

IMPACT OF CHILDHOOD

In Bangladeshi society, trauma faced as an

adolescent is far from rare. The sources are many — financial instability, natural disasters, gender-based discrimination, and the entrenched patriarchal norms that colour so many family dynamics.

Many children grow up internalising the idea that their needs are secondary, their voices are insignificant, or worse, that their very existence is a burden. These emotional scars, if left untreated, mature quietly alongside the individual, only to surface with ferocity when the person tries to build intimacy in adulthood.

Such ingrained beliefs can lead to a persistent fear of abandonment or a compulsion to seek validation in adult relationships. This is especially clear in those who observed parental disputes during their formative years.

In certain instances, parents may express sentiments such as, "I would have left already if we did not have children," or "I sacrificed my career to care for our child" during arguments.

Although not meant to hurt, such statements can leave deep scars. These words often get hardwired into the child's emotional memory. To a child's ears, it doesn't sound like love. It sounds like blame wrapped in affection; a quiet

reminder that they are the reason for someone else's loss. The child, unable to comprehend the complexities of adult relationships, often assumes blame, leading to deep-seated guilt and a distorted sense of self-worth.

Dr Hamid explains, "They begin to believe that they are the root cause of their parents' suffering and sacrifice. They obsessively try to understand the reason behind the conflict, and every time, they conclude that they're to blame."

Monsura, a service holder, shares her struggles, "I've always been left behind. It can happen again. The emotional toll of facing that is agonising to say the least. It's like the moment someone stops seeing eye to eye on anything, texting back on time or forgets I exist in a room. I feel this unbearable weight in my chest. I panic."

She convinces herself that her partner does not care anymore; that she's not enough.

"So, I walk away first. It is better to walk away before I get hurt. I've done it three times now. Marriage, to me, has always felt like a test I'm doomed to fail, probably because my father never stayed long enough to validate my affection and efforts towards him or teach me what love without conditions looks like," she avows.

This is where the fear of "being lost" or benign abandonment begins. Individuals start to lose their own sense of self-worth and identity. Over time, this perception becomes their reality. This unresolved trauma may resurface in romantic relationships later in life. They may experience an intense dread of abandonment or a strong desire to exert control over the relationship. Beneath their behaviour lies a wounded child, still terrified of being the reason someone leaves.

GENDERED EXPERIENCES

Bangladeshi women, often subject to body shaming, colourism, and stricter social expectations, face a different set of emotional hurdles than men, who are socially conditioned to suppress vulnerability under the pretence of strength, and be the provider to their family, even if it means putting their lives on the line. This suppression becomes fertile ground for emotional unavailability in marriage — a wall that neither partner knows quite how to tear down.

Software Engineer, Reza has always been dubbed as a stoic individual. Despite his nature, he struggles to maintain communication or show affection to his spouse. "Showing affection or being emotional in general was never my strong suit. This trait of mine came in handy in many instances in life, but never in relationships."

He expresses further, "It was ingrained by the adults around me, showing emotions was a way of exposing myself. If I cried, I was called soft. If I reacted with anger, I was labelled violent. When I asked for a hug from my mother, I was yelled at for being too clingy."

Expressing his emotions, the skill itself was made to be faded by Reza himself. "I struggle now, even to show affection to my wife, whom I really love. But she believes that I do not care for

her. I am incapable of being emotionally available. I find it difficult to empathise with someone who is experiencing pain."

"I expect them to do what I do: walk it off or bury it deep down until it does not bother me. I never fathomed that something so natural, like loving or being caring, could be so daunting and elusive. I don't know how to show or express it, but I really do love my wife."

Yet, the irony remains: while the world outside celebrates marital milestones with glossy photographs and cheerful captions, many couples suffer quietly behind closed doors, tangled in past hurts they have

speak differently, not with accusations but with curiosity, not with defences but with honesty.

Sometimes, it means recognising that the tears and anger in front of you are not truly about the missed anniversary dinner or the harsh word in the heat of a fight, but about a scared inner child asking not to be abandoned again.

Dhaka, with its ever-shifting skyline and slow, but steady cultural evolution, marriages, too, are evolving. The old ways of bottling everything inside, enduring rather than understanding, are being questioned. Couples are beginning to



never had the space to name, let alone heal.

The communication gap widens not just through arguments but in silence as well — missed glances, unspoken resentments, affectionate advances withheld not out of hate but hesitation and in between, life moves on like a play where both actors forgot their lines but keep performing anyway.

In a society where mental health is still often seen as a luxury concern, seeking therapy becomes a radical act of self-preservation. But the stigma remains stubborn. Vulnerability is misunderstood as weakness: therapy is often dismissed as unnecessary indulgence.

TOWARDS HEALING

Dr Abdul Hamid stresses that real progress begins when couples stop seeing each other as enemies and start seeing the real adversary — the unresolved wounds both are carrying. Healing involves learning to

realise that love alone is not enough if the soil it's planted in remains wounded and parched.

There is no single cure, no easy checklist. The journey of healing marital relationships affected by childhood trauma is messy, nonlinear, and deeply personal. It demands honesty not just with a partner, but with oneself. It asks each person to mourn the childhood they deserved but never had and to relearn, with a loved one, how to trust, be safe, and be seen fully, scars and all.

Because in the end, marriage is not just the meeting of two lives. It is often the meeting of two pasts. And until those pasts are acknowledged and embraced, the future remains hostage to ghosts that refuse to rest.

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Photo: Shahrear Kabir Heemel

**Names used in this article are aliases to keep the identities of the subjects hidden.