

**PRACTICAL EXERCISES TO BREAK THE CYCLE
OF INHERITED FAMILY TRAUMA**

The
Official
It Didn't
Start
With You
Workbook

Mark
Wolynn

Author of the
International Bestseller
**IT DIDN'T START
WITH YOU**

Praise for *It Didn't Start with You*



One of The New York Times's 5 Books on Healing from Trauma, 2025

One of Oprah Daily's 10 Best Trauma Books of 2023

One of Book Riot's 9 Best Healing Books About Trauma for 2023

One of Healthline's 13 Best Mental Health Books of 2022

*One of Cosmopolitan's 15 Books About Mental Health That Everyone
Should Read*

One of Men's Health's 20 Best Mental Health Books to Read in 2022

One of Choosing Therapy's 10 Best PTSD & Trauma Books for 2021

Winner of the 2016 Nautilus Book Award in Psychology

Finalist for the 2016 Books for a Better Life Award

"Mark Wolynn does a masterful job of illuminating the ways in which our ancestors' unresolved suffering, often unknown to us, disables us and binds us painfully to them. He gives us the tools and skills—an approach that combines understanding, imaginative dialogues, and compassionate reconnection—to free and heal ourselves."

—Dr James S. Gordon, author of *Unstuck: Your Guide to the
Seven-Stage Journey Out of Depression*

"*It Didn't Start with You* takes us a big step forward, advancing the fields of trauma therapy, mindfulness applications, and human understanding. It is a bold, creative, and compassionate work."

—Sharon Salzberg, author of *Lovingkindness* and *Real
Happiness*

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“This groundbreaking book offers a compelling understanding of inherited trauma and fresh, powerful tools for relieving its suffering. Mark Wolynn is a wise and trustworthy guide on the journey toward healing.”

—Dr Tara Brach, author of *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*

“Mark elegantly weaves together the threads of generational and attachment trauma, offering a groundbreaking synthesis of neuroscience, psychology, and lived experience. Drawing on the latest epigenetic research, he provides a powerful *trauma language map*—a tool to help readers decode their symptoms, trace them to their origins, and begin the journey of healing. This book is full of healing sentences, practices, and rituals that guide readers toward greater awareness, integration, and repair. It is both a compassionate companion and a practical guide for anyone seeking to transform inherited pain into embodied wholeness.”

—Dr Diane Poole Heller, author of *The Power of Attachment* and *Healing Your Attachment Wounds*

“Mark Wolynn’s extraordinary book cracks the secret code of families and proves that you can go home again—once you understand how history made you. Full of life-changing stories, powerful insights, and practical tools for personal healing, *It Didn’t Start with You* deserves a place on your bookshelf next to Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child* and Dan Siegel’s *The Developing Mind*. You’ll never see your family the same way again.”

—Mark Matousek, author of *Ethical Wisdom*

“Bridging both neuroscience and psychodynamic thinking, *It Didn’t Start with You* provides the reader with a tremendously helpful toolbox of do-it-yourself clinical aids and provocative insights.”

—Dr Jess P. Shatkin, vice chair for education at NYU Langone Medical Center’s Child Study Center and author of *Child & Adolescent Mental Health*

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“After reading *It Didn't Start with You*, I found myself immediately able to apply Mark Wolynn's techniques with my patients and saw incredible results, in a shorter time than with traditional psychotherapeutic techniques. I encourage you to read this book. It's truly cutting edge.”

—Dr Alexandra Kreps

“This book is essential reading. A must-read. Mark Wolynn's approach to inherited and early developmental family trauma and its effect on health and well-being is groundbreaking.”

—Dr Bruce Hoffman, medical director, The Hoffman
Centre for Integrative and Functional Medicine

“Utterly invaluable and endlessly fascinating, Mark Wolynn's book, *It Didn't Start with You*, links our psychology and biology in a profound new way, giving us the power to understand and transform ourselves in the face of what seems inevitable. Identifying our unconscious loyalties to our ancestor's trauma through a series of practical questions and exercises gives us the keys to unlock our own freedom and compassion. Reading this book is like being a part of one of Mark's transformative workshops, a brave and powerful journey to self-realization.”

—Brenda Strong, Emmy-nominated actress (*Desperate Housewives*, *Dallas*, *13 Reasons Why*, *Supergirl*) and CEO
of Strong Yoga®4Women

“As medical doctors, we often treat the symptom. I've witnessed Mark identify the pattern and treat the cause.”

—Dr Russell Kennedy, author of *Anxiety Rx*

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THE OFFICIAL IT DIDN'T START WITH YOU WORKBOOK

Mark Wolynn is the founder and director of the Family Constellation Institute. A sought-after lecturer, he has taught at hospitals, clinics, conferences, universities, and training centers around the world, including the University of Pittsburgh, John F. Kennedy University, Western Psychiatric Institute, Kripalu, the New York Open Center, the Omega Institute, 1440 Multiversity, and the California Institute of Integral Studies. Wolynn's articles have appeared in *Psychology Today*, *Elephant Journal*, *mindbodygreen*, and *PsychCentral*, and his poetry has been published in *The New Yorker*. His book, *It Didn't Start with You*, is an international bestseller and has been translated into 39 languages.

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CYCLE OF INHERITED FAMILY TRAUMA



Mark Wolynn

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AUTHOR'S NOTE



I've designed this workbook to be a guide to lead you through the rich landscape of self-discovery. You can use it on your own or work the material with a well-trained therapist.

Notice how you feel as you read these pages. If you feel agitated or anxious, a certain amount of that is normal. After all, we're excavating the depths of likely uncharted territory.

However, if you find that the intense feelings don't resolve, or you feel unsafe in any way with any of this material, it could mean you need more support. I suggest you bookmark the places that triggered you and seek the help of a somatically trained therapist, preferably one who's trained in working with attachment trauma.

Take good care of yourself as you read this workbook. Feel everything that comes up, as these feelings may be preparing the ground for the next level of healing that's arising.

The information in this workbook is not intended to take the place of a psychologist's care, nor is it a substitute for medical or mental health treatment. Instead, this workbook is a potent tool for unlimited self-discovery.

INTRODUCTION



DO YOU HAVE INHERITED FAMILY TRAUMA?

For the past thirty-plus years, I've been helping people work through the mysteries they live with.

Many of my clients have a symptom or behavior that doesn't make sense to them. It might be chronic pain, migraines, gut issues, skin conditions, or chronic fatigue. It might be depression, anxiety, or overwhelming thoughts and fears. It might be a relationship issue, a self-sabotaging behavior, or an inability to hold a job.

Many also have "ordinary" events in their family history: Their mom's or dad's parent died young. Their dad's little brother drowned. Their grandparents lost family members in war, during an epidemic, or in one of the many genocides throughout history. Their mother got divorced during

pregnancy, lost a baby before they were born, or had postpartum depression.

Events like these, though they seem ordinary, can devastate a family. And because they are common, it's human nature to push down the emotions, to say, "What's past is past," and move on. But whatever emotions we push away never really go away. They often submerge in our body and reemerge as unexplained symptoms. And even if we're the one experiencing those symptoms, the emotions surrounding them, as we'll soon learn, might not be our own.

Substantial biological evidence has shown that the reaction to a trauma doesn't necessarily stop with the people who experienced it. The feelings and sensations—specifically the stress response, the way the genes express—can pass forward to the children and grandchildren, affecting them in a similar way even though they didn't personally experience the trauma.

This workbook will help you work with the mysteries *you* live with—the unexplained symptoms, the fears, the anxieties, the obsessive thoughts—symptoms you may think are yours, when in fact you merely inherited them from your mother or father or grandparent. And you've never made the connection—until now.

WHAT IS INHERITED FAMILY TRAUMA?

The latest scientific research tells us that the effects of trauma can pass from one generation to the next. Here's how it works:

Memories of trauma can become imprinted in our parents' and grandparents' sperm cells and egg cells. These changes in the DNA then pass forward to us. As a result, we can be born with altered brains that prepare us biologically to cope with traumas that are similar to the ones our parents or grandparents experienced.

Imagine the effect on your father if, as a little boy, he lost his mother and was placed in foster care. How would such events affect his ability to love, or trust others to care for him, or feel confident in himself? Not only would he carry emotional scars, but also biological scars in his DNA that can sift into succeeding generations.

Pain doesn't always dissolve on its own or diminish with time. Even if the person who suffered the original trauma has died—even if his or her story lies submerged in years of silence—fragments of life experience, memory, and body sensation can live on, as if reaching out from the past to find resolution in the minds and bodies of those living in the present.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTACHMENT TRAUMA

When there are multiple traumas in a family—or even just one—it can have a profound effect on a mother's ability to attune to her children. This can be particularly dire when a trauma limits the attention she can give to her child during the early stages of neurodevelopment. When this occurs, it

can create a break in the attachment between them, disrupting the child's sense of safety and well-being.

There are myriad experiences that can break the mother-child bond. Maybe her partner cheated or drank and Mom felt trapped in the relationship. Or she had postpartum depression. Or she lost her parent or best friend when she was pregnant with us. Or a baby died before us and she feared we would die too. Or she had a trauma in her early history that affected her biology and psychology—and ultimately ours as well.

Attachment trauma can also be inherited. If our mother, father, grandmother, or grandfather experienced a break in the attachment with their mother, the effects of that break can epigenetically pass down to us. Whether it's attachment trauma or generational trauma we struggle with, this workbook will light the way for healing to happen.

IT CAN END WITH YOU

If you've read my book, *It Didn't Start with You*, you already know that the effects of trauma can echo in our words and speak through our symptoms. But our symptoms don't always resemble the original trauma. We may have issues with our eyesight, or experience tremors, but never connect these symptoms to the fact that our grandmother was orphaned as an infant and couldn't give our mother the love and attention she needed. And our mother, unaware of what she didn't get, couldn't supply us with the attunement

we needed to live fully in our body, creating gaps in the way our nervous system functions.

As you're reading these words, you may be thinking about traumas in your own family or early life and wondering if you're being affected by them.

How do you know if you've experienced inherited family trauma? Here are some common signs:

- Fears or phobias, overwhelming or obsessive thoughts, and anxiety or panic attacks (though these last two are also common with attachment trauma)
- Unsettling emotions, such as a feeling of dread that something terrible will happen, or that you're a terrible person who could hurt someone, be hated, and won't deserve to live
- Physical experiences or symptoms that don't seem congruent with your life experience, whereas with attachment trauma, your symptoms could likely be traced to an early trauma of being physically or emotionally separated from your mother

And here are some signs of attachment trauma:

- Social anxiety, panic attacks, PTSD, trust issues, fears of intimacy, problems with boundaries, a negative self-image, and being emotionally avoidant or reactive





- Unsettling emotions, such as a feeling of being rejected or abandoned, ignored, or unworthy of love, being invisible, helpless, powerless, joyless, not being good enough, or being too much
- Physical experiences or symptoms congruent with an early trauma of being disconnected from a mother, such as food or environmental sensitivities, malabsorption of nutrients, eating disorders, autoimmune issues, chronic fatigue syndrome, substance abuse, as well as conditions related to physical touch such as fibromyalgia, eczema, rashes, and more

Of course, many of us have unexplained symptoms. Many of us grew up in a dysfunctional home or have parents or grandparents who couldn't give their love freely. How do we know if *we* have inherited family trauma or attachment trauma?

This workbook was created to help you find out. And not just to find out, but to heal, and break the cycle for future generations.

The effects of inherited family trauma didn't start with you, but they can end with you.



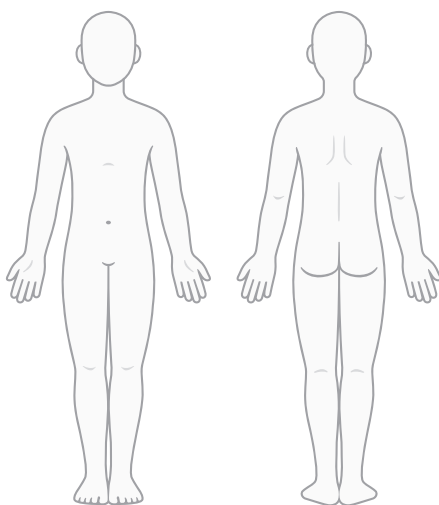
EXERCISE



DO YOU HAVE UNRESOLVED TRAUMA?

Are you wondering if this work is for you? How do you know if you carry symptoms of trauma? Before we begin this work together, here's an opportunity to explore your own thoughts, feelings, and physical symptoms.

Let's start with a body scan. Beginning at the crown of your head, draw your awareness down the entire length of your body, noticing all sensations that get your attention. Where do you feel life force flowing? A sense of aliveness or vitality? Where do you feel the opposite—areas of your body that feel empty, hollow, numb, disappeared, or disconnected? Can you tell where the energy is moving as well as areas that feel constricted? Do some areas feel cool or warm, contracted, tight, or open?



Whatever you feel or don't feel is fine. Let's mark it on the body map below.

Thank you for creating this body map. A physical image of what your body's feeling will be useful as we move forward in this workbook.

Don't worry if you're having trouble naming your physical sensations, or even if you can't feel anything at all. Just naming those areas as blocked, numb, disappeared, or disconnected is half the battle. *These* are feelings! And important feelings—ones you can work with. Having said that, I always advise working with a skilled, somatically oriented therapist if feelings come up that are overwhelming.



Some Physical Sensations Commonly Associated with Trauma Responses

- Fight responses: feeling tight, rigid, clenched, pain, an urge to attack or push something or someone away
- Flight responses: contracting, pulling or backing away, recoiling, panicking—a physical feeling of needing to flee or “get away” to create some distance between you and what feels threatening
- Freeze responses: a slowed heart rate; an inability to move or act; a feeling of being blocked, shut down, frozen, numb, hollow, empty, disappeared

inside, disconnected, dissociated; going “offline”;
going still or silent; flooding, sinking, or spinning
inward

- Other responses that can be connected to any
of the three: queasiness or nausea; shallow or
rapid breathing; increased heart rate; feeling hot
or flushed; sweating; trembling; feeling anxious,
shaky, or jittery



Now let's explore some of your thoughts and feelings.
On the lines provided after each question, please be specific
about your experiences.

Do you experience anxiety? How does it show up?

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.....

.....

Do you have depression? What does depression feel like for you?

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.....

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Are there situations that trigger certain feelings, impulses, or behaviors in you, such as conflicts with others, being in groups, public speaking, or driving a car? Please explain.

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In your relationships, do you have issues with getting close, trust, boundaries, or reactivity? Say more.

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When you're close with someone, does it sometimes feel as though there's a glass wall between you and the other person? What does that feel like?

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Do you have thoughts that distract you or keep you up at night? What are they?

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Do you feel invisible, ignored, or unseen? Do you feel this in crowds, groups, or in your intimate relationships?

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Do you have physical symptoms you can't explain? Say more.

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If so, what fears come up as you think about them?

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.....

*What might these feelings or symptoms be trying to tell you?
What message could they have for you?*

.....

.....

.....

If you answered yes to even one of those questions, let's dive in and dig deeper.

But before we do that, just one more question:

What would healing look like for you? How would things be different in your life?

.....

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.....

HOW TO USE THIS WORKBOOK

I've designed this workbook as if you were having a personal session with me. In it, I'll ask you all the questions I'd ask a client, and based on your responses, I'll suggest the same healing practices and rituals—just as if we were sitting face-to-face.

Here's a brief map of our journey together: In chapters 1 and 2, we'll explore the two different types of trauma covered in this workbook: *inherited family trauma* and *attachment trauma*. Then, in chapter 3, you'll explore the *four unconscious themes* that interrupt life's forward progress—four ways our relationships, success, vitality, and health can be disrupted.

The four unconscious themes are the gateway to the heart of our work together. Once you identify the main theme or themes that echo through your life, you can begin listening for your specific trauma language with the core language approach. In chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, you'll identify

your core complaint, core descriptors, core sentence, and core trauma.

Together, your unconscious theme(s) and your core language provide a map for healing. In chapters 8, 9, and 10, you'll learn personalized healing sentences, rituals, and practices to help you break the cycle of trauma. Finally, chapters 11 and 12 include special healing practices for healthy relationships and optimal success in life.

Throughout the workbook, you'll find both written and somatic (body-centered) exercises that walk you through the healing process one step at a time. These practices are designed to go deep. They may even hit a nerve or two. That's okay. I've discovered that lasting change often involves some level of discomfort. At the same time, remember you are fully in control of your experience. Whatever doesn't feel right, don't do. Trust your gut.

Although this work is yours to do, you won't be alone. Along the way, you'll meet two of my previous clients, Susan and Jordan,¹ who also experienced family trauma. They'll answer the same questions you'll answer, and you'll witness their stories of pain, mystery, courage, discovery, and ultimately healing.

For you to get maximum benefit from this experience, here are some suggestions:

- Set aside plenty of time and space for yourself to answer the questions and do the exercises. Be open. Be curious. Wrestle with them. Don't let them go until you've reached the depths. And then keep going. This workbook will guide you every step of the way.

- ▶ This workbook was created to support a number of different learning styles. You'll find conceptual information, real-life stories, open-ended written questions that engage both the mind and heart, and somatic exercises that engage the body. So feel free to use it in whatever way supports your healing journey: you can complete each exercise as you go, or read the entire workbook first and then come back to complete the exercises.
- ▶ Note: If at all possible, I recommend completing the exercises as you read the workbook. The power in doing the exercises as you go—not just reading them—is that you will be catapulted to the next level of healing, as each exercise builds exponentially upon the previous one.

As your guide, I will remain by your side as you enter a landscape of new discoveries. Each step of the way, I'll provide you with a tool that will function like a lantern, lighting the path forward. Let's get started.