

Modifying Outdated Coping Methods

Until we understand our childhood distress and how we adapted to it, we are likely to perceive many of our beliefs, feelings and behaviours as just a natural response to 'the way the world is' or put our reactions down to our personality. Many so-called 'personality traits' can be adaptations to early challenges that we continue to use habitually.

The better we understand our old defensive behaviour, the easier it is to realise when it's coming into play and make changes. The first step is to identify the particular coping methods that have become problematic for you. This checklist contains some of the coping methods people commonly identify with. Which do you relate to?

- I keep excessively busy because I'm afraid of facing how I feel.
- I'm often out of touch with my feelings, thoughts, needs and desires.
- I constantly look to others for a measure of my worth.
- I use humour as a defense, at my own or others' expense.
- I often escape into a fantasy world, rather than deal with necessary issues.
- I rely excessively on planning and organising to keep myself feeling in control.
- I read peoples' moods and automatically adapt myself to suit.
- I often take care of others at the expense of myself.
- I'm inclined to be over-involved in others' problems.
- I have a strong need to control the people and situations around me.
- I strive to be self-sufficient because I'm afraid to ask for help.
- I'm inclined to withdraw in social situations because I feel unimportant.
- My constant 'false front' distances me from other people.
- I'm inclined to automatically tell unnecessary lies.
- I use excess food, alcohol, drugs, work or sex to help me cope with stress.
- I tend to be overly watchful, mistrustful and tense around others.
- I'm unnecessarily secretive in my close relationships.
- I go along with things I disagree with because I'm afraid of conflict.
- When I feel hurt or vulnerable, I often become defensive or angry.

When we identify the old coping behaviours we are still engaging in to our detriment, we can feel overwhelmed. We may decide to make radical changes, but if we're not able to sustain these we can judge ourselves harshly. Behaviour change needs to be undertaken with respect for our vulnerabilities.

The behaviours we've developed have served a purpose in our lives, and perhaps they still do. It's possible that many of the needs that these behaviours attempt to meet are quite valid and current to our situation today. We may rely on alcohol to relax or tell lies because we're afraid to be assertive. Rather than just attempting to drop old coping behaviours out of our life, it's important to consider how we can replace them with a positive substitute that will meet the need that's usually there. Developing skills in self-care and self-soothing will address many needs.

© Copyright Kay Douglas. © Excerpt from *Challenged by Childhood: Healing the Hidden Hurts of a Difficult Childhood*, by Kay Douglas. Kay Douglas is a registered psychotherapist, counsellor and life coach. She is also the author of four self-help books: *Invisible Wounds*, *Challenged by Childhood*, *Living Life Out Loud* and *Power Games* (co-authored with Dr Kim McGregor). Kay is in private practice in Auckland, New Zealand. For more information please visit www.kaydouglas.com

You are welcome to use, copy or distribute this material but please use it unchanged and include the copyright and full bio details.