WORKSHEET 152 · FOR THE PSYCHOLOGIST

What I learnt as a child about relationships

My beliefs about myself and about others, and what remains of them

AIM

Explore the “internal working models” built in childhood (beliefs about oneself and about others’ availability), test their validity in current relationships and begin to make them more flexible.

WHO IT IS FOR

People with a difficult relational history, repeated relational patterns, work on self-esteem.

DURATION

30 min, ideally in session

HOW TO RUN IT

1. Introduce Bowlby’s internal working models: learnt expectations, often useful back then, that may be outdated today.
2. The person notes the “messages” they learnt about themselves and about others (“I have to manage on my own”, “if I ask, I’m a nuisance”).
3. For each one: where it may come from, whether it is still true today and with whom it isn’t.
4. Formulate a more nuanced belief, to test in a safe relationship.

POINTS TO WATCH

> Work to be done carefully if there was abuse or neglect: ideally in session and after stabilisation. “Earned security” shows that a difficult history doesn’t prevent secure attachment in adulthood (Roisman et al., 2002). These worksheets are not attachment tests: none of them replaces a clinical interview or a validated questionnaire. Avoid locking the person into a “style”. If there is current violence in a relationship, safety comes first, not attachment work.

REFERENCES

Bowlby, J. (1988). A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development. Basic Books.

Roisman, G. I., Padrón, E., Sroufe, L. A. & Egeland, B. (2002). Earned-secure attachment status in retrospect and prospect. Child Development, 73(4), 1204-1219.

Taylor, P., Rietzschel, J., Danquah, A. & Berry, K. (2015). Changes in attachment representations during psychological therapy. Psychotherapy Research, 25(2), 222-238.

PSYCHOLOGIST’S NOTES

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WORKSHEET 152 · WORKSHEET TO HAND OUT

What I learnt as a child about relationships

Best done with your psychologist

As children we learn things about ourselves and about others from the way people responded to us: “you can count on others”, “I have to manage on my own”, “if I cry, they get angry”. Those lessons protected us back then. Today, some of them may no longer be true.

1. Write a message you learnt about yourself or about others.
2. Write where it may come from (without judging anyone).
3. Write whether it is still true today, and with whom it isn’t.
4. Write a more nuanced version that you could put to the test.

What I learnt	Where it may come from	Still true? With whom isn’t it?	A more nuanced version

A safe relationship in which I could test my new belief:

These exercises do not replace therapy. If you are in distress or having suicidal thoughts: 112 (European Union), 3114 (France) or the emergency number of the country where you live.

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