

Conversation 2: The Patterns That Protected You

How Coping Mechanisms Develop

Conversation 1 introduced the idea that your patterns make sense. This next conversation takes us one step further.

Your patterns didn't just make sense; they protected you. This is one of the most important perception shifts you can make in your healing journey.

Most people spend years at war with themselves because of the patterns they developed to protect themselves:

- ♥ They criticise their anxiety.
- ♥ They resent their people-pleasing tendencies.
- ♥ They judge their overthinking.
- ♥ They become frustrated by their need for approval.
- ♥ They dislike their perfectionism.
- ♥ They wish they could stop caring, worrying, feeling, or thinking so much.

And yet beneath each of these behaviours is a simple truth: at some point in your life, that pattern solved a problem, it served a purpose, it helped you navigate a world that felt uncertain, overwhelming, painful, or unsafe. This is something many people struggle to understand because they're evaluating their patterns through the eyes

of the adult they've become rather than through the eyes of the child they once were - who created the patterns in the first place.

The adult says: this isn't helping me, but the child who created the pattern wasn't asking if it would serve a purpose in thirty-plus years. The child was asking:

- ♥ How do I get through today?
- ♥ How do I stay safe?
- ♥ How do I avoid being hurt?
- ♥ How do I stay connected to the people I depend on?
- ♥ How do I make sure I belong?

When we're young, our brains are constantly gathering information about the world around us.

- ♥ What is safe?
- ♥ What is dangerous?
- ♥ What gets rewarded?
- ♥ What gets criticised?
- ♥ What brings connection?
- ♥ What creates rejection?

Without realising it, we begin building an internal rulebook, a collection of beliefs and assumptions about ourselves, other people, and the world we're growing up in.

- ♥ If expressing emotions leads to criticism, we may learn to hide our emotions.
- ♥ If being helpful leads to praise and acceptance, we may learn to prioritise other people's needs before we prioritise our own.
- ♥ If making mistakes leads to humiliation, we may learn to become perfectionists.
- ♥ If conflict feels frightening, we may learn to avoid it at all costs.
- ♥ If affection is unpredictable, we may become highly sensitive to signs of rejection.

These adaptations are rarely conscious. Most children don't sit down and decide who they're going to become. Instead, they learn through repetition that:

- ♥ Experience becomes expectation.
- ♥ Expectation becomes behaviour.
- ♥ Behaviour becomes patterns.
- ♥ Patterns become identity.

Eventually we forget there was ever a time before we learned to adapt, and our true nature all but disappeared.

The challenge we face now is that coping mechanisms don't disappear simply because our circumstances change - they remain long after the original threat has

gone, the original environment has changed, and long after the original need has been met.

Imagine a smoke alarm that was installed to protect a property from fire. The alarm has an important job to do; it keeps people safe. But over time the alarm becomes so sensitive it starts going off not when the house is burning down, but whenever someone burns a piece of toast. The problem isn't the existence of the sensitive alarm; the problem is that the alarm can't tell the difference between genuine danger and a minor inconvenience.

Coping mechanisms work in a similar way. They begin as intelligent protective responses but can very quickly become oversensitive.

- ♥ The people-pleaser learns to keep everyone happy because keeping people happy once felt safe.
- ♥ The overthinker learns to analyse every possibility because being prepared once reduced uncertainty.
- ♥ The perfectionist learns to strive for flawless performance because mistakes once cost too much.
- ♥ The self-reliant person learns never to ask for help because asking for help once led to disappointment and rejection.
- ♥ The emotionally guarded person learns not to trust because trust once led to pain and abandonment.

The coping mechanism is not trying to hurt you. It's trying to protect you. The difficulty is what protects us at one stage of our life can restrict us in another. The walls we build to keep pain out can also keep connection out, the strategies we develop to avoid rejection can prevent authenticity, and the habits we create to stay safe can prevent growth.

This is why healing requires a delicate balance. We're not trying to attack our coping mechanisms. We're trying to understand them.

How different does it feel to say: why am I such a people-pleaser? Compared with, I learned to please people because it helped me feel accepted. Or: why am I so anxious? Compared with, my anxiety developed because my mind learned to stay alert for possible problems.

The behaviour itself may not change immediately but your relationship with it does - and that matters more than you know.

Sustainable healing never happens through self-criticism and yet most people have criticised themselves for years. They've already tried forcing themselves to be different. What they've not done is recognise the intelligence hidden within their coping mechanisms.

The truth is many of the patterns you dislike about yourself today were once evidence of your resilience. They're proof that you're doing exactly what your brain and body are designed to do when you sense disharmony or danger: you adapt to your environment.

Your patterns are proof that you found a way to navigate circumstances that were often beyond your control. But though your coping mechanisms once helped you navigate your way through chaos and disruption, some of them may now be limiting your happiness, and your relationships, confidence, and your peace of mind.

The goal of healing is not to wage war against yourself. The goal of healing is to understand yourself so deeply that change becomes possible.

Before you ask a coping mechanism to leave, however, it helps to thank it for the job it was trying to do. As you make your way through The Healing Library Summer School, I want you to hold onto a few simple ideas:

- ♥ Every coping mechanism has a story.
- ♥ Every pattern has a purpose.
- ♥ Every adaptation was trying to help.

Remember: when we understand what a pattern was protecting us from, we begin to understand it might be **time to let it go.**