



Adults can go to great lengths to avoid their childhood issues, says author and abuse survivor *Barbara Biggs*. But giving voice to the trauma may help heal the pain.

And another thing



In my experience, people deal with childhood trauma in two ways. Both involve burying the pain under the carpet so we can finish growing up. When that monumental job is finished – usually in adolescence – it often threatens to pop up in our porridge again. One way to avoid dealing with it is through drugs, alcohol and other self-destructive behaviour. The other, also effective, is through overachieving.

I'm unusual in that I'm a crossover. My grandmother sold me to a pedophile barrister at 14. As a result of the abuse, I checked into a psych hospital at 16, became a prostitute at 19 and had made four suicide attempts by the time I was 20. I had a child at 23 and after that, I turned to overachieving as a way to blot out the past.

My family is a perfect representative sample of the two ways of coping with the problems of a painful past. All of my siblings had some kind of childhood trauma – with a mother who was 190 kilograms and had six kids to five different men, you can imagine.

The eldest still suffers from psychosis and drug problems. The second-eldest committed suicide at 27. Of my two younger brothers, one killed himself and the other has been unemployed for many years. My youngest sister, however, is on a six-figure salary, runs a company and has never dealt with her childhood issues. She believes she has them licked. All we overachievers do.

One thing I've learned is that we ignore our past at our peril. But we heal in bite-sized pieces and only when we're ready – not a minute before.

We're all born whole and perfect. You only have to see a newborn baby to know that in your bones. Then our childhoods can mess us up. Even without abuse, there's always someone dying, moving, a teacher who hated you. Our perfection becomes distorted. The hard drive gets a virus. My take is that life – our relationships, families and careers – is the best vehicle for undoing the distortion and finding our way back to that wholeness.

After I got pregnant, I practised piano eight hours a day in order to leave not a single bit of room in my head for suicidal thoughts. It worked a treat. During other emotionally difficult times, I've rollerbladed 100 kilometres a week, ice-skated three hours a day, borrowed \$1.2 million and bought five properties in five months (on a two-day-a-week salary, mind). Most recently, I bought an apartment in Paris.

The Paris purchase is, on the surface, a fun yarn about how I put in a ridiculously low offer on a cute place overlooking a park. I didn't realise the 15,000 people who'd died in the European heatwave of 2003 had left a glut of apartments on the market. The agent rang the next day to say it was mine.

Why I said yes – when I was only in Paris for four days, didn't speak French and didn't know anyone there – was partly to do with the fact that it was during one of the most difficult years of my life.

It was the year the first part of my autobiography, *In Moral Danger*, had come out. I thought I'd dealt with the pain of my 14-year-old self. Silly me. I'd only buried her under a deep shag-pile carpet. I had to learn to go back and nurture her, let her grieve, get

angry and integrate her to make myself whole.

It was a tricky business. I hadn't been depressed for 25 years. It was all I could do to get out of bed in the mornings. I used all my usual tricks – read books, had counselling. I was even about to go off into the desert to fast and meditate for two weeks. Then, I learned that depression is unexpressed anger. Finally, after decades, I got angry and the most important lesson of my life revealed itself. My most important job is to listen to my feelings and not rationalise them away. The fog of depression lifted immediately.

During the next six months, I cried a lot. It was gentle crying, holy in a way. I was kind to myself. And it was during this period that I bought the Paris apartment. I didn't realise it at the time but it was another way of creating chaos on the surface while the underbelly emotional stuff sorted itself out.

My emotion was fear of another relationship. I'd lost all confidence in my ability to choose a healthy partner. I escalated the stakes when I took my next-door neighbour, an Australian builder, with me to Paris to renovate. It was no coincidence I'd only known him three weeks and we'd dated twice.

This time, I learned my lesson before we became intimate. Talk about the lengths we can go to to deal – or not deal – with our emotions.

The moral of this story? Overachieve all you like – it beats drugs as a distraction and can even make you rich – but remember one thing: the little kids who live inside us won't leave us alone until we give them a voice. They deserve to be heard. And loved. By us.

Barbara Biggs is the author of *The Accidental Renovator: A Paris Story*.