

The Age of Our Wounds:

Understanding Emotional Regression

When we think of trauma, we often imagine a single event — something that happened back then. But what many people don't realize is that trauma doesn't stay neatly tucked away in the past. It becomes encoded in the nervous system, shaping how we respond to the present. And when life presses against that old wound, we don't always react as the adults we've become. Instead, we respond from the age we were when the pain occurred.

In psychology and trauma research, this phenomenon is known as emotional regression — a temporary return to the developmental age at which trauma first took hold. The body and mind operate as if the past is happening again.

Examples of Emotional Regression

- A woman abandoned by a parent at age five might feel overwhelming panic when someone she loves leaves the room.
- A teenager who grew up being criticized may revert to silence or self-blame during conflict decades later.
- A man shamed for expressing emotion may still freeze or deflect whenever he feels sadness surface.

To the outside observer, these behaviors can seem irrational, dramatic, or immature. But in truth, the person is not choosing their reaction — they're reliving an experience their body once could not process or escape.

The Neuroscience Behind the Wound

Trauma stores itself in the amygdala, the brain's emotional alarm system, while the prefrontal cortex — our rational, adult reasoning center — temporarily goes offline when a trigger is activated. This means that under stress, logic can't easily reach the part of us that's panicking. The body remembers, even when the mind insists, 'I'm fine.'

Healing begins when the adult self learns to recognize these regressions with compassion rather than shame. Instead of asking, 'What's wrong with me?' we can begin asking, 'How old do I feel right now — and what did that younger version of me need?'

From Reaction to Restoration

When we meet ourselves — or others — in those moments of emotional reversion, we offer the chance to rewrite an old script. Compassion, safety, and presence can reach parts of the soul that intellect alone never could.

For those supporting someone with trauma, this awareness changes everything. Instead of

frustration, we bring empathy. Instead of judgment, we bring gentleness. The right response can help someone move from surviving the past to living in the present.

Academic Sidebar: Trauma, the Brain, and Emotional Age

Trauma research has repeatedly confirmed what survivors intuitively feel — the past lives on in the body until it is safely processed.

- Dr. Bessel van der Kolk (2014), in *The Body Keeps the Score*, describes how the brain's emotional centers remain 'on alert,' replaying old danger signals long after the threat is gone.
- Dr. Bruce Perry's Neurosequential Model explains how traumatic stress interrupts brain development, leaving 'islands' of immature regulation within an otherwise adult nervous system.
- Dr. Dan Siegel (2012) uses the term 'integration' to describe healing — the process of reconnecting the fragmented parts of the brain and story so the person can respond with present-day wisdom rather than past pain.

These frameworks help us understand that regression is not a failure of maturity but a neurobiological echo — a signal that a younger part of us still needs comfort, safety, and acknowledgment.

Faith and the Healing of Time

Scripture often speaks of God as the One who 'restores the years the locust has eaten' (Joel 2:25). Healing from trauma is, in many ways, a reclaiming of those years — those inner ages frozen in fear or sorrow. Through love, therapy, prayer, and safe relationships, the wounded parts of us can grow up into the fullness of who God intended.

Each time we recognize an emotional flashback for what it is — not weakness, but a signal — we're inviting healing light into the hidden corners of our story. We begin to parent the parts of ourselves that were once abandoned, shamed, or silenced.

Final Reflection

The next time you or someone you love seems 'stuck' in an old pattern, pause and remember: They may not be responding as they are now, but as who they once were — the age of their wound. And every time love shows up in that space, the wound loses a little more power.