THE EMPTY CHAIR

To My Younger Self

Meeting the younger you with understanding, protection and words that may never have been available at the time.

A gentle note before you begin: Imagining a younger version of yourself can bring strong feelings, memories or body responses. You do not need to remember every detail, create a perfect image, or force yourself into distress. You can write to an age, a photograph, a feeling, or simply the idea of the younger you.

Why speak to a younger self?

Trauma experienced in childhood or adolescence is often understood with an adult mind many years later. A child may have assumed that they caused what happened, should have prevented it, were 'too sensitive', were difficult, or somehow deserved the way they were treated. Children also depend on adults, which can make it impossible to recognise or name harmful behaviour at the time.

The empty chair can offer a different position: the adult you looking toward the younger you with information, perspective and choices that were unavailable then. This is not about pretending the past can be changed. It is about changing the way responsibility, shame and meaning are carried in the present.

You decide who sits in the chair

You might picture yourself at a particular age, place a childhood photograph nearby, use a teddy or cushion as a symbol, or leave the chair visibly empty. If a specific age feels too intense, imagine a more general younger version of yourself. There is no need to recover forgotten memories.

The younger me I am thinking about today is approximately: _____ years old.

What I notice when I think about them: _____

What would help me stay connected to the present: _____

Orient to now

Before beginning, notice your adult body, the room around you and the choices you have today. Name your age now, where you are, and one thing that shows you are no longer in the original situation.

I am _____ years old now.

I am in: _____ **The date is:** _____

One choice I have now that I did not have then: _____

What did you need to hear?

Try looking toward the chair without demanding a response. Imagine that the younger you does not have to explain, prove or perform anything. Your first task is simply to notice what you want them to know.

Words that remove blame

I want you to know that…

_____

It was not your responsibility to…

_____

You were trying to survive by…

_____

What children often cannot know

Children interpret events using the knowledge and power available to them. They may believe an adult's anger proves they are bad, that family secrecy must be protected, that being compliant keeps everybody safe, or that asking for help will make things worse. A trauma-informed adult perspective can gently separate those childhood conclusions from present-day understanding.

What I understand now

At the time I believed: _____

As an adult I can now see: _____

The responsibility actually belonged with: _____

Protection

Many people discover that the strongest response to their younger self is protective anger: 'Someone should have noticed.' 'An adult should have stepped in.' 'You should never have had to manage that alone.' Protection can be imagined without creating a fantasy that erases reality. You can acknowledge clearly what should have happened.

If I could stand beside you now, I would…

_____

I would tell the adults around you…

_____

Do not force affection

You may not immediately feel tenderness toward your younger self. Some people feel irritated, detached, ashamed or nothing at all. Those reactions can reflect how you were treated or what you learned about vulnerability. Begin with respect rather than forcing warmth: 'You were a child.' 'You were dealing with more than people knew.' 'You deserved safety.'

Body check

Notice your breathing, throat, jaw, chest, stomach and hands. If you begin to feel very young rather than simply remembering being young, orient back to your adult self: say your current age aloud, look around the room and move your body.

What was missing?

Trauma is not only about what happened. It can also be about what did not happen: protection, comfort, consistency, explanation, affection, belief, advocacy or repair. Naming what was missing can validate needs that were previously dismissed.

The unmet-needs chair

You needed someone to:
■ believe you ■ protect you ■ explain what was happening
■ comfort you ■ notice you ■ stop the behaviour
■ let you be a child ■ respect your boundaries ■ other: _____

The need that feels strongest now is: _____

Grieving what should have been

Recognising unmet childhood needs can bring grief. You may grieve the childhood you imagined other people had, the parent or caregiver you needed, lost opportunities, innocence, safety, education, friendships or simply the freedom to develop without constantly monitoring danger. Grief does not mean you are stuck in the past; it can be part of recognising the significance of what was lost.

Anonymous perspective

“I expected to tell my younger self to be stronger. Instead, when I pictured the chair, I realised how small I had actually been. I kept thinking, 'Why did nobody see this?' I did not suddenly feel healed. But for the first time I stopped asking why that child had not handled it better. I started asking why they had been expected to handle it at all.”

What survived with you

Trauma resources sometimes rush toward strengths and resilience. You do not have to turn suffering into a positive lesson. Still, it can be meaningful to notice qualities that remained: humour, imagination, determination, sensitivity, curiosity, creativity, loyalty or an ability to notice what others need. These qualities belong to you; they do not justify what happened.

Something I recognise in the younger me: _____

Something they kept alive: _____

Something I want them to know about the life I have now: _____

A boundary across time

Imagine standing between the younger you and whatever felt unsafe. You do not need to replay the event. Simply create a boundary in words: 'No.' 'You do not get to speak to them like that.' 'They are coming with me.' 'This is not their responsibility.' Notice what it feels like to let your adult voice occupy that protective position.

A message from Maggie

When we look back with an adult mind, it can be very easy to judge the child we once were. We ask why we did not tell somebody, why we believed what we were told, why we stayed quiet, why we tried so hard to keep everyone happy, or why we still wanted love from people who hurt us.

But a child is not an adult with fewer years. A child has less power, less information, fewer choices and often complete dependence on the people around them. The younger you responded with what they had available at the time.

If you sit opposite that empty chair, you do not have to promise that everything will be all right. You can offer something more truthful: 'I see how hard that was.' 'You should not have had to carry it.' 'I understand more now.' 'I will listen.'

And if you cannot yet feel kindness toward that younger version of yourself, begin with fairness. They deserved the same safety and protection you would want for any other child.

Closing the exercise

Tell the younger you that you are ending for today. Bring your attention firmly back to your current age and surroundings. Put away photographs or symbolic objects if that helps create separation. Move, eat or drink something if appropriate, listen to familiar music, or return to an ordinary task.

I am back in the present.

My current age: _____ Where I am: _____

What I need after this exercise: _____

Books and further reading

Trauma and Recovery — Judith Herman. Foundational work on trauma, safety and recovery.

The Body Keeps the Score — Bessel van der Kolk. Explores how trauma can affect mind and body.

Gestalt Therapy Verbatim — Frederick S. Perls. Historical material related to Gestalt experiential work.

Sensorimotor Psychotherapy — Pat Ogden and colleagues. Professional reading on body-oriented trauma treatment.

Clinical notes and reference points

Empty-chair methods are most closely associated with Gestalt and experiential therapies. Trauma-informed adaptation should prioritise present-day orientation, consent, choice, pacing and stabilisation. Work involving childhood trauma can evoke dissociation, flashbacks or intense affect and may be better undertaken with a suitably trained therapist when these reactions are difficult to manage.

One sentence I want the younger me to keep:

_____

_____

Space to Breathe Therapy

Trauma Library | The Empty Chair Series