

Hysterical is Historical: Understanding How the Brain Stores Early Wounds

Where early wounds are stored in the brain



Hi! Thank you for speaking your voice of truth. I hear your desire to heal.

When we look at trauma through the lens of the brain, we can begin to understand that what feels “too big” or “too much” in the present moment often has roots in the past. In therapy, we use the phrase “Hysterical is Historical” to remind ourselves that present-day emotional overwhelm—what we might call “hysteria”—can be anchored in historical events that shaped how our nervous system learned to respond.



How the Brain Develops and Stores Trauma

Our brains develop from the bottom up—meaning the lower, more primitive regions form first and are responsible for survival. Early experiences, especially those involving threat or disconnection, get stored here.



0–5 years: Brain Stem (Physical Regulation)

This part of the brain develops first and runs the body’s most basic functions—breathing, heart rate, and physical safety. Trauma that occurs in this stage is stored in the body, often surfacing later as somatic symptoms, chronic tension, or physical anxiety responses.



5–15 years: Limbic System (Emotional Regulation)

The limbic system is our emotional and behavioral center. It controls attachment, belonging, and the fight/flight/freeze responses. Wounding during these years may result in heightened emotional sensitivity, difficulty self-soothing, or relationship-based distress. Because the limbic system is deeply tied to the parasympathetic nervous system, this is often where we see “limbic hijacking”—when the emotional brain takes over and logic temporarily shuts down.



15–25 years: Prefrontal Cortex (Thinking and Reasoning)

The prefrontal cortex handles logic, planning, decision-making, and impulse control. It is the last part of the brain to fully develop. When trauma impacts earlier regions (brain stem or limbic system), the prefrontal cortex may struggle to regulate emotional or behavioral reactions, creating what’s often described as “aren’t development” or “emotional immaturity.”



When the Past Interrupts the Present

When we experience a trigger, our nervous system doesn’t always recognize that the threat has passed. Instead, we drop down into the lower parts of the brain—the same regions where

earlier wounds are stored. This is what I refer to as limbic hijacking: our prefrontal cortex (thinking brain) goes offline, and our body reacts from the age and stage where the wounding first occurred. The response might look like an outsized emotional reaction to something small, but in reality, it's the body remembering an old story.

So, when our present reactions feel disproportionate to the current situation, it's often because hysterical is historical—we're reliving rather than reacting.



Path to Healing: Grounding Before Deep Work

Before diving into trauma processing, it's essential to strengthen your ability to stay grounded during moments of hijacking. Grounding tools help you reconnect with the present, calm the body, and bring your prefrontal cortex back online.



If you're willing and ready, I can begin offering grounding exercises for you to experiment with during these moments. This step is foundational—it allows you to build trust and safety within yourself before we enter deeper trauma work.

As always, please let me know if I'm missing anything or leaving something out. It's an honor to walk alongside you in this work.



**Take gentle care,
Amelia Walter, LMFT
Compassionate Heart Counseling**

