

## Who Do I Think You Were?<sup>®</sup>

### *A Victorian's Inheritance*

Many of us know that learning about our ancestors' lives can help us understand ourselves. But did you know that understanding your ancestors can also directly impact you and your family?

We know that one in four of us will suffer with a mental health disorder at some point in our lives, making them one of the leading causes of disability worldwide.<sup>1</sup> Family historians are well placed to have an important role in the fight against ill mental health.

- Family history can be a powerful antidote against adverse life experiences. It helps us build resilience by showing us how we can overcome disaster and survive tough times.<sup>2</sup>
- Children with a strong 'intergenerational sense' are more self-confident.<sup>3</sup>
- Sharing stories has a positive impact on all family members, especially on adolescent identity and well-being.<sup>4</sup>
- Family histories can help determine, and challenge, the effect of inheritance on mental health.

Helen's latest book, *A Victorian's Inheritance*, shows us how important it is to look at the past to understand and improve the present. Using archival sources, testimonies, and her grandfather's story, Helen paints a vivid picture of life in an English Victorian village, and draws upon psychological theory to explore the lives of her working-class ancestors. It is sobering to think physiological and psychological trauma can affect not only the person involved but succeeding generations. Ancestral trauma can even influence and shape a descendant who has no knowledge of it. When Helen began exploring the life of her grandfather and his forbearers, little did she know that a psychological inheritance would unravel, complete with intergenerational anxiety, trauma, loss, alcoholism, and depression. And what family tree is without these?

Ultimately though Helen's book is about hope, perseverance, and strength. For it is not only inherited patterns of anger, trauma, cruelty, avoidance, violence, fear or dissociation that

can be passed on. An ancestor might be endowed with optimism, gratitude, a love of nature, resilience, intelligence, self-esteem, talent, kindness, a spirit for adventure, humour, the ability to forgive and the capacity to love. By considering the inherited traits, reactions, patterns of behaviour and our ancestors take on life we can reflect on what might have been inherited and honour those who came before.

The good news is our psychological inheritance need not define how we live out our lives. Whatever our starting point we can live positively, thrive, and pass on a different legacy.

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Other articles available from <https://www.helenparkerdrabble.com/blog/>

Helen Parker-Drabble is a former counsellor, a genealogist, and a family historian. She now describes herself as a 'geneatherapist' who explores mental health, mental illness, and psychology through different eras, in the hope that by exploring what impacted our ancestors we help the present generation and those to come.

For more visit:

- [www.helenparkerdrabble.com](http://www.helenparkerdrabble.com) and read the first two chapters for free (includes references, index, and endnotes). Just scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on the button 'Your two FREE chapters are waiting'.
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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. 2013. *Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020-2030*. [https://www.who.int/mental\\_health/action\\_plan\\_2013/en/#:~:text=The%20four%20major%20objectives%20of,a nd%20prevention%20in%20mental%20health](https://www.who.int/mental_health/action_plan_2013/en/#:~:text=The%20four%20major%20objectives%20of,a nd%20prevention%20in%20mental%20health.). [Accessed December 2020].

<sup>2</sup> Copeland, L. (2020). *Genealogy Provides the Strength to Persevere: Knowing your family's past can help you get through a crisis*. [online] Available at: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-lost-family/202004/genealogy-provides-the-strength-persevere> [Accessed April 2020]

<sup>3</sup> Hardy, R. (2017). *Why children need to know their family history*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jan/14/children-family-histories-ales> [Accessed April 2020].

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<sup>4</sup> Duke, M.P., Lazarus, A., & Fivush, R. (2008). Knowledge of family history as a clinically useful index of psychological well-being and prognosis: A brief report. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 45, 268-272.