

# Mental link between school and work

The negative experiences you had in school may be unconsciously cramping your career prospects.

By KATJA SPONHOLZ

BE honest: what comes to mind when you look back on your schooldays?

Good grades and understanding teachers?

Or embarrassing moments, hurtful comments and being shunned during breaks on the school playground?

"Many of us had experiences of this kind," says Germany-based social psychologist Mira Mühlenhof.

In her book, which translates from German as "Put the Shadows of Schooldays Behind You", she aims to show how to improve your life by acknowledging your "school trauma" and finally ridding yourself of it.

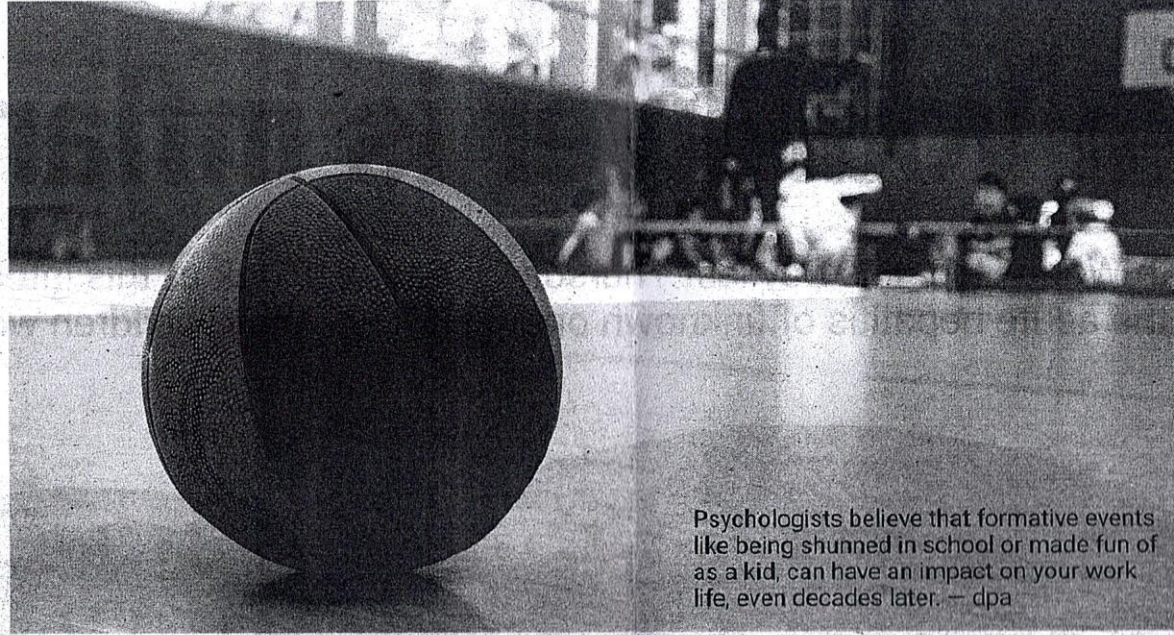
Some people unconsciously carry the psychological scars of certain experiences during their schooldays with them into adulthood.

"They can be the cause of mental blocks or problems such as stage fright, public-speaking anxiety or feelings of inferiority," she points out.

A single incident is sometimes all it takes.

A classic one is being called to the blackboard, having your mind go blank and then being laughed at by your classmates.

"A situation like this is strongly charged with negative emotions and stored in your body, as it were," she says.



Psychologists believe that formative events like being shunned in school or made fun of as a kid, can have an impact on your work life, even decades later. — dpa

The good news is that there's a chance you can overcome it.

"A first step is reflection," says Mühlenhof, i.e. stopping to think about what the source of your current problems could be.

Among the tips she gives in her book are speaking with others about your experiences, avoiding people and places that don't do you good, and developing routines and rituals that provide strength and structure.

It's also important to recognise your limits and accept help.

But feelings of helplessness, em-

barrassment or anxiety aren't the only pieces of baggage from your schooldays that may be weighing you down to this day.

"There are negative assessments that guide our thinking and behaviour," notes career counsellor and occupational psychologist Ragnhild Struss.

And there are also, she adds, childhood talents and interests that have been forgotten, such as strong social skills or spontaneity.

"If you learned in school that there's always a 'correct' and an 'incorrect' way, and were reproach-

ed whenever you gave an answer that didn't meet the teacher's expectations, you'll stop spontaneously and freely expressing what's on your mind," she says.

Perhaps this is why in adulthood you lack the courage to propose ideas during brainstorming sessions at work, take the initiative or self-confidently express your opinion.

General prejudices and personal attributions can also shape your self-image and influence your further development.

Someone who was "always

good in maths" is naturally expected to become an engineer, and a "doctor's child" naturally a doctor.

"Early experiences like this can lead you to not question the attributions any more, but simply to accept what you've been pigeonholed as," Struss remarks.

So you lose the ability to listen to your inner voice and trust your instincts.

If you don't critically examine such attributions, you may be restricting yourself by acting as is expected of you, "instead of pursuing your dreams and achieving plans you have the potential for".

In her counselling sessions, Struss tries to salvage her clients' forgotten resources and motivate them to remember their past strengths and potential.

It's important they understand that prevailing difficulties don't have to be permanent.

"You've got to realise that now you can try out new patterns of behaviour because you've grown up," she says.

She advises directing your attention to positive school experiences.

"Everyone had a teacher who saw something in them, someone they looked up to who recognised their potential and personality, and supported and encouraged them," she says.

It's comforting to know that not only negative school experiences can shape our subsequent working lives. — dpa