

Is It Possible to Move Beyond Childhood Trauma?

If you suffered any form of neglect or abuse in childhood, or if you were deprived of one or both parents whilst still a child, you will know the deep and painful distress this can cause. Sometimes it feels as if you are walking around with a wound that will never heal. It can certainly seem as if these hurts are responsible for a lot that goes wrong in your adult life.

These days we understand a considerable amount about the functioning of the brain and how memories are created and stored. This knowledge can help us to understand the creation of trauma, and also the best approaches for releasing us from these memories.

So how are memories created?

We make a new memory whenever we experience anything at all. The more emotionally charged the experience is, the stronger the memory will be. Along with a factual record of the event we also store a lot of background information – we will note the mood of other people around us, words that were said; we will register any background music or smells, and even notice the weather at the time. In fact we store every detail of the event, way beyond those details of which we are consciously aware.

But it doesn't stop there. Once we have stored a memory we can retrieve it from our mind and re-live it, but here's the interesting thing, every time we do this we alter the memory in minute ways. We add into it related impressions, feelings we have at the time we are remembering, subtle things, but they can be equally as powerful as the original experience and can re-enforce negative beliefs.

It doesn't take a huge step to understand that any therapies that ask us to re-experience unpleasant childhood memories run the risk of embedding the memories deeper into our unconscious, and worsening the emotional impact of the original experience. This approach can even result in the infamous 'false memory syndrome'.

How does understanding about memory storage help us to move away from trauma?

Memories are stored in two main areas of the brain – the hippocampus and the neo-cortex. These two create very different types of memory. Memories stored in the hippocampus are emotionally charged, powerful and completely subjective. Memories stored in the neo-cortex are more narrative in style, factual in nature and much more objective. This is why the area of the hippocampus, amygdala and hypothalamus are often called the emotional mind, while the neo-cortex is referred to as the intellectual mind.

Human beings have a built in mechanism for transferring memories from the hippocampus to the neo-cortex. It is called Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep. This is the period of sleep when we might dream, but what we are doing, whether we remember any dreams or not, is examining emotional memories from the day, processing them and then transferring them to the neo-cortex. Once we have successfully done this the emotional charge is removed and we can register the experience in an objective and rational way.

So why do Traumatic Memories Stay With Us?

Clearly traumatic memories do not go through this transformation or they would not continue to be so painful to us. The reason for this is quite simple. When something seriously distressing occurs our amygdala triggers our survival mechanism, often called the fight or flight reflex. Any event that is perceived as being so dangerous as to be life threatening - and our levels of emotional agitation are what let our amygdala know this – will cause the amygdala to lay down a special type of memory which it retains in the hippocampus. Once you have got through the immediate crisis the amygdala and hippocampus will be on a constant alert for similar types of event in order to protect you from them.

Memories where we have been physically or sexually abused or neglected, or losing one or both of our adult protectors will have been dangerous enough to trigger our amygdala into a fight or flight response. Therefore they are stored in the hippocampus ready to be pattern matched to similar experiences for our survival.

Remember that memories are complex and detailed so what your emotional mind identifies as a similar circumstance could be, for example, the same tone of voice as you heard at the time, or a piece of music that was playing when the event took place. Furthermore the survival behaviour that is triggered by the memory may well be appropriate for a frightened child but restrictive, limiting or inappropriate for an independent adult. This is why we can still feel haunted by childhood events, twenty or thirty years or even longer after the event.

So what can be done to break the cycle?

There are many forms of talking therapy out there, all of which seek to relieve the stress of these painful childhood memories. Unfortunately some of the more traditional forms of psychoanalysis, for instance, can actually worsen the pain for individuals. Attempts to explore the feelings in depth may well lead to a re-living of the actual experiences, which we saw earlier was counter-productive at best and at worst could re-enforce and embed the memories.

Instead what is necessary is to break the connection between the memory or set of memories and the amygdala, thus allowing the memory to be transferred into the neo-cortex in the usual way. There are various methods which help with this, including EMDR, EFT, Time Line Therapy, and Rewind.

- **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)** - uses rapid eye movement to help recondition the mind away from traumatic memories.
- **Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT)** – uses a system of tapping over the body in order to re-programme the mind around the area of emotional distress.
- **Time Line Therapy** – involves visualising a time line which the client imagines hovering over. This is then manipulated to alter the emotional impact of certain events.
- **Rewind** – involves playing the memory as if it were a movie – i.e. not by re-experiencing it – and then rewinding and fast forwarding it several times. This has the effect of fragmenting the memory and shifting it into the neo-cortex.

All of these techniques are powerful and can be very effective. I prefer to use rewind because it can take place in a standard hypnotic relaxation which therefore ties in with the stress and anxiety relief which precedes it and the reframing and solution focusing which follow it. This gives the client the benefit of continuous experience making it easier to accept and understand than experiencing a new technique. This in turn leads to a more rapid recovery on the part of the client.

Is breaking the connection going to stop the negative influences of these memories?

Breaking the connection between these memories and the amygdala is the first step. After moving the memory from the hippocampus to the neo-cortex you may well feel uncertain as to how to react in situations where you previously followed predictable patterns laid down in childhood. We deal with this in two stages.

Firstly we create a new memory around the negative experience. This is a scenario which we create together that offers an alternative response to the original scenario. Where there has been sustained and severe childhood abuse we may even create an alternative parenting experience for you to draw on.

This does not mean that you have forgotten what happened. You may seek out that memory any time you wish, but you will now look at it dispassionately and objectively. Instead we create a more positive emotional experience around the particular issue in question. This creates a new set of neuro-pathways which will generate different reactions– ones in which you are more in control.

Is this the end of the process? Can I now move on?

The second stage of rebuilding your reactions and feelings around the areas of trauma is to work on re-building your life, learning how to get all the elements in your life working harmoniously and well. Solution-focussed hypnotherapy is a particularly powerful method of achieving that.

It is a wonderful feeling when you are finally able to move on with your life, reclaiming control and discovering your true goals and ambitions -

fulfilling your dreams. And the amazing thing is that the whole process could take as few as fifteen sessions and is unlikely to take more than twenty.