

Trauma

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) occurs following a severely traumatic incident, or a series of less severe incidents. Complex PTSD can be experienced as a result of repeated childhood traumas.

Symptoms include flashbacks (traumatic re-living of the event, including images, sounds, emotions and physical sensations) and nightmares, resulting in severe anxiety and/or angry reactions or avoidance of any triggers that may remind the individual of the incident in some way.

PTSD develops because the trauma experience was so distressing that we want to avoid any reminder of it. Our brains don't process the experience into a memory, so the experience stays as a current problem instead of becoming a memory of a past event. Each time we are reminded of the event, the 'flashbacks' mean we experience the trauma again, as though it is happening again, right now. That is very distressing, so we do our utmost to stop the flashback, and avoid any further reminder of the event, so the event remains un-processed.

Therapy helps our brain to process the traumatic event into a memory, filing it away in the appropriate filing cabinet of our mind, so that it becomes a past event, rather than constantly reliving the trauma as happening right now. Therapy will help us to think about or imagine the traumatic event in a safe environment, and we can gradually expose ourselves to those situations that remind us of the event. Inevitably, thinking and talking about the trauma may be upsetting at the time, but it will reduce the overall distress and resolve the problem.

The following pages will help you understand trauma and PTSD:

- Trauma and the Brain
- Treating Traumatic Memories
- Overcoming Avoidance

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Trauma and the Brain

This is a very simplistic explanation of a very complex process. There are three main parts of the brain which are greatly affected by experiencing severe or chronic traumatic events.

Hippocampus

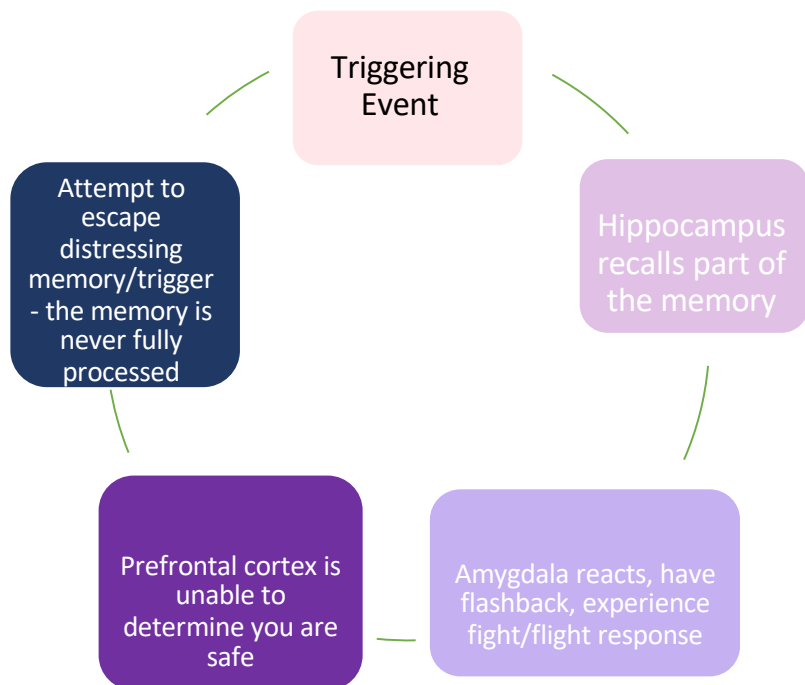
The hippocampus processes trauma memories, by recycling the memory, mostly at night via dreams, which takes place over weeks or months. It then transfers the integrated stored memory to another part of the brain. High levels of stress hormones causes the hippocampus to shrink or underdeveloped, resulting in impaired function. Childhood trauma exaggerates this effect. The trauma memory therefore remains unprocessed in the hippocampus, disintegrated, fragmented, and feels 'current' rather than in the past. (Some people may be born with a smaller hippocampus making them more vulnerable to develop PTSD.)

Amygdala

The brain's 'fear center'. The amygdala helps to store memories, particularly emotions and physical sensations. It also controls activation of stress hormones - the body's fight or flight response. In PTSD, the amygdala becomes overactive causing frequent or near constant high levels of stress hormones.

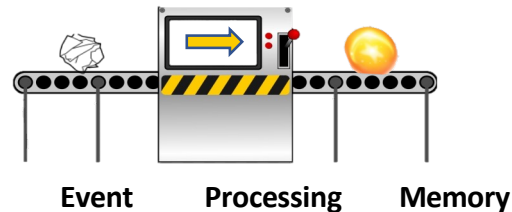
Prefrontal cortex

The prefrontal cortex helps us to assess threats, manage emotion, plan responses, and control impulses. It is the center of rational thinking. Childhood trauma causes underdevelopment of the prefrontal cortex, which results in impaired ability to assess threat through rational thinking, manage emotions and control impulses.

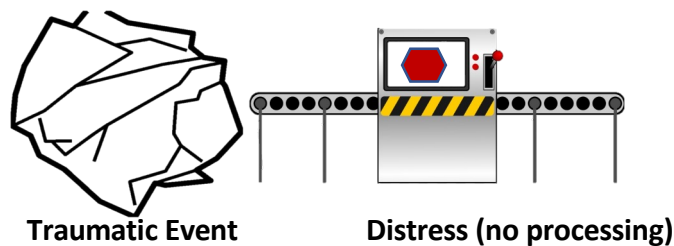


Treating Traumatic Memories

The mind is like a factory, and one of its jobs is to process life events so that they can become memories. Most life events are of a size and nature that the factory can cope with:

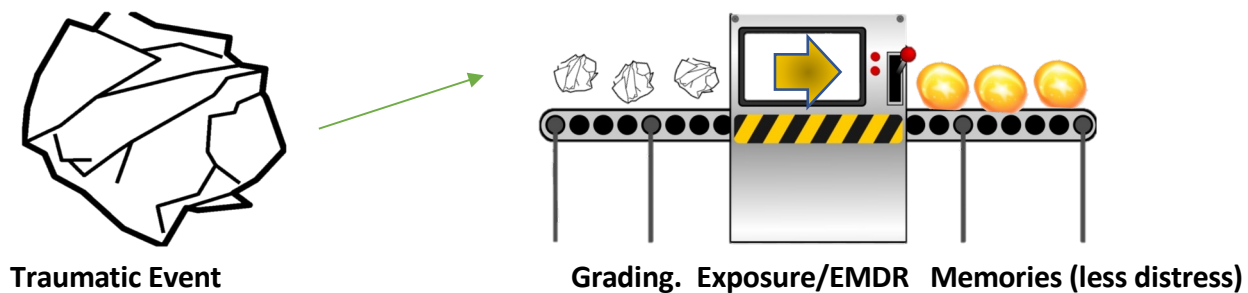


However, sometime an event occurs, such as a trauma, which is simply too large or difficult to process.



Because it isn't processed, the event is prevented from becoming a memory -this means that it remains a current problem, rather than one that's in the past. Current situations or events that remind us of the original trauma, trigger us to have 'flashbacks' which means we re-live and re-experience the emotions and physical sensations that were experienced at the time of the original trauma. At those distressing times, we tend to press the factory's STOP button. We also avoid situations which are likely to trigger these 'flashback' experiences, reinforcing the lack of processing.

Effectively treating the traumatic event so that our 'factory' can process them into memories, means exposing ourselves to thinking about and imagining the traumatic event, and/or gradually exposing ourselves to real situations which we normally avoid. This will result in experiencing distress, but will also cause the factory to effectively process the traumatic event, which will greatly reduce the distress in the long-term .



EMDR Process

What to Expect

EMDR is a very structured process that will help us move traumatic events into memories. Here's a rough outline of the process.

1. Together with your therapist we create a trauma timeline, identify worst and best memories
2. Then we will rate each memory on the SUDs scale. This is the Subjective Units of Distress. When you think about this memory how distressed are you? How much does this memory impact your life?
3. We will create a safe space or resource team together to help you calm down during and in between sessions.
4. Learn and practice EMDR bilateral movements and pick the movement style that works best for you. Before your practice session you'll need to set up your space.

Things you'll need:

1. Laptop with ability to have two screens open, or two devices like a tablet and a phone. (Both need high speed internet access.) The larger screen device will be your EMDR device, and the smaller will be the device you use to talk to your therapist. The larger device should be at eye level and about arms length away from your eyes.
 2. Headphones that connect to the EMDR device
 3. Space to sit comfortably
 4. Notebook with pencils/pens
 5. Photos that remind you of a safe space (Can be real or imagined)
5. We will then start working on some of the memories from the trauma timeline. Starting with a memory with a low SUD we will assign it an image, negative cognition, positive cognition, emotion, location in your body, etc.
 6. We will then use your EMDR style to 'desensitize' each of the memories or items on your trauma timeline.
 7. Sometimes processing a memory will add other memories to the timeline, that's okay and to be expected.

Self Help for PTSD

Avoidance

We try to avoid all the situations, people, places and even thoughts, which are likely to distress us. This avoidance helps prevent us becoming distressed in the short-term, but it is one of the main factors which keeps the problem going over a long time. Avoidance also interferes greatly with our everyday lives.

Use these coping strategies and grounding techniques during a flashback:

- Tell yourself you are having a flashback or anxiety attack, and that this is okay and normal.
- The worst is over -it happened in the past, but it is not happening now.
- Tell yourself: that was then, and this is now. However terrible you feel right now, you survive the awfulness then which means you can survive and get through what you're remembering now.
- Open your eyes and turn on the light (if it's dark)
- Look around the room, notice the colors, the people, the shapes of things. Make it more real.
- Listen to and really noticed this sounds around you: the traffic, voices, washing machine, music, anything!
- Notice your body. the boundary of your skin and how your clothes feeling your skin the movement in your hair. Really feel the chair or floor supporting you, how that feels in your feet, your legs, and your body.
- Pinch yourself. that feeling is the now, the things you're really experiencing happened in the past. That was then and this is now.
- Stand Up and put your feet firmly on the ground.
- Move about: Stretch, stomp your feet, jump up and down, dance, run on the spot, clap your hands, remind yourself where you are right now.
- Use the 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Think of 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell, and 1 slow deep breath.
- Breathe mindfully. Breathe deeply down to your belly, put your hand there just above your navel and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down.