

Explaining the Rationale for Trauma-Focused Work:

Why it's Good to Talk (or Think or Draw or Write or Play)

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Memories of traumatic events are different to memories of other events. It's as if they're stored in a different format and they behave differently.

Memories for normal events tend to be stored and recalled as words and stories that describe what happened. Whereas memories for traumatic events seem to be made up of the actual 'data' from the event:— the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches of the event; and even the thoughts and feelings of that moment. Memories for normal events can be recalled on purpose, traumatic memories may feel out of control because of the way that they seem to pop into a person's mind out of nowhere. People sometimes say that they remember traumatic memories "as if it was yesterday" even when it has been some time since the event. Traumatic memories may not have the sense of being 'back there and back then' that other memories do and because they are so vivid, people may feel as if they are actually re-experiencing the event rather than recalling the memory.

The cognitive model of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) suggests that to help with PTSD, the memories of the events need to be brought to mind in one way or another and 'processed' (e.g. Meiser-Stedman, R. (2002). Towards a Cognitive-Behavioural Model of PTSD in Children and Adolescents. *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review*, 5(4), 217-232). But, because the memory is often accompanied by a great deal of fear, horror, helplessness or other psychological distress, understandably people often try hard not to think about the event.

Explaining how deliberately bringing the events to mind can help reduce difficulties, enables people to make well-informed decisions about whether to consent to, and engage with, interventions that focus on the trauma. Active engagement is necessary for processing to take place.

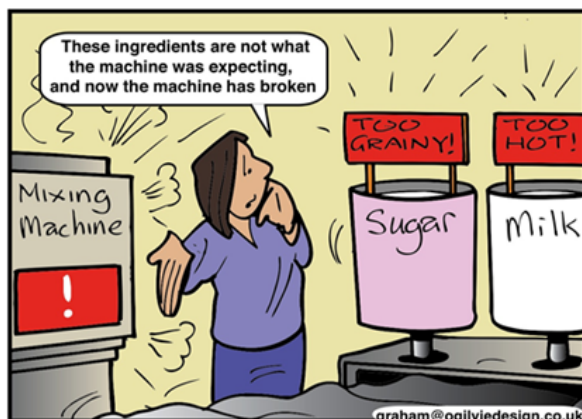
It can help to explain this using metaphors. Here are four that might be useful.

Memories are like chocolate bars; some ingredients can't be processed without some help



A chocolate factory takes individual ingredients, like the sugar, milk and cocoa, and mixes them up to make the chocolate bars. The machine then puts a wrapper around the chocolate bars, and on the wrapper are words which tell you what's inside – it says: "Ingredients: sugar, milk, cocoa" etc. This means that different chocolate bars can be sorted out and stored in the right place.

In some ways, our minds are similar - they take the sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, feelings and thoughts of an experience, and process these 'ingredients' to create memories, which are 'wrapped up' in the words and stories that describe the event.



In the chocolate factory, if the milk is too hot, or the sugar is too lumpy, the machinery can't mix the ingredients properly and it comes to a halt. The ingredients are left swilling around on the factory floor. The machine might try again to mix the ingredients, but if something is still too hot or too lumpy, the machine breaks down again.

In our minds, some events are just too scary, too horrible or too distressing to think about. So we can't process that information into memories. And so the different ingredients of the experience (e.g. the sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, feelings and thoughts) are left unprocessed and left floating around in our minds.



With the factory, it might be necessary to get an engineer in to help, or to wait for the milk to cool down, or to break up the sugar into smaller pieces. Then the machinery can start to mix the ingredients and create chocolate bars again.

After traumatic events, sometimes we need somebody with us to help us to think things through. Sometimes we just need to wait until they are less distressing before we can start to think them through. And sometimes we need to break the events up into smaller pieces and go over things bit by bit rather than trying to process the whole thing in one go. Then we can create a normal memory, even of really distressing events.

The general idea for comparing processing of memories to a factory is based on an idea by Richards, D. & Lovell, K. (1999) Behavioural and Cognitive Behavioural Interventions in the Treatment of PTSD. In W.Yule (Ed.) Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: Concepts and Therapy. Chichester, Wiley. But the specific elaborations are original.

Storing memories is like storing clothes – they need folding up neatly if they are going to stay put



Imagine a well-organised wardrobe; each item is put away carefully with other similar items. When you need something, you know where to find it. You can take it out, wear it, and when you're finished you can wash it, occasionally iron it, and put it back in its place. There is a place for everything, and everything usually stays put. This means that you can close the doors of the wardrobe and get on with other things.

Our memories for normal events work in a similar way. Memories are stored in a particular way so that when we want to remember an event, we bring the memory to mind, and when we're finished with it, we put the memory back. The memories generally stay put until we want them, which means that we can 'close the doors' and get on with other things.



With the wardrobe, if someone throws you a duvet full of stinging nettles and shouted, "Put it away - quick!", it's painful to hold so you might try to shove it away quickly and close the door. But, because it's not put away neatly, the doors don't close properly. You might be able to hold them closed with one hand and get on with some things, but when you take your hand off the door, the duvet falls out, and stings you again.

Traumatic memories are like the duvet - painful to handle - and so we try to avoid them. We 'shove them away' rather than think them through. This means that they are not stored in the same way as other memories, so they fall into our minds when we don't want them. Avoiding them may work for a while, but often just as we begin to relax (e.g. between going to be and going to sleep) they intrude into consciousness again.



In order to get the duvet to stay put and stop falling on to you, you need to take hold of it - which might sting a bit - and you might want to get someone to help. You need to fold it up, you might need to move some things around on the shelves. And then you can put it away properly and it will stay put until you want it.

In order to get traumatic memories to stay put and stop intruding, we need to find a way to deliberately bring them to mind, which might be distressing. We might want to do this with some help from someone else like a therapist or a family member. We might need to adjust our view of the world a bit, but thinking the memory through enables us to process the memory so that it can be stored like other memories and stay put until we choose to remember it.

This is based on the analogy of a disorganised cupboard whose contents spill out and are in need of organisation in Ehlers, A. & Clark, D. M., (2000). A Cognitive Model of PTSD. *Behaviour, Research and Therapy*, 38, 319-345. But the elaborations are original.

A 14 year old's account of trauma-focused work

I was working with a 14-year-old boy and, just before we went over the traumatic event again, I reminded him about why we were doing the trauma-focused work, using the wardrobe analogy. He listened patiently and then said, "It's a bit like that David; but, actually, it's more like this..."



He filled up the waste bin with scrunched-up pieces of paper until it was over-flowing, and said, "These are all the bad things that have happened to me, and as I walk along the road to school [he made the bin walk along and bits of paper fell out of the top] they fall in front of my eyes. And as I go to sleep [he lay the bin down and more pieces of paper fell out] they fall into my dreams..."



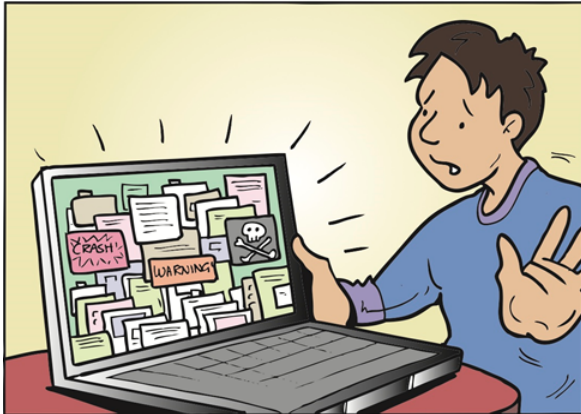
...But when I come here and talk to you, we take each piece of paper out [he took each of the pieces of paper out], we unscrunch them [he un-scrunched them], and we read them through carefully...



Then we fold them up neatly and place them back in the bottom of the bin [he folded up each piece of paper neatly and placed it in the bottom of the bin] But because they're folded up neatly, it means that don't fall out of the top and I have more room in my head to think about other things.

A 9-year old compares memories to computer files

I was working with a 9-year-old boy who had experienced a very traumatic event and was having very vivid, frightening nightmares. I was explaining to him that it might be helpful at some point to think through what had happened with someone, and I was using the earlier stories to explain why. Halfway through the second story, he closed his eyes, screwed his face up and put his hands over his face. I asked if he was okay, and he said, "Yeah, yeah...I think I've got it. Is it like this...?"



... On my laptop at home, I've got loads of pictures saved as JPEG files. They take up loads of room on the hard drive and some of the files are corrupted, so they keep making my computer crash.



...Are you saying that the things that happened to me are stored as JPEGs on MY hard drive [i.e. in his head]. And they keep making it crash so I can't do anything with them. But if I write out what happened and save them as Word documents instead...



...they'll take up less room on MY hard drive and stop making it crash?"

I said, "Yes – that's pretty much EXACTLY what I'm saying."