

Chapter 27

Where the Standard EMDR Resources Tend to Go Bad and How to Fix Them

There is nothing special about Shapiro's preferred resources. They were just her preferred resources. Some of the most powerful resources I have seen clients develop are strengthening the memory of rocking a baby, the memory of petting a dog, the memory of getting a hug from someone safe, or imagining walking on your favorite stretch of trail. Often it is more elegant to leverage and strengthen what the client already has than to introduce something completely new, especially on the first few contacts.

All three of the resources discussed below are primarily visualization resources. Clients who struggle to visualize are very likely to struggle with all three of them. When clients struggle with resources because of difficulties visualizing, try to make the resource more concrete. We can do this by outsourcing the calm scene to a YouTube video (see the section on Dip Your Toe In Calm Scene), showing the clients videos of boxes or empty safes for containers, and asking clients to connect with the somatic memory of being in the sunshine for the light stream resource. Or try other creative ways of making abstract visualizations more concrete.

Calm Scene Exercise

When Abusers Appear

The most common way that a calm scene "goes bad" is when an abuser intrudes into the calm scene. It makes sense that this would happen. Typically we develop the calm scene after we have given psychoeducation about EMDR therapy, which the client will understand clearly as a trauma treatment. The client's nervous system knows that we are doing a calm scene in preparation for doing trauma work. However, we are asking clients not to think about anything difficult. We are about to do trauma work, but don't think about anything difficult. What do parts of the nervous system often want to do? They want to jump ahead to the trauma.

When a resource goes bad, I will try one time and very quickly to salvage it. If that doesn't work, we immediately pivot to grounding or another

resource. Abusers showing up in the calm scene are best conceptualized as an intrusive trauma symptom, and these are best addressed by grounding. The time to teach grounding is before you need it, not during a flashback-like experience.

When Grief Appears

Clients often have few experiences with safety and sometimes grandparents or related figures may have had houses or yards that were experienced as somewhat safe in the client's childhood. Clients may be able to connect to these spaces, but they may soon realize the unprocessed grief related to the death of one or both grandparents. It is generally a good idea to assess for unprocessed grief prior to starting a resource where the people associated with the resource have died. Using resources that clients have a deep somatic connection to can be very powerful, we just need to weigh whether the advantages offset the disadvantages. The best practice is to check.

When the Calm Scene Inadvertently Connects to Trauma

Some of the most powerful calm scene resources connect to existing somatic connections and memories of a specific place. Clients with complex trauma may have had a few places where they felt calm, astonished, or surrounded by beauty. It is elegant to use these memories. However, imagine this scenario. I am introducing the calm scene exercise to the client and the client immediately says, "Maui... it has to be Maui... I can imagine it and go there in the snap of a finger." In this case, it's easy to use Maui, except that the client is coming to see me for divorce trauma and Maui was where they honeymooned. The client may not actually make the connection that the calm scene intersects the trauma we are working on until they are in the middle of it. Again, the calm scene shouldn't intersect with the reason they are coming to therapy.

Container Exercise

"I Don't Connect With It Strongly"

Sometimes, consultees will report that the client developed the container but didn't really have a strong positive emotional response to it. My reply is usually that "the container is a box that holds stuff... it's unusual for people to have a deep somatic experience with a box." The point of the

exercise is to develop it as a mental construct and to send the message that the things we are containing are things we are putting up for right now.

“I Already Do This”

When I describe the container to a client, they sometimes have a strong emotional response. They say, “Tom, I already do this. In fact, I’m coming to you to help me stop doing this and here you are showing me to do something that I’m coming to you to show me how to stop.” We need to patiently listen to the client and then explain that containment is actually a great gift of the nervous system since having trauma mostly out of awareness allows us to function when we need to. Containment for the purpose of avoiding can leave us stuck. However, with everything that we put into the container, we do so with a purposeful intention to return to it and fully process it. Containment allows us to work somewhere. For us to work successfully somewhere, everything else needs to be out of working memory. Practicing containment is a key skill that clients with complex trauma will need in order to do trauma work. With clients with complex trauma, not everything that knocks on the door of awareness should be encouraged to enter.

“I Shouldn’t Have to Do This”

Clients may have an emotional response to the container exercise when they realize that they need to develop one. Clients may say, “It’s unfair that I have to develop the container to hold what was done to me! I shouldn’t have to do this.” It is usually helpful to simply normalize that difficult reality.

I will sometimes say, “Yes, it is deeply unfair that we have to be both the prisoner and the jailer for what was done to us. The world should not have been set up that way, and I’m sorry that it is. I wish that things stuck to the person who did bad things rather than the person who they were done to... but that’s not how things are.”

“Can’t I Just Burn It, Bury It, or Put It on a Rocket Ship?”

No. The purpose of the container is to hold things that we are not prepared to work on in this moment. With trauma, nothing buried I ever lost. If you want to use a rocket ship, we need to design it with a “Return Home” button so that it can return to us what we put into it when we are ready to deal with it.

“I’m Trying to Contain Everything and It Won’t Go”

One of the most common problems with the container is when clients try to put trauma that is not currently in working memory into the container. The container is for things that are in right-now working memory that we are not prepared to work on in this moment. Sometimes clients will reach into their trauma container of the “limbic brain” memory storage and grab real trauma or whole themes of trauma and put it into the container. In order to contain something, we have to touch it. If we touch it, we bring it into working memory. In short, it is best practice to tell clients not to contain things that are not in right-now in working memory.

Light Stream

Other than problems visualizing discussed at the beginning of this chapter, most problems with light stream reduce to meanings associated with the “bright and healing light.” For some people, the light has spiritual suggestions, and embodied shame may conflict or cause uncomfortable resonance when the light comes into contact with the internalized shame. Other people have medical trauma and the bright light is suggestive of emergency operating rooms.

For the first seven years that I was an EMDR therapist, I struggled with light stream for two reasons. One was spiritual trauma. I simply didn’t want something suggestive of spirituality that close to me. The other was that I viewed my skin as a border with the outside world. My skin separates me from not me. If light is inside me, something has gone wrong with my border with the outside world. Imagining the bright healing light as sunshine and allowing the heat of the sun to warm my skin was my workable accommodation for light stream. You may need to help clients find their own accommodation or use other resources.