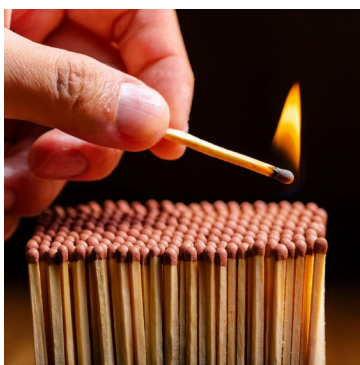


# Chapter 40

## When to Let New Memories In, When to Container

Clients with complex trauma sometimes start with individual memories and then open up a large number of adjacent memories or assorted memories in different developmental eras. If this happens with a relatively healthy client, the best guidance is to stay out of the client's way and let them come. They are likely to resolve all of them in a long string. Again, healthy clients have a boat the size of a cruise ship, and they can generally land whatever they target within a session or two. Allowing a client with complex trauma and little adaptive information to open a large number of memories, especially in the first dozen reprocessing sessions, is not going to end well. Again, we need memory content to come in EMDR therapy, but it needs to come at a digestible rate and intensity.

### Why Lots of Memories Want to Come



Memories want to come because there are a lot of them stored tightly in memory networks. Part of what makes complex trauma so complex is that the lessons of it are so redundantly placed. An attachment figure or a family member who has the capacity to be horrible probably has the capacity to be horrible almost all the time and in many different contexts. When any individual memory is activated, even a “small” one, it has a specific body feel.

When the body is activated from specific content, similar memories want to come into working memory as though they are pulled by a strong magnet. Additionally, large numbers of similar memories are stored in associated memory networks. Activating one memory can strongly resonate with similar memories.

Clients with complex trauma often pivot from an individual memory to a theme. Themes contain many memories, and these memories may be spread across many developmental eras. This is something that clients with complex trauma also do outside of EMDR therapy. As we will see, when we get activated in EMDR therapy and our bodies start to feel a way that is intense and familiar, we tend to default to the processes and strategies that we do when we are activated outside of EMDR therapy. Our goal in this therapy is to have a disconfirming experience rather than a confirming one. Allowing default processes to execute their functions when they are likely to be overactivating will introduce challenges that are difficult to manage.

It is possible to identify a memory and then put a fence around it to prevent lots of other things from coming in. Yes, this is restricting the clients' processing, but it is often a reasonable restriction early in treatment. Some toddlers need to wobble and bang around a living room to develop independence and competence in navigating the world. Some toddlers will absolutely turn all the gas knobs on or run straight off the nearest cliff. Knowing one from the other allows for better and safer guidance.

## Why It's Sensible Not to Let Them In

Our goal in the session is to resolve the memory that we initially selected. We selected the memory on purpose as a reasonable memory to try to metabolize today. Resolving that memory will likely cause multiple adjacent memories to resolve through generalization. Generalization is a process in transformational trauma therapies where memories that are closely networked may resolve automatically without the client needing to actually bring them into working memory. Imagine that a client's uncle was physically abusive 50 times. If these memories are very similar and stored in the same memory network, resolving the first and the worst memory in two back-to-back sessions might automatically resolve 40 or more of them that the client never has to touch. This is part of what is remarkable in transformational trauma therapies. Resolving representative individual memories can resolve many memories that have the same "shape." Metaphorically, the resolution of a memory in EMDR therapy creates a pathway of healing that has a specific shape, and similar memories that share that shape can resolve as a byproduct of the representative memory resolving. However, imagine that an uncle was physically abusive 50 times and while trying to resolve the first memory, the 12<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 31<sup>st</sup>, and 48<sup>th</sup> memory of physical abuse from the uncle came into working

memory all in a single session. With clients with complex trauma, allowing all of those adjacent memories to come into working memory is almost certain to result with none of them resolving or shifting. The client is also likely to go home with a lot of adjacent memory content activated or smoldering unnecessarily. Resolving a representative memory allows broad general-ization to happen.

## The Grill in the Backyard Metaphor

It is important to be strategic about what we target and also be selective about not letting too much memory content come into awareness faster than the client can digest. Imagine that you have a grill in your backyard. You selected the items that you are grilling on purpose. The smells from your grill may spread across your entire neighborhood, and a lot of neighbors may want to come to your barbeque. The denser your neighborhood, the more neighbors you may attract. However, just because they want to come, that does not mean that they should be allowed to barge through your door, walk across your living room, open your sliding back door, and take food off of your grill. It's your grill. It's your door and your living room. You do not need to let in everything that knocks. It makes sense that these other memories want to come. But the door of your awareness is your door. Letting clients know that they do not have to let everything in that knocks may be an opportunity to practice a kind of internal agency and internal boundary that is deeply helpful in trauma recovery. This is why we have the container resource. We cannot work everywhere all at once. In order to work somewhere productively, almost everything else needs to be kept out. The grill metaphor is a good one to share with clients with complex trauma.

## A Sensible Decision Tree for Letting New Memory Content In

My suggestion here is that we be careful about what we encourage the client to bring into working memory. However, it is also true that the things that come into awareness in EMDR therapy do so for reasons. I am not suggesting that clients should never let other memories come into working memory, only that we should evaluate if now is a good time for more content to emerge. The following sections are how I help the client make this decision quickly and efficiently about what to do when additional memory content wants to come into working memory.

## **Check With Me First**

I anticipate that many memories will want to come into working memory once the initial target memory is activated. I will explain the Grill in the Backyard metaphor. I let the client know that if a flood of memories wants to come in, simply let me know that is happening, and I can help the client contain them. If a single memory wants to come, I ask the client to simply let me know that it is knocking before he lets it into focus.

## **Check Time**

One of the most important tasks of an EMDR therapist is to always keep track of time. We need to always end sessions in the best way possible and we need to allow plenty of time for closure. If most of the session is over and it is nearly time for closure and another memory wants to come, I ask the client to contain it, and we add it to the list of potential targets. Is there time to notice and digest this content? If not, don't bring it into working memory.

## **Is the Memory That Wants to Come a Feeder Memory?**

I am not convinced that feeder memories as frequent of a problem as EMDR consultants believe they are. Yes, it is possible that a memory may get some of its heat from prior experiences. Later abandonments are built on top of prior ones in cases of complex trauma. Each and every one of them. Almost every memory for clients with complex trauma has floatback memories to some degree, and going all the way back isn't wise when these earlier memories tend to be whales. I see clients with complex trauma resolve memories with extreme regularity, including memories where prior memories set the foundation for the current pathology. Yes, it is better if we could start with the foundational memories. But the dilemma of trying to land the whale into the canoe surfaces again.

There are some memories where nearly all of the distress comes from a prior experience. But in a full-time caseload of clients with complex trauma, it does not happen every day, every week, or even every month. It does happen, though. For instance, a client wanted to target a difficult confrontation with a boss. When we were about five minutes into reprocessing, the client said, "Crap. This isn't about my boss. This is about the time my father said the same thing to me when I was about seven." Clearly, the memory we started with isn't going to resolve until we resolve the memory with the father. However, that does not mean that we

*have to* pivot to the earlier memory with the father right now in this session, particularly if we selected the memory of the boss because it was a more tolerable place to start. What did we do? The client and I had a conversation about the wisdom of pivoting to that attachment wound memory with the father today, and we agreed that it was too big of a fish for this session and the client put both of them into a container. We moved to closure and engaged in resources. The client returned to that memory several months later when he had the adaptive information needed to metabolize memories that large with much less effort.

### **How Are You Handling What You Are Already Hooked To?**

Even if there is time in session and another memory wants to come into awareness, I want it to come in at a good time. I realize that we are not checking the SUDs throughout the session, but how is the client doing in this moment? If you were to check the right-now body-based SUDs, would it be seven, eight, nine, or ten? If so, now is not a good time to let new content in if the client is still clearly distressed by the content that they are already connected to. If you are in an eight-foot canoe and you are hooked to a seven-foot tuna, you have your hands full. You will be lucky to land what is already on the line, and we have no business hooking onto another large fish.

As the client becomes more comfortable with EMDR therapy and is resolving memories effectively, it is essential to start removing the initial restrictions that we put in place and allow the client's nervous system to explore other territories and allow additional connections and insights to emerge. However, the ability to pick our battles and pick our adversaries on any given day are essential tasks for doing trauma work well, safely, and in the most efficient ways possible.