

# Chapter 44

## Why Finishing Things Matters in EMDR Therapy

In EMDR therapy and any other therapy with clients with complex trauma, we don't want to make the perfect the enemy of the good. Good is good. If a client's SUDs from a difficult memory decreases from 8/10 down to 2/10, that is good. Whatever remains of that difficult memory will likely be held in a much more tolerable and potentially less damaging way. However, our goal is not simply to decrease distress in an individual memory. It is for the client's pervasively traumatized nervous system to largely reset over the course of treatment. For broad healing to occur, we need to leverage generalization. Generalization occurs when clients resolve things, and the resolution of a single memory instantly results in many similarly linked memories spontaneously resolving. Fully resolving a memory transforms it from support for a negative schema to core support for a positive schema. Part of our goal in resolving the initial sets of memories is to generate more adaptive information that may be needed for larger traumatic memories to be resolved.

Clients, however, will often insist that a partially resolved memory is "good" and that there are much more pressing topics to focus on in subsequent sessions. The therapist may face the dilemma of wanting to return to finish work that the client has little motivation to finish. To be fair, clients are not wrong. They probably do have current concerns that feel much more important than cleaning out any residue from the partially resolved memories of prior sessions. When clients present at sessions with topics that they would like to work on, yet we have multiple unresolved memories, I simply share the dilemma with the client. I may say something like the following:

We can work in the territory that you would like to work on today, but it's my job to also point out that there are multiple memories that are not fully resolved from recent sessions. Fully resolving a memory clears many other memories that you will never have to touch directly in EMDR therapy. Resolving those memories may make it easier to do the

work that you want to do today and in later sessions. It is okay to have a few partially resolved memories, but it is also important to come back and finish them. Do you have ideas about when we can return to them?

With some younger clients, I may use the Video Game metaphor. I explain the following:

In a video game, we don't simply walk past gold bars and other important resources that we will need for the journey. In each stage of the process, we need to extract the assets that are present in this layer of the game for use in later stages. We don't rush toward the boss fight as fast as we can, or we may find that we don't have the strength, health, or recovery assets needed to be successful when we get there.

Alternatively, I may use a tunnel analogy with some clients:

When a memory fully resolves, it's like a tunnel of information that allows other information to flow. Imagine a tunnel from France to England under the English Channel that is complete except for the last two miles. We may have done really good work. Other projects may demand our attention. However, when the tunnel is complete, a lot of good things can transit through that passageway for decades. It is okay for construction to be delayed, but we don't want to miss the opportunity to finish a project that can help bring supplies needed for future projects on both sides of the channel.