

Chapter 47

Trouble Finding an Individual Memory When Trauma Was Daily

It is usually best to work with an individual memory in EMDR therapy when possible. However, clients with complex trauma will often struggle to identify an individual representative memory when trauma was daily. Many of our floatback approaches are too broad to return anything specific enough to be useful. Floatbacks on cognitions alone may be too broad when there are tens of thousands of memories. They may also struggle with “first” or “worst” when they are attempting to sort a massive dataset of memories. Imagining doing a Google search for: Ohio pizza. That general search returns millions of web pages, nearly all of which are not what we are looking for. Now imagine if we can bring more details to the search and Google Pizza Murray Hill Road Cleveland. That search returns two restaurants that you can eat at today if you live near the Cleveland area. I describe the approach below as a topographic approach to memory selection. Trauma is stored in ways that are “searchable” using body sensations, beliefs about ourselves, the developmental era that the memory occurred, details of who is in the memory (i.e. memories that happened with my “brother,” “mother,” or “father”), or details of the category of wounding (i.e. sexual abuse, being embarrassed by a parent, or being left out). Memories also happened in spaces, and the topography of those spaces is often encoded into the memory. When our usual strategies to recruit representative memories fail, you can use the following questions to get at a representative memory directly relevant to the present complaint. As you will notice, we do not ask for a specific memory until the end of the process.

The example below is developed when the client reports many present triggers around the cognition “What I want doesn’t matter,” but the client has struggled to float that cognition back to a single individual memory.

Therapist: “Can you get in touch with that recent memory when your partner ignored your suggestion about dinner plans, and it brought up

‘What I want doesn’t matter’... What are you noticing in your body right now?’”

Client: “I feel like I’m deflating, like a ball that is losing air.”

Therapist: “From the point of view of ‘What I want doesn’t matter’ and that deflating feeling, what age (approximately) does that come from? Don’t think about a memory, just listen to your gut sense. What age?”

Client: “About eight years old.”

Therapist: “Okay, eight years old is about third grade. Check your gut, third grade, ‘What I want doesn’t matter,’ and that feeling, where do you need to work: at home, at school, or in the community?”

Client: “At home.”

Therapist: “Can you get a floor plan of the home at the time in your mind? Don’t think about individual memories, just check your gut sense using: third grade, ‘What I want doesn’t matter,’ and that body feeling... What room in that home do you associate with those things?”

Client: “The kitchen.”

Therapist: “Where in the kitchen?”

Client: “The table.”

Therapist: “Which chair at the table?”

Client: “The back left one.”

Therapist: “Ok, from the perspective of that chair at that table, ‘What I want doesn’t matter,’ in third grade... put yourself in that chair and look around and let me know the first memory that comes into your awareness.”

Client: [pause] “I’ve got it. It’s a memory of my mother giving the last piece of lasagna to my brother and it was my birthday.”

Therapist: “Good.” [therapist resumes the beginning of Phase Three].

The general structure of this approach is:

- 1) Identify the negative cognition and recent incident that you would like to float back.
- 2) Lightly activate the recent incident to get a body feel.
- 3) Float back the negative cognition and the body feel to an approximate age.
- 4) Inquire about the context: Home, school, or community.
- 5) Bring up a floor plan or mental picture of the house, school, or community location and inquire about where (room, etc.) in that space their attention is drawn.
- 6) Be more specific about where in the room or space (specific chair or place in the space).
- 7) Put the cognition, age, and the specific place in the space together and target the memory that emerges.

In the vast majority of cases, the memory that emerges will be a representative that helps improve current triggering once processed. Don't forget to work in the future prong with this memory territory as soon as that makes sense.