

Chapter 4

The Boat and the Whale Metaphor

Many trainees leave EMDR foundational therapy training with a core conceptual misunderstanding about what EMDR is. This misunderstanding causes some therapists to practice EMDR therapy in ways that may lead to therapist disillusionment with EMDR and in ways that could cause client harm. Trainers stress strict fidelity to standard protocol. This is sensible. It is important that trainees learn how to practice this therapy in standardized ways, in part so that they have a solid footing to make appropriate and clinically justified adjustments. Therapists tend to be creative people. It is very easy for a new trainee to get an initial understanding of EMDR and merge it with their understanding of Gestalt therapy, for example, and make a franken-therapy that is neither. However, what many trainees hear when trainers stress the importance of following standard protocol is: “If I don’t do EMDR therapy in exactly this way, I’m doing it wrong and client harm is likely to occur.” They hear this as though EMDR therapy is the recitation of specific words in a specific order. EMDR therapy is not a spell or incantation that loses its power if it is not performed perfectly. EMDR therapy is not a magic wand. In fact, the word “magic” does not appear in any versions of the Adaptive Information Processing model. When it works, EMDR therapy facilitates the linkage of stuck information into existing adaptive information that is already present somewhere in the client. EMDR therapy is an information processing therapy.

Phase One Is Also an Assessment of Adaptive Information

When I meet a client for the first time, I never know what difficulties they have encountered in life. From an EMDR therapy lens, I’m as interested in what has gone well in the client’s life as I am in what has wounded him. Why? I have a general understanding of how difficult experiences might get better by using the Eight Phase Protocol of EMDR therapy. What I

do not know is what the difficult information will connect to and metabolize into. Again, EMDR therapy does not simply desensitize a traumatic memory. It reprocesses the memory by connecting it to existing adaptive information. You cannot connect something to nothing in EMDR therapy, nor can you connect a lie to a lie.

You Can't Land a Whale Into a Canoe



The core of the AIP model is that we are connecting information to other information when engaging in EMDR therapy. Enough of the needed adaptive information must be present somewhere in the client's system for memory resolution to occur. Metaphorically, you cannot land a memory the size of a whale into adaptive information the size of a canoe. There is nothing magical in the Eight Phase Protocol that will automatically generate the needed adaptive information if it is not already there. Said differently, you do not get a bigger boat just because you are connected to a huge fish.

Clients with attachment wounding, developmental trauma, or complex trauma often have been too saturated with the tasks of survival to have had the opportunity to develop large amounts of adaptive information. One way of conceptualizing complex trauma is through the lens of the deficits of adaptive information. Clients with complex trauma typically have small boats of adaptive information and have oceans filled with massive monsters. They also have small windows of tolerance. Deficits in adaptive information and a narrow window of tolerance will and should directly impact how we conduct EMDR therapy with these clients.

Clients who have had great lives and securely attached childhoods typically have enormous amounts of adaptive information. It is easy to believe the lessons in your earliest nostalgia when those lessons are “your needs matter,” “what you want is important,” “you belong here,” and “what you are feeling is real and matters to me.” Clients who have had great lives have adaptive information the size of a cruise ship. People who have had good lives typically have a large window of tolerance. With their enormous foundation of adaptive information and their large window of tolerance, they can hook and land every fish in their oceans all at once.

This is the privilege of the non-pervasively traumatized. They do not have monsters in their oceans.

Implications

All aspects of EMDR therapy are affected by the presence or absence of adaptive information, as well as the traumatic load that the client is carrying. When clients have adaptive information the size of cruise ships, we typically do EMDR therapy with high fidelity to our initial training. We identify the memories relevant to the current dysfunction and often process them in the order of the largest first. It is important that therapists do not micromanage the work of recovery for the healthiest clients we see. A lot of their healing consists of seeing the relationship between their categories of wounding. We do not want to construct obstacles for that. In short, we need to trust the healthiest clients to let things go where they go.

For clients with extreme trauma and very little accessible adaptive information, letting things go where they go may encourage them to go straight off a cliff and may result in client harm, even if you do EMDR therapy exactly as you were trained. Complex trauma often requires sensible modifications to standard protocol. This is not particularly controversial. Sensible modifications may be necessary for complex trauma clients to successfully start somewhere. The following are just some of the sensible adjustments for working with complex trauma that you will learn about in this book:

- How to do Phase One with a client with 28,931 horrible memories.
- What a comprehensive-enough Phase Two look like.
- What does prepared to start mean?
- Selecting landable target memories.
- How we interact with the memory in Phase Four matters.
- Where processing tends to break and how to fix it.
- The things that resolving memories will not give you.