

Chapter 37

How We Interact With the Memory Matters

In EMDR therapy, we need memory content to come, but we need it to come into awareness at a digestible rate and a tolerable intensity. The problem is that trauma in people with complex trauma isn't stored in small and discrete packages. It's stored big, and it's felt big. Its lessons and their bodily expressions aren't meant to be ambiguous or experiences subtly. One of the most common places where EMDR therapy breaks down is when too much memory content comes into working memory too quickly. Clients with complex trauma may start with one memory and then many want to come into working memory. I explore in other sections of this book how clients with complex trauma easily pivot from a single memory to a broad theme, and this rarely ends in sunshine. Once trauma hits the body, memories with the same body feel often want to come into awareness as though pulled by the strong magnet of the body state. Another common breakpoint in EMDR therapy is when intense content from a single piece of memory comes into awareness too quickly, like a tsunami. In short, many EMDR therapy sessions with complex clients go sideways as a result of overactivation. Some clients come to sessions with their metaphorical football helmets on thinking that they need to constantly push into or tackle the memory like it is a football sled.

What Exactly Are We Asking Clients to Do in Phase Four?

Most of an average reprocessing session is spent in Phase Four, and the core task I'm asking the client to do over and over is to simply notice what is happening in the nervous system following the last round of activation. When we first arrive in Phase Four using the standard protocol, the part of the memory that the client is noticing was activated in Phase Three. I want the client to notice what has been activated in Phase Three before they activate more. Clients will assume that they should continue playing and activating the memory in Phase Four while they are attempting to notice the last "bite" of activation. This is an invitation to overactivation

with clients with complex trauma. That's not what we are asking them to do. We do not instruct them to keep one eye on the bad memory and notice what is happening in the nervous system with the other. I want all of the focus to be on the present activation. I do not want clients to stay focused on the bad memory and also try to notice the activation that has already occurred. Attempting to do both is like trying to mindfully notice while you are standing in the middle of an open doorway to a barn. Horses, cows, and pigs rush out of the barn and run straight into you. With clients with complex trauma, we need to put a gate on the memory channel to help make sure that content is coming into awareness slowly enough to be digestible and tolerable. Remember that the goal of EMDR is to connect stuck information into right-now adaptive information. What happens to adaptive information when we are overactivated? It becomes less accessible (or farther away), and the maladaptive "fires" want to grow.

When we put a gate on the memory channel, aren't we restricting the client's reprocessing and potentially cutting off some channels of noticing that might be helpful? Yes. We can remove any and all restrictions the moment they are no longer needed. However, my goal in each of the first few sessions is to help a client resolve a tolerable memory in a tolerable way and not one thing more. I want the client to experience healing from something. I'm not seeking client insight into how their traumas broadly relate to each other across their lifespan. Insight will come later. I'm trying to help the client heal by processing a cup of gunpowder one spoonful at a time. Or, using a different metaphor, we will briefly open the door or gate on the memory and close it. The client will digest the content that came into awareness when it was briefly opened. When that piece of the memory is digested, I'll direct the client to access the next tolerable piece.

Standard protocol promotes distress coming in as a large wave. Large waves in EMDR therapy require a large window of tolerance, something few clients with complex trauma have. Standard protocol promotes things going anywhere they might want to go. The advantage of bringing smaller pieces of the memory into working memory is that clients with complex trauma will process these experiences faster and with much less distress. Back to the Boat and the Whale metaphor, if we are connected to a large fish, how we interact with the fish matters. It may not be wise or kind to ask the client to stand in a small canoe in the ocean and yank violently until the fish is landed. This is an invitation for snapped fishing lines, flipped boats, or injuries. We want to show the client how to land memories well and with as little unnecessary distress as possible. I want the client to activate some and notice, notice, and notice. Reel the line in a little, let it

run, and notice, notice, notice, notice. Reel a little more, let it run and exhaust itself, notice, notice, and notice.

Using a Bean Bag to Activate Digestible Pieces of the Memory

An alternative to going into the memory at the worst part using standard protocol is to do an abbreviated Phase Three (see the Videotape Approach in the next chapter) and use a bean bag or other object to help the client activate smaller “chunks” of the memory. This intervention originally came out of my work with Flash but is very helpful when we need to try to manage overactivation in EMDR therapy.

In standard protocol, we ask something like the following: “When you return to the memory where we started, what are you noticing?”

But in this approach, we say: “Throw the bean bag up into the air and catch it. I only want you to think about the bad memory while the bean bag is in the air.” The bean bag serves as a timer that limits exposure to the memory content. Also, in order to catch the bean bag, the client will need to visually track it. Tracking it taxes focus and may help prevent the client from having a flashback or overactivating the memory. As soon as the client finds activation, we ask them to drop the bean bag and notice the activation while engaging in bilateral stimulation. We continue standard rounds of bilateral with noticing, doing check-ins as usual in Phase Four, and not throwing the bean bag again until the last piece of distress has been fully or mostly digested.

The client can progressively throw the bean bag higher as it takes longer to find the next piece of activation. Once the client needs more time to find the activation in the memory than throwing the bean bag allows, return to standard protocol using: “When you return to the memory where we started, what are you noticing?”

This often allows you to process the most distressing parts of the memory by cutting them into smaller and more tolerable pieces.

Do Not Think About the Memory if I Am Not Right-Now Asking You To Think About It

If you are using the standard protocol and the client is struggling with too much activation, another highly effective strategy is to discourage the client from thinking about the memory in Phase Four while they are currently noticing distress. “If you are noticing distress, I want you to notice it and digest it. If you are not noticing distress, I’ll send you back to the target

memory to see if we can activate some of it for you to notice.” Clients will think that they absolutely have to “have one foot in the past and one foot in the present.” They do not. For clients with complex trauma, that is one of the most difficult and inefficient ways to do EMDR therapy. I want you to have both feet in the present and I’ll send you back to the memory when the last round of distress has been metabolized.

The language I have used for this is: “When I am asking you to notice, and the bilateral stimulation is happening, I do not want you to think about the memory. I do not want you to think about the memory if I am not right-now asking you to think about the memory. Just notice deeply what is happening in your right-now nervous system and digest what has already been activated. When the distress is gone or mostly gone, let me know and I’ll send you back to the memory to get more to notice.”