

# **Chapter 48**

## **The Elegance of the Future Prong**

It is easy for therapists to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of past trauma in clients with complex trauma that they may neglect one of the most helpful parts of EMDR therapy: working in the future. Many of our clients have unmanageable lives. This means that they are likely to have an unmanageable next week. Future templates leverage past work, often without taking much session time or the client reporting substantial distress, to help the client visualize, experience, and navigate a future scene more effectively. Future templates create instances of learning for subsequent experiences to connect into. We heal when we have disconfirming experiences. Trauma therapists appreciate that those experiences can be imaginary. Much of what is transformational when working with obsessions, compulsions, and ongoing relationship triggers occurs when working in the future prong.

### **When We Try the Future Prong Too Soon**

If the future template immediately becomes overwhelming to the client, that may be a strong indicator that more work needs to be done in the past before a future template is likely to be successful. It is difficult to predict how much past territory with many clients with complex trauma will need to be resolved before a future template can be completed. Unless there are clear indications that the client is not prepared for a future template, I often invite the client to try it.

The two cases that follow are examples where I advised the client to try to conduct a future template before the client resolved enough of the past content.

The client, in her early 30s, experienced multiple sexual traumas across multiple different foster placements throughout childhood. The client is currently married to someone who is “safe,” and she wanted the moments of sexual intimacy with her husband to be less triggering. The

client was able to resolve multiple memories not connected to sexual abuse prior to working in this area. The client resolved one sexual abuse memory from early childhood across several sessions, but the future template was stopped when the client had flashback-like experiences from the events that she did not resolve in EMDR therapy. We returned to process additional childhood sexual abuse memories, and after resolving multiple memories from other foster placements, the client spontaneously reported that sex with her husband was less triggering. We retried the future template, and it was successful. The client reported substantial improvement in this goal in subsequent sessions.

A client in her late 20s reports that much of her life's wounding is in the theme "what I want doesn't matter" in relation to her mother. The client sometimes depends on her mother financially but also took many steps to distance herself from her mother in other ways during and after college. After working in EMDR therapy around assorted topics, including several memories with her mother around the "what I want doesn't matter" theme, the client reported a wave of anxiety around an upcoming vacation with her boyfriend, her infant child, and her mother. Her mother expressed an intention to babysit her baby during the vacation, and the client was worried that her mother wouldn't respect her dietary restrictions for the infant. The future template was unsuccessful, as we were not able to complete it before the vacation occurred. The client was eventually able to do more past work with this theme and reported that she was able to more comfortably set and defend boundaries with her mother related to herself and her child.

When the future template does not go well, that is not a failure. It is information. Fortunately, struggles in the future template consistently point to the need to do more comprehensive work in the past or to do additional frontloading to address any informational deficits.

## General Notes About the Future Prong

Unless something catastrophic is probable, the future template should not be catastrophic. It should target something that is likely to happen in the next few weeks or months. The future template should not be "Let's imagine that your other child also gets hit by a car" or "Can you imagine the scene where your new husband also has a heart attack and dies."