
Explaining the Rationale for Trauma-Focused Work: Why it's Good to Talk

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Memories of traumatic events are different to memories of other events. Traumatic memories can cause difficulties because they tend to come into people's minds uninvited. When they do, they are often very vivid and may bring with them the original distress of the event itself. Sometimes they are so vivid that it feels as if the event is happening again, rather than it being simply remembered.

The cognitive model of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) suggests that part of the problem of PTSD is that the memory of the event or events needs to be brought to mind in one way or another and 'processed' (e.g. Meiser-Stedman, R. (2002). Towards a Cognitive-Behavioural Model of PTSD in Children and Adolescents. *Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review*, 5(4), 217-232). But, because this is likely to be accompanied by a great deal of fear, horror, helplessness or other psychological distress, understandably people often try hard *not* to think about the event.

Explaining how thinking or talking through the event might help to reduce symptoms can enable people to make well-informed decisions about whether to consent to, and engage with, interventions that focus on the trauma. Active engagement is necessary for processing to take place.

It can help to explain this using a number of analogies, some of which follow. Examples of these being used in clinical practice are contained in:

Trickey, D. (2008). Experiencing refugee status after previous trauma. In P. Appleton (Ed.) *Children's Anxiety – A Contextual Approach*. Routledge.

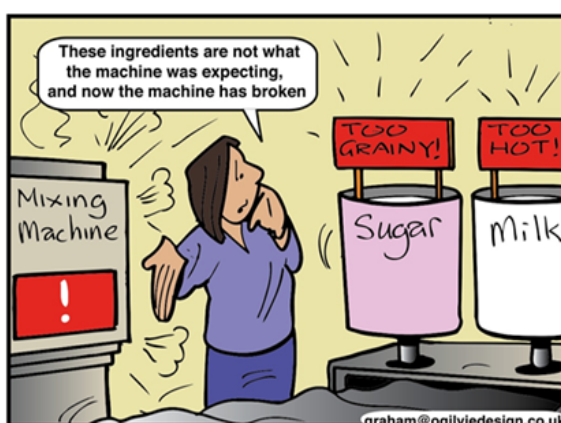
Trickey, D. (2013). Post-traumatic Stress Disorders. In Graham & Reynolds (Eds.) *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy for Children and Families 3rd Edition*. CUP.

A chocolate factory takes all of the individual ingredients, like the cocoa, sugar, and milk, and mixes them up in the right quantities to make bars of chocolate. The chocolate bars are then wrapped up. On the wrapper are words (the ingredients), which explain what is inside. This means that different chocolate bars can be sorted out and stored.



Our minds take the sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, feelings and thoughts of an experience and processes them or bundles them up into memories, which are then 'wrapped up' in the words of a story. The 'wrappers' usually stop the different 'ingredients' from spilling out unexpectedly. We know what is inside each memory from the words on the 'outside'.

If the milk is too hot, or the sugar is too lumpy, the machinery will not be able to mix the ingredients properly and may break down. The ingredients will be left swilling around in the factory waiting to be processed. The machine might try again, but if something is still too hot or too lumpy, it will break down again.



Some events are so scary or horrible in some way that people cannot process the information into memories. So the sensory information, such as sights, sounds and smells, is left unprocessed and may fall into awareness even when they are not wanted. Each time this happens, it might be too scary or horrible to think through, and so the memory remains unprocessed.

The factory might need to get an engineer to help, or it may just need to wait for the milk to cool down a bit, or it might need to break up the sugar into smaller pieces before the machinery can start working again.



Sometimes people are better able to process the memory with some support or help from another person. Sometimes they just need to wait until the right time, and sometimes they need to find a way to think it through gradually, piece by piece, in order to develop the story, as if they are wrapping the memory up in words.

The idea for comparing processing of memories to a factory is based on an idea by Richards, D. & Lovell, K. (1999) Behavioural and Cognitive Behavioural Interventions in the Treatment of PTSD. In W.Yule (Ed.) Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: Concepts and Therapy. Chichester, Wiley. The elaborations are original.

Imagine a well-organised wardrobe; each item is put away carefully with other similar items. When you need something, you know where to find it. You can take it out and wear it, and when you've finished using it you can wash it, *occasionally* iron it, and put it back in its place. There is a place for everything, and everything usually stays put. This means that you can close the doors and get on with life.



Our memories for normal events work in a similar way. Each memory is stored alongside other similar memories. When we want to remember an event, we can recall it by bringing the memory to mind, and when we've finished with it, we can put the memory back. The memories usually stay put, which means that we can 'close the doors' and get on with other aspects of life.

If someone throws you a duvet full of stinging nettles and shouts, "Put it away - quick!" it would hurt to touch and so you might shove it away quickly and try to close the door. But, because it is not put away neatly, the doors would not close – you would have to hold them closed so you can try to get on with other things. But, when you turn your back, the duvet would fall out, stinging you again.



Traumatic memories are like the duvet - painful to handle - and so we try to avoid them. We 'shove them away' rather than think them through. This means that they are not stored in the same way as other memories, so they fall into our minds when we don't want them. Avoiding them may work for a while, but often they intrude into consciousness again, just as we begin to relax.

We need to take the duvet out - which might sting a bit - and we might need to get someone to help us. We need to fold it up, make room by moving some of the other things in the wardrobe, and we need to place it carefully on the shelf. This will ensure that the duvet stays put.



In much the same way, traumatic memories need to be processed. Sometimes this is best done with help from someone else (e.g. social support or therapy). We might need to adjust our view of the world a bit, but thinking the memory through enables the memory to be processed and stored with other memories so that it stays put.

This was inspired by the analogy of a disorganised cupboard whose contents spill out and are need of organisation in Ehlers, A. & Clark, D. M., (2000). A Cognitive Model of PTSD. Behaviour, Research and Therapy, 38, 319-345. The embellishments are original.

I was working with a 14-year-old boy and, just before we went over the traumatic event again, I reminded him about why we were doing the trauma-focused work, using the wardrobe analogy. He listened patiently and then said, *"It's a bit like that David; but, actually, it's more like this..."*

He filled up the waste bin with crunched-up pieces of paper until it was over-flowing, and said, *"These are all the bad things that have happened to me, and as I walk along the road to school [he made the bin walk along and bits of paper fell out of the top] they fall in front of my eyes. And as I go to sleep [he lay the bin down and more pieces of paper fell out] they fall into my dreams..."*



...But when I come here and talk to you, we take each piece of paper out [he took each of the pieces of paper out], un-scrunch it [he un-scrunched them], and we read it through carefully...

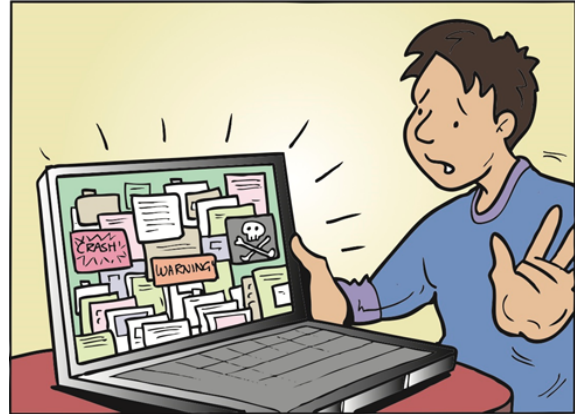


*Then we fold them up neatly and place them back in the bottom of the bin [he folded up each piece of paper neatly and placed it in the bottom of the bin] **This means that they don't fall out the top, and I have more room in my head to think about different things.***



I was working with a 9-year-old boy who had been stabbed several times and was having very vivid, frightening nightmares. I was explaining to him that it might be helpful at some point to talk through what had happened with someone, and I was using the earlier stories to explain why. Halfway through the second story, he closed his eyes, screwed his face up and put his hands over his face. I asked if he was okay, and he said, "Yeah, yeah...I think I've got it. Is it like this...?"

... On my laptop at home, I've got loads of pictures saved as JPEG files. They take up loads of room on the hard drive and some of them are corrupted, so they keep making my computer crash.



...Are you saying that, if I take the pictures of what happened that are stored as JPEGs on MY hard drive [i.e. in his head] and I write out what happened and save that as a Word document instead...



...It'll take up less room on MY hard drive and stop getting in the way?"

I said, "Yes – that's pretty much EXACTLY what I'm saying."

