

Please Try This at Home

Monthly Tips for Increasing the Joy in Your Life

Take the Pain Out of Your Memories

What things have happened to you in life that, if you're reminded of them, make you wince a bit, or maybe a lot? Was it when your first girlfriend broke up with you? When you overheard your best friend in grade school saying she didn't like you? When your dad called you a big wuss because you cried after skinning your knee? When you got fired and were never told why? When you went all the way with someone and you didn't really want to, but you didn't say no either?

Guess what? We *all* have some of these memories. Nobody makes it through life without at least some of them. The thing is, though, if something like that is still painful to think about years later, most of us don't want to talk about it. It feels shameful, like we should have "sucked it up" years ago and gotten over it already. And since no one likes to talk about those kinds of things, most of us assume that we are alone in being *still* bugged by *that* kind of thing.

I am here to tell you that is not the case. The difference between people is *not* that some of us got overwhelmed and embarrassed by various degrees of nasty experiences and some of us never, ever, ever did. The difference is that *some of us admit it* to others, or ourselves, and others don't.

Just the Tip of the Iceberg: What Wincing Means about Your Brain

If these memories only caused us a wince now and then, a yucky feeling that lasted just until we could distract ourselves and forget about it, I wouldn't be writing about this. 'Cause that's no big deal, right? Unfortunately, what most people don't know is that if a painful memory event happened three or more months ago, but thinking about it still causes us to wince or have to distract ourselves ASAP, that is a sign that that memory is stored differently in our brain than other memories that don't cause that feeling. And because of what our brain did with that memory, it not only makes us wince, it also has the power to cause all kinds of disruption in our lives, things ranging from sleep and concentration trouble, to out-of-the-norm irritability and anger, to over-the-top reactions to things, to high anxiety and easy startling, to alcohol and drug abuse, to dating the same butthead with a different name over and over again, to low self worth, and the list goes on.

Am I being a little dramatic here? Yes and no. Sure, not every "wince" memory causes debilitating things, but some of them do. And if it turns out that *your* yucky memory is causing *anything* like any of the ones I mentioned, I'm guessing you might want to know that so that you can learn how to get rid of it. (Cause getting rid of it *is* possible, which is why I am writing this. So stick with me, here.)

Before we can get to the good healing stuff, we need to understand why these memories are able to cause all this nastiness. When all is working well in the brain, every night in REM sleep when our eyes go back and forth under our eyelids, our mind performs rapid and comprehensive compression and relocation of the fresh memories we've made of what has happened during the day. It happens like this:

- 1) The amazing brain knows how to go into our short-term memory and locate the experiences we've stored there during the day, fresh and full of all the associated emotions and body sensations we felt at the time (e.g., played tennis today with a friend I only get to see once every 5 years, right knee aches, sad I don't get to see her more often, felt invigorating to be active, proud I won the game, felt like a valuable person to her, etc.).
- 2) Then it separates the recent, fresh memories into components that resemble kinds of experiences we've had before (e.g. "sad I can't see this friend more" is like other sad experiences I've had, "running around playing tennis" is like previous active memories I've had, "knee aches" are like mild pain memories I've had, "feeling she values me" is like other times I've felt worthwhile, etc.).
- 3) Finally, it files these memory "components" into long-term memory storage along with the experience "categories" that we have developed according to the ways we've experienced the world previously (sad, active, pain, worthwhile, etc.).

It's kind of like a computer making a compressed file. Once the brain has done its categorizing work, the original memory doesn't take up as much mental space. It's now in the "back of our mind" where we could bring it up if we need to, but it's not front and center in a way that we are obsessing about it all the time and thinking about every part of it. It becomes more like an average, everyday memory of what it was like to do homework in grade school. If you can recall it at all, it's more shadowy or faint than fresh, recent, and complicated. The memory has been processed and filed away to make room in short-term, emotionally-aware memory for what we will be experiencing tomorrow.

Now something different happens with the memories that still make us wince three or more months later. It starts when we experience something 1) *negative*, and 2) different enough from previous experiences our brain has had and knows how to process that during or after the experience, we're left feeling *overwhelmed or helpless*. Some experiences are overwhelming because they are way out of the realm of what even the toughest adult human beings were designed to be able to tolerate: war, rape, torture, learning those who were supposed to love us are actually evil, etc. Other experiences are overwhelming because we encountered them when we were young, inexperienced, or emotionally sensitive and our brain had not yet collected enough experiences of this kind of event to know how to deal with it. Like when a little boy who has always been loved goes to kindergarten and finds that none of the other kids want to play with him. He's got no previous experience of exclusion with which to understand the hurt.

With these kinds of negative and overwhelming experiences, what happens in our REM sleep that night is that the brain tries to do the memory sorting process only to find that it doesn't have a "category" with which the memory can be associated and stored. It's like it's got a filing cabinet for all kinds of other experiences, but not for that one. Having nowhere in long-term, not-wince-causing memory to put this overwhelming memory, the brain leaves it in short-term memory with *all* of the fresh sensations, feelings, and conclusions that we made about ourselves as a result of the memory still attached. And then, it's as if it marks that memory "Overwhelming, Not Process-able, Do Not Disturb." So then, the next night in REM sleep, the brain sees that "Do Not Disturb" mark and leaves the yucky memory it in short-term memory. It just stays there. And that's why, when we think about it, it still hurts as if it were recent and we can still remember details and sensations that we can't for non-wince memories.

How Stuck Memories Ruin Your Life

Since our brain was not able to sort and file our yucky experience, we've now got something hurtful and overwhelming stuck in the part of our brain that takes in new experiences. So if we got rejected in kindergarten and then our significant other rejects us at age 25, our experience of the present adult rejection will also have mixed up in it the devastating overwhelm of what it was like to be a helpless, un-socially skilled five-year-old being rejected for the first time. With that childhood "yuck" left in our short term memory, we are likely to *overreact* to the adult rejection because it's not just the adult rejection we're reacting to. We might be more irritable, angry, or depressed than someone who did not have an old rejection stuck in their short-term memory.

What about sleeplessness or high anxiety? Say the stuck, wincing memory is that at 12 years old, we didn't get the dog in at night like mom said and the dog got run over. The dramatic, black and white conclusion we drew from that memory, which felt very valid then in light of what happened, was that if we are *ever* not paying attention, death or horrible things will result. Because that memory is still in short-term storage today, it's still so fresh that that extreme belief about what our awareness or lack of awareness does to the world still feels valid. A part of us is saying that we still have to be alert and paying attention all the time or disaster will result. So now, when our body wants to go to sleep, a part of our brain says, "No, if you are asleep, you are not paying attention. Don't go to sleep very deeply or very long." Then we've got to take drugs to shut up that part of the brain so we can sleep.

I could go on and on with examples of how present day addictive behaviors can be perpetuated by the need to numb stuck memories that cause current circumstances to be so painful that they are intolerable without numbing. Or how low self worth and failure to excel can be caused by what we concluded about ourselves as the result of a stuck memory that still feels very real and present, like, "If my mom treated me *that* way, I must be a worthless person," or "The fact that I caused that harm makes me a bad person, and bad people should not be allowed to succeed or have good things." Suffice to say that stuck memories can cause all kinds of other problems, or even if they are not the primary cause of the problem, they can make other problems so much worse with what they lead us to believe about ourselves or the ways they get us to react in the midst of those problems.

Getting Your Memories Un-Stuck

Finally, here's the good news. Through some awesome luck followed by quality research, a psychologist named Francine Shapiro discovered that when your body receives bi-lateral stimulation—like hearing tones that play back and forth in the left ear and then the right, or getting the eyes to look left-right-left-right, or holding little vibrating pulsers that go left-right-left-right—that motion puts the brain in the same processing state that it is in during REM sleep. But this time, you're conscious! You have a choice about what to think about. So if, with your brain in that state, you consciously choose to focus on your "wince" memory, you can bypass the "Do Not Disturb" sign that your unconscious mind put on it and you can *get your brain to un-stick the memory!*

What's so cool about this process, a therapy method called EMDR*, is that the unconscious mind processes things about 1,000 times as fast as the conscious mind. So when you get your unconscious mind on board through bi-lateral stimulation, it actually doesn't take that long thinking about the wince memory to let your brain open it up and get it sorted. With a memory

that is a discrete event (not a repeated, long-term event) and for a person who has some good support and strength going for them in the present, the reprocessing part of EMDR can happen in as little as 20-50 minutes.

How does your brain sort it now, if it was too overwhelming to be sorted in the past? Well, for one thing, the fact that you did not *just* experience the overwhelming event—it was at least three months ago—and that you survived it (or you wouldn't be reading this) means that at some level, your brain is aware that you are actually stronger than that memory. Even though it may have felt life threatening then, it turns out that it didn't kill you. Plus, you may have had a lot more experiences since that memory, tough things that you have overcome that prove to you that you can handle this thing that was overwhelming when you didn't have a "filing cabinet" for it in your brain. Now you do. Taking off the "Do Not Disturb" mark from this memory by forcing your mind to think about it allows your brain to go back into it with a fresh perspective, now aware that you survived and that you have strengths now that you didn't have then. That awareness allows your mind to process what was impossible to process before.

Often, within a week or two of fully processing a memory through this kind of therapy, people report, "I still remember it, but it feels like it happened to someone else. It doesn't hurt like it did when I think about it." Or they say, "I certainly don't like that memory, it wasn't a good one, but I get that it doesn't mean I'm worthless. I can't believe I felt that for so long!"

Some people notice a small short-term effect. The memory pain seems to have gone down for now, but they're not sure it's going to last. For them, the impressive results are what happens over time. The fact that the memory is no longer stuck frees them to have positive, strength-building experiences that they could not have had before, allowing healing to gradually unfold. After EMDR, a woman who was scared of public speaking might still be nervous before her next required speaking event, but she notices afterward that she is not nearly as exhausted as she used to be after facing an audience. She starts saying "yes" to more speaking engagements because she knows they won't drain her as much, and pretty soon notices that the nervousness before speaking goes down, too. Over 6-12 months, she discovers that she feels confident in her speaking ability, where before, it made her afraid and exhausted.

There's a lot more to learn here. I've explained the basics for reprocessing discrete, one-time memories, but there are also other EMDR processes that work well for long-term hurts, very recent events, performance enhancement, chronic pain, addictions, and much more. I just wanted to give you a taste of what I've learned about EMDR and to tell you that I have seen some amazing results in my own life from this therapy (I'm the public speaking lady!) and in the lives of clients who have been unable to change through lots of other kinds of therapy, growth, and spiritual work.

If you have some "wince" memories you'd like to get unstuck, or some life struggles that you are beginning to suspect might be linked to stuck memories, feel free to:

- Learn more about EMDR: <http://www.emdria.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=2>
- Read abstracts of randomized clinical trials of EMDR: http://emdr.nku.edu/docs/randomized_trials.pdf
- Read the abstract of the FBI Bulletin 22 stating that it uses EMDR to help agents recover from field traumas: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/App/publications/abstract.aspx?ID=176790>, or
- Find an EMDR therapist near you: <http://www.emdria.org/displaycommon.cfm?an=1&subarticlenbr=235>

I am excited for you to experience the relief and empowerment that comes from *finally* having a clean mental slate so that you can experience your life from here on with the strength, confidence, and joy that should have been yours all along.

If you or someone you know would like help processing some “wince” memories or working through related symptoms, feel free to *call me at 303-931-4284 for a free 20-minute consultation or email info@jenniferdiebel.com*.

*EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. Back and forth eye-movement was the method of bi-lateral stimulation that Francine Shapiro used for her research. “Desensitization” is the process of intentionally focusing on memories that were marked “Do Not Disturb” and “Reprocessing” refers to the brain’s work of changing the ways those memories are stored so that they are no longer painful or symptom-causing.

Thanks for reading!

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