

SESSION 5: FIGHTING BACK MEMORIES

How do you overcome and soothe flashbacks of past events?



PRACTICE DEEP BREATHING

Start class by practicing the deep breathing method discussed on page 28.

INTRODUCTIONS

Last week we talked about feeling less numb and more fully alive. The handouts asked you to reflect on how a sense of emotional numbness may be affecting your everyday life and to keep track of activities that inspire active living and using your five senses.

- *Who wants to share what they learned from Handout 4.2: Living Fully?*
- *Who chose an activity on the list that they don't normally do? How did that go?*
- *What activities did you find especially helpful?*
- *Did anyone add an activity to their list that they think might be helpful for others?*

BEHIND THE SCENES

After experiencing severe trauma, people often say, *"I feel like I'm losing my mind."* This is not surprising given the physical and psychological effects of trauma. When your brain is forced into survival mode, it is often hard to return to normal everyday brain functioning. The calm, predictable brain of the past seems harder to access. Instead, more erratic and demanding brain functions dominate and can feel impossible to control or soothe. Your brain is still trying to process the terror of the traumatic event, and try as it may, it can't make sense of *why it happened, how it happened, and how to move forward*. Like a record stuck on a scratch, it keeps repeating the same space over and over again until it can get beyond that scratch. This replay is most apparent in flashbacks and nightmares. Trauma survivors try desperately to shield themselves from recurring memories, but the memories keep coming back fiercely and relentlessly. This chapter will focus on ways to soothe traumatic memories and begin to move toward healthier brain habits.

MOVIE CLIP - Play Session 4: Fighting Back Memories

To think about how recurring memories shape our everyday lives, we are going to look at a clip of Brooks flashing back to previous events. As you watch, think about how one event or memory leads to another memory which leads to another.

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

[First, write responses to the questions below (*think*), then share your responses with a partner (*pair*), then discuss the questions as a group (*share*):

- 1) As Brooks is punching the bag, his mind thinks back on past events. What does he see in his memories?

- 2) A “trigger” is anything (an act, event or memory) that leads to another reaction or series of reactions. In this video clip, what is the trigger or triggers that lead to memories of his past?

- 3) Can you relate to the experience of having recurring memories of a traumatic experience? If yes, what do you see in your memories? (*You do not have to share this answer with your partner or the class if you don't want to.*)

- 4) Do your memories come back in flashbacks during the day, nightmares at night, or both? Rate how often you experience flashbacks or nightmares.

a. How often do you experience a flashback (a memory while you are awake) of a traumatic experience?

1_____2_____3_____4_____5_____6_____7_____8_____9_____10
Never Once in a while Once a month Once a week Once a day Several times a day

b. How often do you experience a nightmare (a vivid dream while you are asleep) of a traumatic experience?

1_____2_____3_____4_____5_____6_____7_____8_____9_____10
Never Once in a while Once a month Once a week Once a night Several times a night

- 5) Can you think of a “trigger,” something that often leads to a traumatic memory or flashback? (It may be a sound, smell, something visual or something else. Example: In the movie Leslie says, “When I see a guy with a beard, it’ll remind me of Ake.”)
- 6) Have you found a way to soothe or reduce the number or severity of flashbacks/nightmares you have? *(Please consider sharing your strategies with the class.)*

CLASS DISCUSSION

When trauma happens and your brain is forced into survival mode, the frontal lobe (the rational part of the brain) can lose control and the limbic system (the emotional part of the brain) takes over brain functioning. That is why traumatic memories are so vivid, so emotional, and so intense—they were created when the limbic system was dominating the brain. These memories are not filtered through the rational part of the brain but encoded in raw emotions and sensations of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. The limbic system is considered the more primitive part of our brain because it is most similar to animal brains that are designed for survival more so than communication and rational thought. If it feels like there is a wild animal loose in your brain, it is because your memories of that traumatic event were created by the primitive, survival mode of your brain.

Now what? How do you soothe those dominating and demanding memories? How do you let them rest? If you had a wild animal loose in your backyard, what would you do to make sure it didn’t attack you? Unfortunately, you cannot shoot it dead. These memories are bullet proof. And you can’t capture it and ship it away because it will always find its way back. You need to think of a way to turn it from an enemy to a friend and learn to share your brain space with it.

Imagine that you had a wolf loose in your backyard. Discuss as a class:

- ***What could you do to settle it down and help you feel safe?***
- ***What could you do that would make it angry and vengeful?***
- ***How can you apply these same principles to taming traumatic memories?***

The answer to these questions may be different for everyone. Most people who have overcome traumatic memories agree that you cannot starve or ignore these memories. They do not get better unless the rational part of your brain can come to understand and make peace with the angry, restless part of your brain that keeps returning to traumatic memories.

One person read aloud, then discuss as a group: **What can you relate to?**

What do you remember of flashbacks and nightmares after the crime?



FROM BROOKS: After the crime, when I was in the hospital and for months after, what I didn't like was not feeling like I was in control. Flashbacks would come, or I'd have these bizarre dreams where my dad or my mom or maybe both of them had lived or survived after we left the house. In my dreams, they went somewhere else, or we lost contact with them and couldn't get back to them.

Probably the hardest time, the lowest point, was one night in college within a year of when they died. I was in my dorm room alone and had the tapes of the memorial service, my dad's last sermon, and my mom's concert. It was the first time I had gotten them out and put them in a tape player. I started listening to pieces of them. Listening to my mom in particular was really hard. I remember getting so sad and finally saying, "I can't listen to this," and I had to turn the tape off. As I did, and as I lay in bed, I remember feeling like I couldn't close my eyes. I couldn't let myself fall asleep because if I did, I was going to lose my mind. If I fell asleep, if I didn't stay awake through to the morning, I would wake up without my mind. It would just be gone. It was from the barrage of all the memories, all the sadness... all the loss. All the hurt was right in my face, and I couldn't get away from it. It felt like it was taking over.

In flashbacks, certain moments are very clear—some of it's less clear, but most of it's very clear. I would think about what people said that night, what my mom said, or what I said. And of course I remember when we heard Leslie crying from being raped, and my mom sobbing. And there's just... no words to explain.

The nightmares were a morphed version of what happened that night. I would have dreams where I walked into a restaurant, and Ake and Hatch would walk in, and I'd always get shot in the shoulder. It wasn't bad enough to kill me, but it was always being shot in the shoulder. The sad dreams, the really sad dreams, were the ones where my parents had lived or just my dad had lived and somehow he had gone somewhere else. I remember seeing him, and he just looked frail, like he had kind of given up.

It was very conflicting, remembering things when I didn't want to remember them or when I was trying to sleep. I didn't want to forget my parents, and I wanted to remember them and remember our family, but then at the same time, I needed to remember things for the trial I knew was coming up.

There has not been a day, I don't think, that I haven't thought about it all, but it's more manageable now. The pain has dulled over the years. I don't think I'd describe them as flashbacks anymore. Now, they are just memories, and they are easier to control and easier to put into perspective. They don't have the sting they used to have. I think a lot of it is having good memories to look back on and living a happier life now, so when those thoughts come up it's much easier to put them in perspective. Now maybe I let myself think about it or maybe I don't.

HOMEWORK Use Handout 5.1: Taming Traumatic Memories to help process/reconcile flashback memories.

HANDOUT 5.1: TAMING TRAUMATIC MEMORIES

To begin the process of taming traumatic memories, the rational part of your brain (the frontal lobe) needs to communicate with the emotional part of your brain (the limbic system) through journal writing. At least once a day over the next six days sit down and write a letter to your traumatic memories that create flashbacks/nightmares.

The steps toward addressing your traumatic memories are similar to trying to tame a wild animal. First you need to establish trust and communicate, and then begin to build rapport and mutual understanding. This may seem odd at first, but trust the process and you will begin to defuse the pent-up tension that often causes and perpetuates flashbacks and nightmares. (Use separate pieces of paper to complete this exercise. Use at least a half a piece of paper per day to respond to the questions.)

Day 1: Introduce yourself. Tell the traumatic memory about who you are as a person. Tell it who you were before the traumatic event(s). Tell it why you are likable and trustworthy.

Day 2: Name it. If your traumatic memory was a wild animal, what would it look like? What would you call it? Describe it and give it a name you can continue to refer to. (Remember you are trying to tame this animal, so give it a name you can live with.)

Day 3: Try to figure out what the traumatic memory wants from you. What is it trying to tell you? What does it want you to understand?

Day 4: Tell the traumatic memory how it makes you feel. How does it make your mind feel? How does your body feel? How does it affect your daily life and your sleep at night?

Day 5: What do you want the traumatic memory to do? In addition to going away and leaving you in peace, how could this traumatic memory help you to move forward with your life?

Day 6: Forgive the traumatic memory. The memory is not your enemy—it is a painful reminder of a painful time, and it is part of who you are. Understand that the memory hurts with your hurt. What could you do or say to help the memory feel better? How could you soothe it and help it feel heard and understood?

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