

Processing:

We transform traumatic memories, relieving us of their burdens.

Traumatic memories impact many areas of our lives. They can intrude and skew our sense of situations dramatically, making it more difficult to relate with other people and ourselves. They can affect how we talk, work, love, act, and think. The impact and the benefits vary from person to person and each memory has different effects. Processing memories can benefit us in many ways such as fewer nightmares, sleeping better, reduced hypervigilance, more peace, better self-esteem, greater capability for success in work situations, more positive relationships, better self-care that comes more naturally, as well as greater hope and vitality. Processing reframes the memory itself through a deep, connected expression of the memory's burdens that allows the discharging of emotions, replacing warped myths/beliefs with nourishing truths, and putting the event in its true perspective.

The following is an example from one of our author's life:

Like many other times that I processed a traumatic memory I felt tremendous fear beforehand. I was terrified that the memory would overwhelm me; that I would hate myself forever or even commit suicide as a result. I had to do a lot of preparation with my therapist to become ready. While processing the memory I allowed the horrific scenes of torture, and their accompanying emotions and beliefs, to flow out of me. It did feel intense, scary, and very painful, and yet it was finally moving! The pressure was easing with each tear drop, with each expression of these long-repressed memories. Afterwards, I was able to see that I had actually been an innocent victim in the situation I'd remembered. I felt the burden of self-negating beliefs and emotions lighten a bit more. The overwhelming feeling of guilt and of being evil faded more and more. I felt freer without this terror looming over me. I felt calmer and more in control of my life. And I was finally able to grieve the pain of that terrible situation. Over time I came to be able to talk about that memory with more and more ease. Some things that used to trigger intrusive traumatic memories no longer seemed to affect me, so I felt safer in my life. I gained more confidence and was more motivated to process more memories whenever I could to keep up this progress. The rewards were certainly worth the effort for me. Now, years later and dozens of memories processed, I feel like a totally different person with so much hope, passion for life and confidence in my future.

Processing allows pain that has been stuck to emerge and dissipate. Yet there is a common misconception that processing increases pain. However the truth is that we are exposing the pain that was already there, so we can heal the wounds. What feels like a crazy response to the present is actually a memory playing in the body. It's not "dwelling in the past" to experience emotions, sensations and beliefs remembered from that time period, it's simply that memory is not fully processed and resolved during traumatic situations so it can be reactivated and replayed over the years into the present.

Memory is processed differently in our brain during trauma. Sometimes portions of the memory or even the entire memory can be dissociated (out of conscious awareness).

Traumatic memory often carries a powerful, negative emotional charge, frightening images, body sensations (urges, scents, physical pain, remembered pressures, etc.), negative beliefs about self and life, words that were said and other auditory inputs. These need to be intentionally and skillfully processed. The presence of traumatic memories recycling repeatedly in our brains perpetuates emotional wounds. These are wounds that time does not heal. Often one traumatic incident may cause a number of traumatic memories to be stored, and each may need processing. Sometimes these associated traumatic memories need to be processed together to find the inevitable freedom.

There are a number of key ingredients for doing this step safely and well – sufficient life stability, emotional resilience, being able to be gentle with one’s self, having learned processing skills and concepts, an ability to self-soothe, a support network, and feeling safe enough to do it. Other ingredients that can be very helpful are an ability to harmonize internally, a skilled trauma therapist who fits you well, a safe place to process at home, and a safety plan for difficult times. There are countless other things that people do to help them with processing. If one feels unready for this step, it can be helpful to do other steps and come back when ready. Processing memories safely usually requires skillful and careful help from others. Healing is easiest when one is centered, compassionate and curious regarding one’s self. Compassionately understanding the impacts of the traumatic memories helps wounded aspects of ourselves to open up for healing.

There are many different metaphors people use to help them access and process traumatic memories. A composite of memories and ensuing patterns can feel like it has its own personality. Some terms people use for this is: an “aspect,” “inner child,” an “exile,” a “part,” an “alter,” a “wound”, “younger part,” “child part,” “auxiliary,” etc. (See the Harmonizing Step for one model.) It’s helpful to be gentle and respectful to the protective dynamics/aspects that are resistant to processing memories. These aspects can be listened to, understood and soothed before proceeding. Processing is much smoother, easier, faster and safer if we do this first. Listening to protective aspects often helps us pace ourselves appropriately. Pushing too much too fast can overwhelm us unhelpfully. We can learn to respect the protective aspects, find out what they need, and gain their permission to process the memory. Developing a relationship with the protective aspects is as important as connecting with other aspects that contain memories. We can also ask aspects to slow down the emergence of memories so we can process it more safely.

The perspective you had during the trauma remains unresolved; thus when a memory emerges we find that aspects often speak as if they are the age you were when the trauma occurred. It’s most helpful to treat this aspect as you would a precious child who is just escaping from that traumatic situation. As the memory is processed, these sensations of being younger gradually dissipate. During the Uniting Step these aspects connect with other aspects and gain a more updated understanding about self and the world. Simultaneously we gain a broader and more balanced view of life with every aspect that unburdens.

There are a number of methods for processing traumatic memories, and there are new methods being developed all the time. There are many methods, including Internal Family Systems therapy, EMDR, psychodrama, gestalt therapy, somatic experiencing, art therapy, and many others. We are all different and will find that different things work for us at

different times. However, we should be cautious in which approaches we explore. There are many methods that can be more traumatizing than healing. It is a natural tendency to want to stir up feelings, or act them out. For example, forcing memory activation is usually counter-productive and often adds to one's trauma burden. A sadly common counter-productive method is re-enacting victim situations. Even more tragic is perpetrating abuse on others. Practices should be chosen based on how they help us achieve more joy and less pain for ourselves and others. We find it most helpful to consult our inner wisdom and look for practices that adhere to the Vital Cycles Healing Principles.

An important part of processing traumatic memories is venting the emotional charge. Venting is a critical coping mechanism at other times as well. Venting techniques are like pressure escape valves that help temporarily to ease emotional pressure inside (e.g., anxiety, anger, fear, pain, guilt, and shame). We suggest that any way of venting is healthy as long as NO ONE gets hurt, including the one doing the venting. Some examples of healthy venting are beating a pillow with a hose, hitting a punching bag, hitting balls at a batting cage, writing letters that are not going to be sent, etc. It's also very important that you are able to maintain the awareness that you are an adult and safe in the present despite the traumatic memories and feelings you are experiencing and venting.

There are many positive outcomes of processing. We find that our hope increases, we feel more joy, celebrate successes, feel lighter inside, more centered, more connected to ourselves, and build healing momentum. The example in the first paragraph demonstrated these outcomes.

Activities: (The following activities can be done in a Healing Journal and/or with the support of others.)

Activity 1: Attend a Vital Cycles workshop or retreat and participate in a processing session, e.g., Sculpture (Memory Recasting).

Activity 2: Use Internal Family Systems therapy (selfleadership.org).

Activity 3: Write about sensations, beliefs or emotions you feel that seem to come from another time, or when you were younger. Notice the difference between how a traumatic memory and current situations feel. Talk about this with others on a healing path or trusted others who understand. The more we can understand and sense traumatic memories the easier it is to respond appropriately to life today.

Activity 4: Use a healing journal to express all the components of a memory in manageable pieces. It is very important to gently pace ourselves.

Activity 5: Develop a list of venting tools that work for you. Create an action plan to explore a new venting technique that you can use safely and easily.