Why trauma memories are different

Why trauma memories come back uninvited and feel as if they are happening now.

Ordinary memories are like files in a cabinet. They have a label, a date and a beginning, middle and end. You can take one out when you choose, and put it back.

During overwhelming danger, the brain is busy surviving. It does not file. The experience is stored as raw pieces: images, sounds, smells, body sensations and feelings. There is no date stamp to say "this is over".

An ordinary memory

- Has a time and place
- Feels like the past
- Comes when I call it
- Has words and a story
- Fades with time

A trauma memory

- Has no clear time stamp
- Feels as if it is happening now
- Comes uninvited, set off by reminders
- Is mostly sensations and images
- Stays vivid

Triggers

Because the pieces are stored by sensation, anything similar can set them off: a colour, a tone of voice, a smell, a time of year, a feeling in your body. The alarm part of the brain matches the pattern and reacts before the thinking part can say, "That was then."

This is why reactions can seem to come from nowhere.

How this changes

Avoiding the memory keeps it unfiled. In trauma-focused therapy, we go through it carefully, in a safe setting, so the brain can do what it could not do at the time:

1. Put the pieces in order.
2. Add what you know now: that it ended, that you survived, what was and was not in your control.
3. Stamp it with a time and place, so it can be stored as past.

The memory does not disappear. You will still be able to recall it, but it stops coming back as if it were happening now.

In the meantime

Grounding skills help when a trigger hits. They bring your attention back to where you are, which tells your body that the danger is over.

Draws on the cognitive model of PTSD developed by Anke Ehlers and David M. Clark.

My notes and questions

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Triggers: then and now

For one trigger, compare what is the same as then with what is different now.

Name _____ Date _____

When something sets off a trauma memory, your brain has spotted a similarity and sounded the alarm. This exercise trains it to notice the differences as well.

What happened just now? What set me off (a sight, sound, smell, feeling, place, date)?

What did it remind me of?

THEN	NOW
What was happening at the time of the trauma? Where was I, how old, who was there, what could I do?	Where am I today? How old am I? Who is here? What can I do now that I could not do then?

Everything that is different between then and now

What I can say to myself the next time this trigger comes up

How I felt before and after doing this

Tip: look around and name five things that prove it is now, not then. Today's date. Your phone. Your own hands.

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