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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