



Clear Thinking Issue 134

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How to stop the past from hurting you

Hypnosis Master Series: How hypnosis can ease the pain of past memories
– by **Mark Tyrrell**

Like it or not, we are not just the sum of our parts. We are also the sum of our pasts.

We learn emotionally as well as in other ways. The 'emotional brain' is amazingly clever in some ways - think of that common experience where a song you haven't heard for decades prompts a very specific emotional feeling in you, which then in its *own* turn suddenly wakes a memory you hadn't thought about for years.

But in spite of this astoundingly precise capacity, in other respects our emotions are more like blunt instruments - primeval and over-simplified responses that were evolved in a much more straightforward world where they were the vital tools of survival.

Fear, anxiety and anger were essential to help keep us safe in a simple but savage world. In Palaeolithic times, we had to learn from our dangerous experiences so that we could respond instantly with fear or anger the next time something similar happened. What's more, it didn't matter if the primitive emotional brain got it wrong sometimes and over-reacted, because survival was what counted and it might be better, under such conditions, to *over-respond* than not to respond at all.

But in our more complex modern world, emotional learning from the past can trip you up rather than help you in the present. This is because the emotional part of the brain isn't great at discerning differences, or understanding that circumstances alter cases. This means that an emotional response learned in and appropriate to *one* context - such as

at school - may be misapplied or over-applied by the emotional brain in quite different contexts.

So, for example, a nine-year-old boy may learn to fear group situations because he has the one-off (or repeated) unpleasant emotional experience of being bullied by his peers. Years later, as an adult, he may find himself experiencing the same level of fear in a group of mature and kindly and perfectly well-disposed adults. From an emotional standpoint, he's still operating out of a context which is out of date.

Although his *conscious* rational mind recognises that circumstances have changed, his *unconscious* more emotional mind needs to catch up and take this on board so that he can stop causing himself problems.

I once treated a man for this very problem. He was pretty confident about himself and about life *in general* but whenever he found himself in a group situation of more than half a dozen people, he would 'crumble', as he put it, and feel painfully anxious. But he had no idea why.

Now in psychotherapy we often make use of something called an 'affect bridge', a process of connecting feelings and memories.

I described a kind of affect bridge above, when I mentioned how a song might spark an emotion which would then trigger a long-forgotten memory. When we feel an emotion it will often remind us of a past time. This man's feelings had been so intense in those group situations that all his focus had been on getting away as fast as he could, so he had not connected it up to anything specific from his past. So I asked him to close his eyes and just get some of the feeling of the experience of being in a group as an adult. He did this by recalling a recent time he'd felt very uncomfortable in a work meeting.

When he told me he had a sense of that feeling, I asked him just to *wait...* and see if any other memories come to mind...

Almost immediately his mind went to a time some thirty-five years earlier when he'd been in class as a child. He was new to the school and the teacher had left the room. Suddenly the other boys had attacked him, first verbally and then with their fists.

He was visibly shaken by this memory and suddenly felt it connected to his adult discomfort in groups, although he hadn't thought about this emotional memory for many years and it had never consciously troubled him.

I often use an approach called the [Rewind Technique](#), especially for PTSD cases or phobias. (1)

But there are other excellent techniques which use similar processes of relaxation and disassociation to re-contextualize old memories in the brain as 'past' - and so no longer threatening - that can also be successfully deployed to deal with unhelpful emotional responses, especially where these are less intense than is the case, say, with chronic PTSD.

So with this particular client I used the following technique.

The helping hand technique

After relocating to the past unpleasant classroom memory, I asked my client to open his eyes and describe to me all the ways his adult self was different from his nine-year-old self. He came up with a varied list, including:

- I am more confident
- I have more resources
- I've got a black belt in karate
- I know much more about the world now
- etc

I then suggested he close his eyes again and I hypnotised him deeply. He visibly entered a profound relaxed state.

I suggested he time-travel back to that out-of-date class room, not as the child he was then but *as his adult self* to, as I put it, "sort that time out properly."

His adult self, with all his present personal resources, was to comfort his nine-year-old self and reassure him. Then he was to tell the other boys to leave his younger self alone. While he followed these instructions I kept him under close observation. He looked deeply relaxed and calm throughout - a sure sign that now this memory would be processed through a much less emotional part of his brain and be much less likely to cause him problems.

While hypnotically engaged in this process, he also found other times to "sort out". And later, when he opened his eyes again, he reported that he felt fine thinking about those childhood times now - they really felt as if they had been "put to bed". I also got him to hypnotically rehearse feeling as relaxed and comfortable in groups as he should have been all along.

So what did we do here?

Well, we first *located when the emotional learning had taken place* - or at least one of the times it had been at it strongest initially. For him, the classroom bullying seemed to be the key emotional learning that had caused him problems later in life.

We then *talked about how he was now different in so many ways*. Reminding people of their resources tends to make them feel more resourceful and also stops them feeling too distressed by just focussing exclusively on the unpleasant memory.

I then helped him *relax deeply into hypnosis and stay relaxed* by going back into that memory not as he was then but *as he is now*. In this way he could experience that time without the usual feelings of anxiety and helplessness but from a much more disassociated perspective. This meant that now his brain could finally re-process that memory as no longer current or threatening.

This technique also gave him a chance to get a sense of *completing unfinished business* from the past. He described this later as the memory having been "finally put to bed".

After this session he reported no longer feeling like a helpless nine-year-old in group settings but feeling confident and relaxed.

People talk about hypnosis being used for regression but actually real-life situations can *spontaneously* regress us. If something triggers an *emotional pattern match* to something that happened to you long ago, you can feel - emotionally speaking - the same age as you were back then. Now my client could feel his true age when in groups.

We call this the 'helping hand technique' as it helps clients use everything their present self has learned to go back and help out their past self from an earlier time and so re-contextualize their memory of that time. This means they can *feel differently* about it from here on in.

Of course, this process is all metaphorical. But it corresponds closely with some very real processes that occur when the brain re-programs old negative emotional patterns into neutral and safe ones.

The sealed envelope technique

Now I'm going to describe another well-used hypnotic technique to help diminish and even free ourselves completely from the detrimental effects of past experience.

In a study carried out in 2010, researchers asked the subjects to write down something unpleasant from the past - such as a decision they deeply regretted.

Students in the study who sealed their written accounts of loss or regret inside an envelope reported feeling much less troubled by these memories than students who had written them down but not sealed them in. (2)

So, according to this research, if something's troubling you, write it down, put it in an envelope and seal it. Doing so will help bring you psychological closure.

But of course we can also do this hypnotically - and sometimes much more powerfully.

For example, I might ask a client in hypnosis to relax deeply in a beautiful place and just get the sense of a small white puffy cloud and notice that cloud darken as all the negative feelings from some past event transmit from the person's mind into that cloud. Eventually, I might suggest the cloud drift away and they can watch a far distant rainbow as that cloud rains out all the past hurt as they begin to feel free and light.

Or I might suggest they hypnotically watch the rain from all those past negative feelings helping to irrigate dry land to be able to produce new healthy life in future. This reframes that past experience as something that, paradoxically, may help things in the future.

Or we might hypnotically ask someone to seal away in a "secret secure safe box" any old feelings they no longer need, perhaps hypnotically getting them to bury it deep within the ground. Of course, we can do this alongside *literally* asking someone to write about troubling memories and seal them away in an envelope, just as the researchers in that study did.

So, in summary, I've explored two ways to help put a troubling past event into its proper context. I've described the 'helping hand technique' and the 'sealed envelope' technique, which can be done both literally and hypnotically, using any scenario that puts the feelings and memories into a sealed or safe and separate environment.

Notes

1. www.rewindtechnique.com
2. See: [Sealing the Emotions Genie: The Effects of Physical Enclosure on Psychological Closure](#) (*Psychological Science*, July 2010)

New 'Smoking Cessation Training' Home Study Pack

We've been successfully running online training courses for several years now, getting some excellent [feedback](#). However, one common comment from course delegates was that the live lectures times did not always suit busy lives or time-zone differences and that you preferred to listen to the recorded lectures. We've listened to these comments and created a home study training pack that will fit into your schedule and allow you to rush or meander through the course at your own pace.

When you buy a course, you will receive a pack containing a USB stick and workbook, containing audio lectures, hypnosis scripts, psychology insights, videos, check-lists,

transcripts of the lectures, overviews and summaries of the course content. In short, everything you need and more to learn effectively. Also, there is your own private forum for ongoing discussion with colleagues and course trainers, where you usually get an answer within 24 hours of posting a question. After completing the self-test quizzes, you will be sent a certificate of completion.

And of course, Kirstin will still be there to help with any administration or other course queries.

The new course has a new price. Previously, the full price course was £395 or £296 if you got the early bird discount. We're offering the new smoking cessation pack for £195, less than half the original price.

Find out more about the [Smoking Cessation Training Home Study Pack](#)

Find out how you can get 10% discount on this training pack and other products and scripts by [joining the HypnosisDownloads.com Growth Zone](#).

See you in a fortnight.

Mark Tyrrell

Co-Founder

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