



Memory Reconsolidation

Sometimes painful memories are like “apps” that get downloaded into your emotional system, continuing to influence you in the present, or causing you to overreact to anything that seems similar.

Fortunately, scientists have discovered that every time you bring up a memory, you have an opportunity to reconstruct it so that it doesn't have the same emotional charge. But, it takes about 10-minutes after you recall the memory for the associated neural networks to become malleable enough to be overwritten. I break down the process into five-steps below.

Five Easy Steps to Stop a Memory From Haunting You

1. Bring up the memory of the distressing event briefly. You don't need to go into great detail initially, just recall the essence of it and a *hint* of the emotions you had around the event. No need to relive it– in fact if you bring the emotion up with too much intensity, it can hinder the process.
2. Now, before you review the memory in any further detail, do something that would be calming or soothing for about 10-20 minutes, such as meditating, visualizing a serene place, or imagining how good you're going to feel with this event behind you. You could also do centering prayer, take a walk, listen to music, or watch a short, funny video. The point is to do something that feels good and gets you in a calm state of mind for at least 10-minutes. This gets the memory in a state that can be overwritten.
3. Next, either write down, draw, or retell the story of the traumatic event to a therapist or trusted friend while intending to stay emotionally present and connected to your present surroundings. Just describe the facts of the event as if you were an objective observer. This cues the nervous system that the event isn't actually happening again and allows you to make new associations.

4. As you retell the story, look for the *emotional meanings* you may have attached to the event such as, "I did something wrong. I'm bad. I'm unlovable. I'm unworthy. People can't be trusted." Even if you know logically that the meaning is not true, it can still *feel* true. That felt meaning is what's haunting you and it needs to be replaced with a new meaning.
5. Create a new emotional meaning that is more accurate as you view the scene through the eyes of an adult. Then, retell the story with this new meaning and really feel the truth of that updated meaning as you retell it. Finish the story at a better place such as the fact you survived, escaped danger, achieved a goal, overcame an obstacle, or were treated better by someone else in your life later.

Imagine younger you and give her a hug and encouragement. Show your younger self that he's worth loving and grow him up from there with this new awareness. See the audio/video links listed below and read the case example of Susie for more ideas.

Audio and Video Links that Illustrate the Process

Cool video: To watch an 5-minute video on the process of memory reconsolidation by neuroscientist Daniella Schiller, [click here](#).

Cool Audio: To listen to an excerpt from my interview with brain scientist Joe LeDoux on memory reconsolidation, [click here](#).

Cool Article and Audio: Great story on NPR about how editing your stories with happier endings through writing can heal. [Click here](#).

Case Example

Susie had terrible childhood memories of her father getting drunk, screaming at her, and telling her she was stupid and worthless. As a child, she often went out of her way to avoid her father and his angry rants. As an adult, Susie carried an irrational fear of making men angry and went out of her way to avoid them. Even though she's intelligent, she still had this deep fear that she was not as smart as people thought and felt like a fraud when people complimented her. Susie knew these fears were illogical and held her back from getting into healthy

relationships and living to her full potential. She wanted to put the memories of her father's drunken tirades behind her and reclaim her self-esteem.

We reprocessed the memories of her father using the five steps I outlined above. As we reviewed the events objectively, Susie could see that as much as it felt personal then, she didn't cause her father's angry outbursts. Alcohol and her father's high-stress levels caused them. As we went through the story a few more times, Susie realized the words he hurled toward her as a child had no substance. They were just empty words slurred at her through a haze of garbled nonsense.

Because the emotional part of the brain learns better through an experience, I had Susie imagine stepping into her childhood scene as an adult, hugging her younger self, and reassuring the child that she was okay. This brought a few tears to Susie's eyes, but she also noticed feeling stronger and more at ease. To further take the sting out of her father's words, we took turns role-playing obnoxious, drunken characters, saying absurd things to each other with slurred speech until Susie started laughing. This role-play helped Susie distance from her father's anger and recall times when he could be clear-headed and amicable.

We finished the story with Susie vividly recollecting positive moments in her life that occurred later, such as graduating from school, being cared for by a friend, and teaching her nephew how to swim. This creates new context for the memory.

Within a few rounds of this process, Susie noticed a discernible difference in how she felt about herself and her past. She smiled and said, "It's strange. Now I really see how my father's issues had absolutely nothing to do with me. He vented his frustrations towards me, but it was never really *about* me. For the first time in years, I feel... free."

**This example uses a fictitious name & is a composite of multiple cases. All identifying details have been changed for confidentiality purposes.*