Explaining the Rationale for Trauma-Focused Work:
Why it’s Good to Talk

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Memories of traumatic events are different to memories of other events. Traumatic memories can cause difficulties because they tend to come into people’s minds uninvited. When they do, they are often very vivid and may bring with them the original distress of the event itself. Sometimes they are so vivid that it feels as if the event is happening again, rather than it being simply remembered.

The cognitive model of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) suggests that part of the problem of PTSD is that the memory of the event or events needs to be brought to mind in one way or another and ‘processed’ (e.g. Meiser-Stedman, R. (2002). Towards a Cognitive-Behavioural Model of PTSD in Children and Adolescents. Clinical Child & Family Psychology Review, 5(4), 217-232). But, because this is likely to be accompanied by a great deal of fear, horror, helplessness or other psychological distress, understandably people often try hard not to think about the event.

Explaining how thinking or talking through the event might help to reduce symptoms can enable people to make well-informed decisions about whether to consent to, and engage with, interventions that focus on the trauma. Active engagement is necessary for processing to take place.

It can help to explain this using a number of metaphors. This leaflet contains four metaphors and a familiar piece of children’s fiction that I commonly use. Examples of these being used in clinical practice are contained in:

A chocolate factory takes all of the individual ingredients, like the cocoa, sugar, and milk, and mixes them up in the right quantities to make bars of chocolate. The chocolate bars are then wrapped up. On the wrapper are words (the ingredients), which explain what is inside. This means that different chocolate bars can be sorted out and stored.

Our minds take the sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, feelings and thoughts of an experience and processes them or bundles them up into memories, which are then 'wrapped up' in the words of a story. The 'wrappers' usually stop the different 'ingredients' from spilling out unexpectedly. We know what is inside each memory from the words on the 'outside'.

If the milk is too hot, or the sugar is too lumpy, the machinery will not be able to mix the ingredients properly and may break down. The ingredients will be left swilling around in the factory waiting to be processed. The machine might try again, but if something is still too hot or too lumpy, it will break down again.

Some events are so scary or horrible in some way that people cannot process the information into memories. So the sensory information, such as sights, sounds and smells, is left unprocessed and may fall into awareness even when they are not wanted. Each time this happens, it might be too scary or horrible to think through, and so the memory remains unprocessed.

The factory might need to get an engineer to help, or it may just need to wait for the milk to cool down a bit, or it might need to break up the sugar into smaller pieces before the machinery can start working again.

Sometimes people are better able to process the memory with some support or help from another person. Sometimes they just need to wait until the right time, and sometimes they need to find a way to think it through gradually, piece by piece, in order to develop the story, as if they are wrapping the memory up in words.

Imagine a well-organised wardrobe; each item is put away carefully with other similar items. When you need something, you know where to find it. You can take it out and wear it, and when you’ve finished using it you can wash it, *occasionally* iron it, and put it back in its place. There is a place for everything, and everything usually stays put. This means that you can close the doors and get on with life.

Our memories for normal events work in a similar way. Each memory is stored alongside other similar memories. When we want to remember an event, we can recall it by bringing the memory to mind, and when we’ve finished with it, we can put the memory back. The memories usually stay put, which means that we can ‘close the doors’ and get on with other aspects of life.

If someone throws you a duvet full of stinging nettles and shouts, “Put it away - quick!” it would hurt to touch and so you might shove it away quickly and try to close the door. But, because it is not put away neatly, the doors would not close – you would have to hold them closed so you can try to get on with other things. But, when you turn your back, the duvet would fall out, stinging you again.

Traumatic memories are like the duvet - painful to handle - and so we try to avoid them. We ‘shove them away’ rather than think them through. This means that they are not stored in the same way as other memories, so they fall into our minds when we don’t want them to. Avoiding them may work for a while, but often they intrude into consciousness again, just as we begin to relax.

We need to take the duvet out - which might sting a bit - and we might need to get someone to help us. We need to fold it up, make room by moving some of the other things in the wardrobe, and we need to place it carefully on the shelf. This will ensure that the duvet stays put.

In much the same way, traumatic memories need to be processed. Sometimes this is best done with help from someone else (e.g. social support or therapy). We might need to adjust our view of the world a bit, but thinking the memory through enables the memory to be processed and stored with other memories so that it stays put.

*This was inspired by the analogy of a disorganised cupboard whose contents spill out and are need of organisation in Ehlers, A. & Clark, D. M., (2000). A Cognitive Model of PTSD. Behaviour, Research and Therapy, 38, 319-345. The embellishments are original.*
I was working with a 14-year-old boy and, just before we went over the traumatic event again, I reminded him about why we were doing the trauma-focused work, using the wardrobe analogy. He listened patiently and then said, “It’s a bit like that David; but, actually, it’s more like this…”

He filled up the waste bin with scrunched-up pieces of paper until it was over-flowing, and said, “These are all the bad things that have happened to me, and as I walk along the road to school [he made the bin walk along and bits of paper fell out of the top] they fall in front of my eyes. And as I go to sleep [he lay the bin down and more pieces of paper fell out] they fall into my dreams…

...But when I come here and talk to you, we take each piece of paper out [he took each of the pieces of paper out], un-scrunch it [he un-scrunched them], and we read it through carefully...

Then we fold them up neatly and place them back in the bottom of the bin [he folded up each piece of paper neatly and placed it in the bottom of the bin] This means that they don’t fall out the top, and I have more room in my head to think about different things.”
I was working with a 9-year-old boy who had been stabbed several times and was having very vivid, frightening nightmares. I was explaining to him that it might be helpful at some point to talk through what had happened with someone, and I was using the earlier stories to explain why. Halfway through the second story, he closed his eyes, screwed his face up and put his hands over his face. I asked if he was okay, and he said, “Yeah, yeah...I think I’ve got it. Is it like this...?”

... On my laptop at home, I’ve got loads of pictures saved as JPEG files. They take up loads of room on the hard drive and some of them are corrupted, so they keep making my computer crash.

...Are you saying that, if I take the pictures of what happened that are stored as JPEGs on MY hard drive [i.e. in his head] and I write out what happened and save that as a Word document instead...

...It’ll take up less room on MY hard drive and stop getting in the way?”

I said, “Yes – that’s pretty much EXACTLY what I’m saying.”
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

Many people are familiar with the story of Harry Potter. When Harry was one-year-old, Voldemort killed both of his parents in front of him. Harry’s maternal aunt adopted him, where he experienced emotional abuse and neglect. He was sent to Hogwarts boarding school, where he formed a good attachment to the Headteacher, Professor Dumbledore. When Harry was a teenager, Voldemort tried to kill him, but failed. When Harry returned safely to Hogwarts, Dumbledore helped Harry to talk through what happened as a way to process the events. Dumbledore may have been a bit more forceful in encouraging Harry to talk about what happened than we would be in therapy, but this is a nice example of how talking about something – even if it is difficult – can help.

Chapter 36 – The Parting of the Ways

‘Harry?’ Dumbledore said gently.

Harry got up and swayed again; the pain in his leg, which he had not noticed all the time he had listened to Crouch, now returned in full measure. He also realised that he was shaking. Dumbledore gripped his arm, and helped him out into the dark corridor.

‘I want you to come up to my office first, Harry,’ he said quietly, as they headed up the passageway. ‘Sirius is waiting for us there.’

Dumbledore supported Harry by taking his arm, calmly explained what was going to happen next, and took Harry to his office, where he would feel safe – especially as Sirius, Harry’s godfather, was waiting for him there.

Harry nodded. A kind of numbness and a sense of complete unreality were upon him, but he did not care; he was even glad of it. He didn’t want to have to think about anything that had happened since he had first touched the Triwizard Cup. He didn’t want to have to examine the memories fresh and sharp as photographs, which kept flashing across his mind. Mad-Eye Moody, inside the trunk. Wormtail, slumped on the ground, cradling his stump of an arm. Voldemort, rising from the steaming cauldron. Cedric … dead … Cedric, asking to be returned to his parents …

Harry seems to be dissociating (numbness and unreality). He is also suffering from core symptoms of PTSD: avoidance of the memories, which intruded vividly into his consciousness.

‘Professor,’ Harry mumbled, ‘where are Mr and Mrs Diggory?’

‘They are with Professor Sprout,’ said Dumbledore. His voice, which had been so calm throughout the interrogation of Barty Crouch, shook very slightly for the first time. ‘She was Head of Cedric’s house, and knew him best.’

They had reached the stone gargoyle. Dumbledore gave the password, it sprang aside and he and Harry went up the moving spiral staircase to the oak door. Dumbledore pushed it open.

The familiar ritual of having to give a password to get to the staircase may have added to Harry’s sense of safety.

Sirius was standing there. His face was white and gaunt as it had been when he had escaped from Azkaban. In one swift movement, he had crossed the room. ‘Harry, are you all right? I knew it – I knew something like this – what happened?’

His hands shook as he helped Harry into a chair in front of the desk.
'What happened? He asked more urgently.

Sirius was clearly distressed by Harry’s experience, as carers of traumatised children often are.

Dumbledore began to tell Sirius everything Barty Crouch had said. Harry was only half listening. So tired every bone in his body was aching, he wanted nothing more than to sit here, undisturbed, for hours and hours, until he fell asleep and didn’t have to think or feel any more.

Harry seems to be finding it difficult to concentrate which is another symptom of PTSD

There was a soft rush of wings, Fawkes the phoenix had left his perch, flown across the office, and landed on Harry’s knee.

’Lo, Fawkes,’ said Harry quietly. He stroked the phoenix’s beautiful scarlet and gold plumage. Fawkes blinked peacefully up at him. There was something comforting about his warm weight.

Harry was comforted by the familiar animal sitting on his knee, in the same way that children may be comforted by the presence of a familiar pet.

Dumbledore had stopped talking. He sat down opposite Harry, behind his desk. He was looking at Harry, who avoided his eyes. Dumbledore was going to question him. He was going to make Harry relive everything.

’I need to know what happened after you touched the Portkey in the maze, Harry,’ said Dumbledore.

’We can leave that til morning, can’t we, Dumbledore?’ said Sirius harshly. He had put a hand on Harry’s shoulder. ”Let him have a sleep. Let him rest.”

Now that Harry was safe and comfortable, surrounded by familiar things and people, Dumbledore tried to encourage Harry to tell the story of what happened. Sirius tried to avoid putting Harry through that ordeal – such avoidance by proxy is common.

Harry felt a rush of gratitude towards Sirius, but Dumbledore took no notice of Sirius’ words. He leant forward towards Harry. Very unwillingly, Harry raised his head, and looked into those blue eyes.

’If I thought I could help you,’ Dumbledore said gently, ’by putting you into an enchanted sleep, and allowing you to postpone the moment when you would have to think about what has happened tonight, I would do it. But I know better. Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. You have shown bravery beyond anything I could have expected of you. I ask you to demonstrate your courage one more time. I ask you to tell us what happened.’

Dumbledore did not go along with the avoidance. Instead, he explained the importance of processing the events. I am not aware of any research evidence to support Dumbledore’s claim that numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it. But in therapy, we ensure that the client understands the rationale for trauma-focused work, and what it will involve, and we make sure that they are well enough supported so that they are able to make an active, well-informed choice about whether to do it. I worry that Dumbledore may have been a little too forceful.
The phoenix let out one soft quavering note. It shivered in the air, and Harry felt as though a drop of hot liquid had slipped down his throat into his stomach, warming him, and strengthening him. He took a deep breath and began to tell them. As he spoke, visions of everything that had passed that night seemed to rise before his eyes; he saw the sparkling surface of the Potion which had revived Voldemort; he saw the Death Eaters Apparating between the graves around them; he saw Cedric’s body, lying on the ground beside the Cup. Once or twice, Sirius made a noise as though about to say something, his hand still tight on Harry’s shoulder, but Dumbledore raised his hand to stop him, and Harry was glad of this, because it was easier to keep going now he had started.

The trauma memories were triggered vividly as Harry processed them and gave them words. Sirius seemed to want to stop it, but Dumbledore rightly continued, which Harry seemed to appreciate.

It was even a relief; he felt almost as though something poisonous was being extracted from him; it was costing him every bit of determination he had to keep talking, yet he sensed that once he had finished he would feel better.