

Changing Tapes

Memories, pressed between the pages of my mind

Memories, sweetened thru the ages just like wine

Elvis Presley

Each experience we have leaves an impression somewhere in the nether regions of our brains. Plato compared these memory traces to impressions made in a wax-like substance. Today, we call them “old tapes.” Each of these impressions is connected to the sensory memory (what we saw, tasted, smelled, heard, or touched when the impression was formed) and the emotional reaction we had to the experience. The brain stores the impression of the experience so that it is connected to the sensory memory and the emotional reaction that went with it. When one part of the memory gets “hooked,” the rest of the memory tends to come along with it.

Almost anything can dredge a stored impression into our consciousness: a scene, a taste, a smell, a sound or a song, or even a tactile sensation. This is why hearing a song on the radio (a sensory memory) can sometimes evoke a vivid memory of an experience and the emotional reaction that went with it. When we connect to any one part of a memory, the rest of that memory tends to come along with it. When that one memory door opens, it often brings back other parts of the memory as well. If the memory is important, we tend to re-experience it powerfully in the present moment.

For example, the Vapors, *Turning Japanese* conjures up a memory of my high school tennis team wearing our tennis racket covers on our heads, seat dancing and singing with the radio at the top of our lungs. *I'm turning Japanese, I think I'm turning Japanese, I really think so. I'm turning Japanese, I think I'm turning Japanese, I really think so.* I have absolutely no idea why we had the tennis racket covers on our heads as we bounced along to this song, but it certainly added entertainment value because we were all but howling with laughter by the end of the song. We were coming home from a tennis tournament that had been at a swanky private club at the beach and had done fairly well. If I let myself slide into the memory, I feel the near manic joy of bouncing up and down with a tennis racket cover on my head, laughing so hard I almost cried and feel the bond we shared as a team in that moment. Other sensory memories also come in to play. I can almost taste lemon lime Gatorade, feel the sticky sultry heat and smell the salty fish-like smell that characterizes the Texas coast.

Unfortunately, the memories that surface aren't always happy. For example, even now, decades after being sexually abused by my grandfather, a whiff of *Old Spice* can still make my skin crawl. When I first started working though the abuse, that simple whiff could spring me into a full blown panic attack because it dredged up other sensory memories as well. With all the memory action happening, it was easy to get lost in the past and it felt like I was going through the sexual abuse all over again.

Because lots of the important memories are connected to painful events, it's important to find ways to work with memories to reframe and release them. Otherwise, most of us

have a tendency to find ways to avoid connecting to the memories or ways to drown them out so that we don't feel them. Many sexual abuse survivors try to avoid things that remind them of their abuse. Sometimes this avoidance is conscious. Someone who was raped at a party while drinking may avoid parties where lots of people are drinking and may avoid getting drunk again. Often, the avoidance is not. For example, a friend of mine used to throw up when she smelled condoms. This certainly put a damper on any activity that might involve condoms. Similarly, many sexual abuse survivors avoid sex even though they can't explicitly say why they avoid it. Many people create their lives in such a way that they are too busy to feel or deal with the memories that come up. This was totally the escape route I took until it quit working and I finally had a physical breakdown.

While it is possible to work through memories on one's own, it often helps to have help working through them. Because these memory traces or old tapes are connected to sensory input and are emotionally charged, you can't just think or talk them away. You've got to process them through the body and find a way to defuse the emotional charge. Action oriented approaches to therapy such as dance or movement therapy, psychodrama or gestalt therapy, when done well, are particularly helpful because they bring the "then and there" into the "here and now." And because they engage the body, they provide an opportunity to discharge the emotions related to the memory. Once the emotions have been released, it's a lot easier to reframe the incident so that the meaning is less personally damning. Art therapy, yoga therapy or body work in conjunction with standard talk therapy can also be useful.

At a more general level, practices that help one be grounded in the present moment are also very useful in working with and releasing memories. Some people find meditation, especially with a group, to be helpful. Other people find yoga or tai chi to be helpful. And, while you can do yoga and tai chi on your own, it is very helpful, at first, to take a class or go to a group. Not only does the instruction from the teacher help keep you focused, the energy of the group has a way of providing a safe container.

By working with your memories rather than avoiding them or blotting them out with patterns of busyness, channel surfing, video game addictions, surfing the internet or drug and/or other chemical or food ingestion, you can release and reframe the painful ones and celebrate the pleasant ones, so that they become "sweetened thru the ages just like wine."

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