My Personal History with P.T.S.D.

As a psychologist who works with clients who have had psychological trauma in their past it is often helpful for them to know that I have been through my own version of trauma and that the treatment that I now use in practice is one that has been very helpful personally for me as a client. I don’t pretend to know exactly what it feels like to be my client, but I do know what it is like to have panic attacks and flashbacks.

I went to my first E.M.D.R. training in Oklahoma City in 1997. I had heard about E.M.D.R. from another counselor who described it as “waving your hand in front of your clients and then they get better.” Needless to say I was very skeptical of the value of such a technique. However, I went to the workshop with another psychologist friend of mine, primarily because we needed the additional C.E.U.s (continuing educational units) and I wanted to go to dinner in Oklahoma City. I arrived on a Thursday night and the workshop began on Friday morning. I was still skeptical but when the time came for practicing the technique I decided to do some work on a trauma of my own that had been a painful memory for many years.

When I was very young I lived next to a houseful of very unhappy and sometimes cruel children. There were six kids in the family and they were very poor, very hostile, and frequently assaultive of the other children in the neighborhood. As I sat down to practice E.M.D.R. with another therapist at the workshop I remembered a specific event that occurred on Christmas day in 1950 when I was four years old. What occurred had been a pivotal event in my growing up. It was something that I often dreamed about and caused me anxiety whenever I was around groups of my peers who were just “hanging out”.

As I began to recall the traumatic memory I remember thinking about a phrase that often came to mind, “I can’t trust anyone” and then suddenly reacting with a deep pain in my stomach just thinking about it. As I floated back in time, watching the hand of the treating therapist move back and forth in front of me, I clearly recalled that Christmas morning. It was a sunny day, very warm for late December, and I had just gotten a brand new basketball. Being four years old I wasn’t too good at dribbling but my parents shooed me outside to practice on our sidewalk in front of our house. The kids next door were outside and they quickly came over to grab my new basketball so they could play “keep away” from me. Being the youngest kid on the block I remembered that this was a game they often played simply to harass me.

As the therapist continued the E.M.D.R. the memory unfolded in more detail. I remember that the oldest kid, he was age 16, went inside their house and grabbed a baseball bat.

They started playing baseball with my new basketball. Even at age four I knew that they would eventually ruin my basketball by hitting with a baseball bat and knocking out of round. After a moment’s hesitation I charged in to grab the ball thinking that I could catch before the batter could hit it. Instead the kid with the ball bat swung at my basketball missing it but hitting me square in the face.

As I sat with the therapist doing E.M.D.R. tears began to roll down my face. I remembered the scene very clearly of feeling the bat hit the right side of my face, feeling my body reeling from the impact of the bat, and then a kind of pain I had never known before spread inside my face and down into my neck. I didn’t just recall the memory; I relived it. The shock of having someone hit me very hard and with no remorse was a blow to my feelings that I was safe in this world. Everything changed in that instant.

It became clear to me in that flash of time that people could not be trusted and that they were unsafe to be around. When the therapist asked me, “What are you aware of now?” I felt the hot tears running down my cheeks and stated, “I feel like I am four years old and can’t trust anyone not even myself!”

As we continued with the E.M.D.R. I moved from feeling hopeless, helpless, and very sad to becoming angry for the cruelty of the act. The memory of six children aged six to sixteen, teasing a four year old boy and then hitting him in the face with a ball bat for their own amusement made me feel the same righteous indignation that I had felt when I first realized that they were going to ruin my new basketball if I didn’t do something to stop them.

We did a few more sets of eye movements and my feelings began to change again. I was moving away from anger and my stomach wasn’t hurting as much. Instead I was thinking about what a brave little boy I was to stand up to six kids who were enormously bigger and stronger than me. I felt a sense a pride in myself and also a level of compassionate understanding that I had not experienced before. It was that I was being led to realize that the kids next door were very unhappy with their lives. They were very poor, wore hand-me-down clothing, and were probably made fun of when they went to school for their shabby appearance. Their parents were both angry alcoholics and very aggressive with their children so it became self-evident that the children were simply acting the way they had seen their parents act toward them.

By the end of the day, after eight sets of eye movements, I felt as though a burden had been lifted from me. I was beginning to realize that this event of 1950 had kept me in a state of fear of my peers whenever they gathered from more than 45 years. As I thought about the episode now I had the epiphany that I no longer had to fear the past or hold a resentment toward those children of my early past. In fact, I could release the resentment that often accompanied my remembrances and forgive them. As a psychologist, I had studied dysfunctional families and realized that children generally model their behavior after those adults and older siblings that are influential in their lives.

I worked on this same memory on Saturday morning for about one hour and when I met my buddy for lunch I told him, “I have to admit that this E.M.D.R. actually really helped get over a childhood trauma. I think this technique might actually really work!” That was in 1997 and since that time I have been to more than thirty workshops, read more than a dozen books, moved up through three levels of certification, and continued to refine this technique that has proven to be so helpful to me personally as well as my clients.

The incident at age four was not the only trauma in my life, rarely does anyone my age get through life with only one traumatic event, but it was the first of several that I worked on using E.M.D.R. as a technique. Many other things have been helpful in reducing panic, anxiety, depression, and the feeling of inadequacy that often accompany P.T.S.D. However, E.M.D.R. along with biofeedback, cognitive-behavioral therapy, prayer, physical exercise, having a support network, and a spiritual rededication have all proved very helpful in allowing me to feel fully alive and grateful for the opportunities that have been presented to me.