

MEMORIES AND TRAUMA

When an event happens, we receive information about that event through our senses. We see or hear something and our eyes or ears send that information up to our brain. This is done by a set of electronic messages which travel up our nerves. When these messages reach our brain they go to the relevant department, messages from the eyes to the visual department for example. Your brain ties all these individual messages together into a bigger message which summarises all that information.

For example, if you see a dog moving its mouth and hear a barking noise, your brain puts those two together and understands that it's that one dog that's barking, instead of there being two separate dogs.

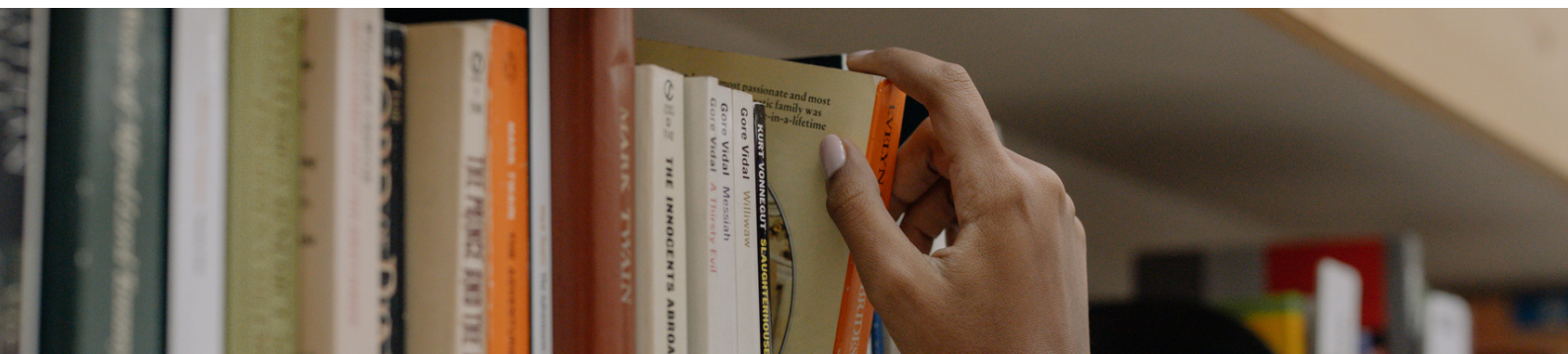
Your brain takes all these summarising messages and tries to organise them into themes (eg. Memories about dogs) and tries to put them into the time period and location context (eg. I saw that dog last week/near my nan's house).

This means that the memory gives us some information about the theme (eg. What dogs are like), information about that time period (eg. Last week was stressful) and about the location (eg. My nan lives in an unsafe area). We call these beliefs. If we get lots of messages about the same topic, we're more likely to have stronger beliefs on that topic



Because the messages aren't summarised or put into the time/place context, the pain feels like it's still happening now. We still feel uneasy because it feels like the situation we're in now is still dangerous.

The problem is that these 'jagged' messages don't simply go away over time. They need to be summarised, put into their proper context and 'filed away' by the brain. Your brain keeps trying to do this which is why these feelings and memories may seem to keep coming to mind when you didn't want them to. It's just your brain trying to organise.



Unfortunately, these messages are painful to experience so we avoid them. This leads to cycles of remember -> avoid -> remember -> avoid. Sometimes it gets difficult to avoid them, so people use other tools, distractions, substances etc. to numb them out.

Another reason the memories may come to mind is that your brain makes links between similar messages, like with the summarising work mentioned earlier. That's why, for example, you hear a song and your mind goes back to where you first heard it. Similarly, if you see someone who looks similar to the person who caused the trauma.

For example, it may trigger a link in your brain to the painful trauma message. Normally another part of your brain would kick in and say 'no, hang on, this is different because the other person you saw was a long time ago' but remember, trauma memories aren't put in their proper time/place context. This makes it feel like the trauma is happening again, right now.

Everything we've described about the information from your senses from trauma experiences is also the same with information from your body. When we are scared, for example, we feel certain things in our body, maybe our stomach or chest. Again, in a trauma, these are intense messages and get 'stuck'.

This means that, just like seeing a person who looks similar, if we get a similar feeling in our stomach etc. to how we felt during the trauma, it may trigger a link to the painful trauma message. This makes it feel like it's happening again, right now.

This explains how we can literally carry trauma around with us in our bodies.



How does therapy help?

Therapy has two main approaches:

The first is to work with the brain's natural instinct to organise the memory. We teach activities to soothe the pain so you don't have to avoid it and your brain has time to sort the memory.

Secondly we use similar soothing methods to allow you to come into contact with the bodily feelings for long enough that you can learn that 'I'm safe now, it's not still going on. I can look after myself. I'm not overwhelmed'.

