

## How to Mindfully Transform a Painful Memory

Adapted from Dr. Ronald Alexander's book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss, and Change* (New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

Memories can be greatly distorted by strong, painful emotions from a trauma and can create unwholesome, distorted self-judgments. Returning to the original ordeal from the safety of the present, particularly with a supportive therapist or a wise and trusted friend at your side, can allow you to look again at how the events unfolded, using your logical mind to make sense of what you see with your mind's eye. When immersed in the original experience, you probably overlooked evidence that contradicted your emotional reality. For example, if as a child you have a memory of being laughed at by all your classmates when giving a presentation the memory of this awful day could be so painful that you have difficulty speaking in front of others as an adult. The emotional or perceived reality was that *everyone* laughed and *no one* showed support. In actuality, such extremes are unlikely. In returning to this memory, you might remember that one child shushed the others or that the teacher scolded those who were laughing. As you recall this evidence that the incident wasn't entirely negative, you can draw strength from the memory of someone stepping in or helping you. Rather than allowing a painful past experience to keep you in a state of contraction, you can remember its positive aspects and use them to give you courage.

The mind has the marvelous capacity to re-live the emotions connected to a memory over and over again, each time you recall it. When you close your eyes and imagine yourself standing at the shore of a lake, happily tossing in stones with your grandfather at your side, you recreate the feelings of contentment and love. You can use such a wholesome memory as an antidote to emotional pain whenever you feel unloved or insecure.

In my therapy practice when a client has an unwholesome self-judgment, I help her experience its wholesome antidote. For example, an interior designer I work with felt that she wasn't unique or special. I knew from our sessions that this belief was holding her back from expanding her business and I asked her to recall a time when she felt unique or special.

Sometimes my clients insist that they never, not for a moment, felt a particular wholesome quality, but I always press this point, because I know that with some effort, they can find one, however small. I tell them that it's as if their computer has given them the error message "file not found" because they're searched for it in the wrong area of their hard drive. Through a mindfulness meditation practice, you can recover such moments that the conscious mind has forgotten and "restore the file." Then you can reprogram your belief system, consciously choosing to lay a new neural network. However, if you decide to retain that file, you reinforce the old unwholesome belief, ensuring that it will affect your self-image in the future.

You can return repeatedly to this wholesome memory, all the while using it as a positive antidote. When you do, you'll reinforce a new, consciously chosen, wholesome self-judgment. My client was able to access a memory of putting her senior art project on display for the class, and the tremendous admiration and respect her classmates showered on her. Each time she recalled this memory, it re-created in her feelings of being talented, creative, and special.

Here are two more tips from my book, *Wise Mind, Open Mind* on how to transform a painful memory:

### **Create a New Memory**

Another technique for transforming an unwholesome memory into a wholesome one is to consciously rewrite a traumatic memory. Doing so lessens the intensity of the unwholesome feelings attached to it and lays new neural networks for remembering a

positive, enhancing experience (albeit one created in the imagination). By creating this healing memory, you ensure that whenever the original memory arises in your awareness, it won't cause you as much pain as it used to.

### **Make an Unwholesome Memory Wholesome**

Practice the following mindful meditation:

- Get into a comfortable posture either sitting crossed legged on a meditation cushion or with your legs extended straight out with your back against a wall for support, or sit in a chair with a firm back, keeping your feet on the floor and your spine straight, and tucking in your chin slightly to keep your vertebrae aligned properly.
- With your eyes closed or halfway open, fixating them on one spot, start to pay attention to your breathing. Breathe in with awareness of your lungs and your diaphragm. As you inhale, say to yourself, "In." Exhale from your lungs and then your abdomen, saying to yourself, "Out." Do this each time you breathe. You can also use the words "rising" and "falling away," or "comfort" and "letting go," or "surrender" and "release."
- After meditating for a few minutes, turn your mind's eye to the scene of an upsetting memory, recalling exactly where you were, how you felt, and any sensory experiences you had at the time (remembering the sensory aspects will help you remove any unwholesome feelings that come up when you have similar experiences in the future, for instance, if you usually become agitated when it rains, because you associate it with that unpleasant memory). Put yourself completely in the scene.
- As the scene starts to unfold, imagine yourself being drawn upward and backward by an invisible source that deposits you in a balcony seat from which

you gaze down at the drama before you. Be aware that you're writing the script of this play, and begin to rewrite it. Imagine that in the moment of your embarrassment, the people around you express support, smiling and encouraging you to continue.

- Experience the discomfort of this moment mingling with your rising courage, and allow yourself to breathe deeply. Move the feelings through your body as you rewrite the scene to unfold in a way that alleviates your discomfort and makes you feel reassured of being loved and accepted by the people around you.

Becoming more insightful and reflective through a mindfulness practice leads to greater awareness of the unwholesome memories produced by your mind. You may be tempted to be critical of your ability to meditate or quickly shift the painful memory, but what you really are is a person making a long and sometimes arduous journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance. Don't hold yourself to unrealistic standards and expect to quickly transform what are often lifelong thinking habits.