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SELF-HELP METHODS

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INTRODUCTION

In this short self-help manual different methods that can help you handle usual distressing after-effects of potentially traumatic events will be depicted. It is written in order to help following a variety of potentially traumatic events such as accidents, violence including rape, traumatic aspects of sudden loss, and other strong experiences that has led to strong sensory exposure, distressing thoughts or fantasies. The methods are not to be thought of as a substitute for therapy when that is needed, but rather as a supplement to professional help. When it comes to coping with adverse events, it is important to have a variety of strategies at one's disposal and to be able to use them in a flexible way. I hope that this manual will add to your arsenal of strategies.

Although few of the methods in this manual have been rigorously researched, we have seen through clinical experience that they have been very helpful for people following traumatic events. It is important, however, to remember that there usually is no instant effect from using them. Like so many methods, they require practice and training to have an effect. Different people can make use of different methods, and thus several different methods are proposed for handling difficult images, thoughts, or reactions. You may have to try out different strategies or methods to find the one that has the best effect for you.

HOW TO TAKE CONTROL WITH INTRUSIVE MEMORIES?

Following potentially traumatic situations, it is very common to experience intrusive memories that enter consciousness and cause distress. Especially in the first period following the event, this is to be looked upon as a usual and normal reaction. However, if the intrusive material continues to be bothersome over the first weeks following the event, or it increases in intensity and/or frequency, the methods described below can be used to gain control and reduce the distress the intrusive material creates. By using these methods, it is possible to bring the memories under better control. They are a supplement to more active traumatherapeutic methods requiring a professional therapist, and can be used before or in parallel to professional help. If these methods are inadequate in gaining control with the material, it is strongly recommended that you seek professional assistance. Most intrusive memories come in the form of intrusive sensory impressions with intrusions from visual impressions as the most common response. When aiming to change an impression, it is

important to remember how many dimensions a sensory impression can have. For example, a visual impression can be changed along the following dimensions:

- clarity
- contrast
- focus
- movement
- distance
- speed
- color
- place
- depth
- duration
- position
- hue

Likewise, an auditory impression can be described according to dimensions such as intensity, frequency, tonal frequency etc. When learning to change or take control with bothersome memories, it can be helpful to keep in mind that all sensory channels have different dimensions that can be changed. This will give you a variety of options when it comes to the ways that you can bring about change.

The screen technique

A method that many have benefited by over the years is the screen method. This comes in many different versions and can be varied and tailor-made to your own needs. Here is what you do:

Imagine that you are looking at a TV-screen, sit in a movie theater or in front of a computer screen. Bring up the visual image that is bothering you and place it on the screen in front of you. Notice if it is in black and white or in color. Change the color, make it greyer, or change it into black and white. Play around with the colors of the image. Try to look at the image from a different angle, pretend you are moving around and look at it from other perspectives. If it is hard to do, use time on this task and do not criticize yourself if you cannot make it happen. Just notice what happens. Maybe you can see it from above or from

the side? Then try something else: Imagine that you see the image in the form that is bothering you. After bringing it up on the screen, imagine that you have a remote control in your hand. Press the “off” button to remove the image. Bring it up again and do the same several times. Just press the “off” button to close the “image program”. You need to practice to get control over the image. If it is hard to take the image away, try changing channels or zap. Use 10 minutes a day until you see that you gain control of the intrusive image instead of it controlling you. You should refrain from this training close to bedtime. Practice in the afternoon or early evening so as not to interfere with sleep.

To further help you gain control with intrusive images you can add the following component:

Bring the memory up on the screen again. On TV you will have seen how the producer often bring another picture into the corner of a screen to enable you to follow something that goes on apart from what takes up the main part of the screen. Now place a very pleasant image in the upper right corner of your screen while the negative image takes up the rest of the screen. Then you rapidly let the two images change place, that is; the intrusive image now is to be the small image up in the right hand corner of the screen. Use some time to train on letting these two images rapidly change places. When you have the pleasant picture filling most of the screen and the intrusive image in its upper right corner, start moving the intrusive image. Move it down to the right lower corner, then over to the left lower corner, up to the left corner and then back to its original upper right hand corner. Then close the small image and let the screen be totally filled with the pleasurable image. If you are used to working on a computer you can imagine closing the program instead of placing it on the tool bar or you can send the image to the garbage bin.

If it is more like an intrusive movie or a series of pictures that are running in front of your eyes you will have to vary this method. If this is the case here is what you do: *Imagine that there is a video- or DVD-player attached to your screen. Imagine putting in a cassette or recordable DVD record. Right before starting viewing your movie on your screen press the “record” button and start the recording. Start running the movie in order for it all to be entered on the recording. Run the movie until you are in safety or the intrusive memory is ended. When you are at the end of the movie stop recording and imagine pressing the “eject” button. Place the cassette or DVD-record in a lockable*

drawer, lock it there and know that you have the key and can access it at a future point in time if you want to.

Some people find that it is hard to record some of the sequences of the film. If this happens to you just stop the movie at that point, adjust the tracking control, freeze it for a moment or run it back and forth a couple of times over this point until you are sure you have it all recorded.

One extra dimension that can be added here is that one can 'enter' the movie at the end and then play it backwards until the beginning. This can as the other techniques above lead to an altered memory sequence or disturb the consolidation of the memory. Lastly, it is possible to bring new features into the memory, i.e. a magical helper or making a positive change to the image.

Moving the image. The hand method.

Many people have made use of another method to gain control over intrusive visual images. Here is the instruction to follow:

Imagine seeing the intrusive image in front of you. It can be distressing to bring it up, but do it anyway. Where do you see it? How far from your eyes do you see it? Usually people see it quite close but not so close that it is hard to focus on it. Most people see it at an arm's length, fairly close. Now you can try moving it further away from you. Can you do that? Let it move further and further away from you. Just notice what happens when it moves further away. Does it become smaller or change in other ways? Let it go all the way until it comes to the wall, door or other barrier and then you let it float away as a sheet of paper like you will have seen on television. Do it again and experience how good it is to be able to control the image instead of the image controlling you.

If you have problems moving the image you can make use of the hand method. Here is the instruction:

Can you see the intrusive image? It can be very bothersome, but I want you to try something that has been helpful for others. When you see it, how close is it? Imagine seeing a person you trust in front of you with the palm of his/her hand facing you. He/she is standing a little to the side and just holding his/her hand with the palm facing you at the distance where you see the intrusive image. Try to see the image inside the palm of this

hand. Can you do that? Then imagine this hand slowly moving backwards taking the image further and further away from you. When it is far away from you, imagine the person closing the palm and taking the image away behind his/her back in a swift motion. This is a method where you can solicit help from this person and instead of doing it all in your imagination you can let the person help you by moving his/her hand in reality. Ask him/her to place his/her palm (facing you) where you see the image and then have him/her move the hand further away.

As with other methods it may take some time before you succeed. It is of course unpleasant to approach something you rather would forget, but if you practice, you can reduce and gain control over the intrusive visual memories.

Changing other intrusive sensory impressions

The same principles of change as described above can be used for intrusive memories in other sensory channels. If it is **auditory memories**, you can imagine that you hear them from a radio, an mp3player, a television with only sounds etc. Then you start manipulating the auditory memory by toning down the sound, change the speed, enter some music into the memory, or change another dimension of the memory. You can also imagine that you have a remote control where you turn the sound on and off, etc. Some imagine sitting in a record producing studio where they have a number of controls they can adjust to change, rerecord or play around with extra sound effects to change the bothersome memory. As with visual images, you can also record the intrusive memory onto a tape that can be locked in a drawer in your fantasy.

While taste and smell impressions can linger on following a traumatic event they usually do not come back into consciousness without a reminder triggering them. For **taste impressions**, it is possible to use a countering taste, i.e., some candy or other good taste that one can use to counteract the bothersome taste. Fantasy can also be called upon to remember especially good taste impressions, i.e. ice cream. Think about this taste and recall how it tastes and how that taste can fill you with good memories. While keeping that good memory in mind try to imagine how the taste is. What are its dimensions? Where do you feel it in your mouth? Can you remember the good situations and places where you felt that good taste? How can you keep holding on to that good taste? How would you describe that

wonderful taste to others? Use the taste to counteract the negative taste impression.

What was briefly described above is called counter-conditioning. It is possible to recall good situations (memories, experiences), that be a good taste, seeing something beautiful, hearing some wonderful music or taking a relaxing bath, and make a connection between good experiences and a specific point on your body. Every time you experience or retrieve a good memory into your consciousness, you can press this point i.e. the side of your hand (the karate point) or the top of your middle finger and anchor the good experience to this point. Make it a habit to link this point with positive experiences. Press the point when you experience a positive mood, a peak experience or when you bring good memories into your memory. If you do this regularly or train on doing it, just pressing this point will trigger a conditioned (or associated) positive response. You can use the point as a counter-conditioning point to balance an intrusive memory, for example a taste impression that is triggered. By practice, this method adds to your coping methods and provides you with flexibility when a distressing memory appears.

For **smell impressions**, the use of counter smells in your nostril is a possibility. You can gently apply some good smelling substance in your nostrils to counteract the negative smell impression. In addition, you can use your imagination to start manipulating the memory, i.e. encapsulate it, and let it blend with other smells or change it slightly by adding some substance to it. Again, by thinking you are in a smell laboratory with many different substances at your disposal where you can experiment with changing the smell may help you control this specific intrusive memory. You can also imagine that you put a container around it, use a fan, or hover to remove it, letting strong winds blow it away, lighting a fire to press it away, etc. To let the smell flow into a balloon that you then make smaller and smaller is another way to allow your fantasy to work on the smell. In your fantasy you can call in good smells and let them gradually "cover" the intrusive smell. You can do this the following way:

Think of a smell you find particularly attractive. Can you smell it? Just notice how good it is, how it feels and how it can fill your entire nose. Let this wonderful smell press the bad smell away. Think of the good smell as a strong smell that will win the fight against the bothersome smell. Use your fantasy to let this smell be powerful and dominating.

Body memories can also develop intrusive qualities but usually they need a

concrete reminder to trigger reexperiences. Breathing methods and other tension releasing methods to be described later can reduce the intensity of such sensations. Body massage, aromatherapy and other methods that feel good for your body can also reduce bodily memories. If you have experienced violence and it is difficult to let others touch you, you may want to consider seeking professional help to reduce the discomfort.

Other imagery techniques

When working with intrusive memories you may yourself find ways of varying methods if the methods described above does not help. Try to change one of the many dimensions that the sensory image has. For example visualize the contours or the form change, turn the situation around or look from a different perspective, pull down a curtain in front of the image, use an eraser to rub it away, lock it in a drawer, keep the smell in a container etc. If you have used a photo image program on a computer, you can use the editing function in your fantasy and alter the qualities of the memory.

METHODS TO REDUCE BODILY AROUSAL OR TENSION

Many people who have lived through traumatic or critical events experience bodily tension and distress in the aftermath. The alarm reaction that is mobilized to face the threat keeps lingering on in the body and it is difficult to calm oneself down. The methods mentioned below will help you do this.

The deep breathing technique

This is a method used within meditation/yoga. Emergency personnel can use this method while responding to an event to calm down and be ready for upcoming tasks, and to be mentally prepared and cope effectively. When air is drawn in through the nose it will go up into one's cranium and pass near a center that regulate the degree of arousal in the body (hypothalamus). This leads to a rapid "cooling" of this center and your heart rate will automatically decrease. The instruction is:

The first thing you should do when feeling that your body is aroused is to breathe deep and slowly in through your nose with your mouth closed. If it is hard for you to breathe through your nose, you breathe deeply through your mouth. Breathe deeply but slowly

making sure you fill your lungs. While you breathe in, count slowly to five. To make sure you breathe deeply you can place your hands on your stomach and feel them being lifted as your chest fills with air. Although you do not breathe with your stomach, it feels like it when you inhale deeply. After you have filled your lungs count slowly to five before you exhale slowly through your mouth. Again, count slowly to five while you do that. Then you wait while you again count slowly to five and then you repeat the whole sequence; breathing in through your nose, holding your breath, slowly breathing out, all while counting slowly to five. Continue doing this 4 to 5 times and notice how the body slowly calms down. It may be easier to do this with your eyes closed, but if you do not want to do that, it is ok.

Remember that this is just like in sport; you have to practice the methods repeatedly to become skilled in calming your body in this way. If you practice, you can use the technique in any situation where you need to calm yourself rapidly. In the beginning, it can be difficult to keep focused on your breathing but with training, it comes more easily. If other thoughts enter your mind while you are performing this breathing exercise just tell yourself that they can wait and concentrate on the breathing again.

Benson's relaxation response

The American physician Herbert Benson (1975) developed a relaxation response based on studies of different relaxation methods that he studied, including meditation, yoga, self-hypnosis, progressive relaxation, and others. He distilled the active ingredients and the common elements in these methods and used this for the basis of his own method.

Benson's method:

- 1) Sit quiet in a comfortable position
- 2) Close your eyes.
- 3) Relax all your muscles, starting with your legs and gradually up to your head and face. Keep them relaxed.
- 4) Breathe through your nose. Notice how you breathe. While you breathe out, say the word "calm" or another word quietly within yourself. For example: breathe in....out, "calm", breathe in.... out, "calm". Breathe easy and naturally.

- 5) Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You can open your eyes to check the time but do not use an alarm. When you are finished, you sit quietly for several minutes, first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes open. If you use the method in bed, you will hopefully be able to go from relaxation to sleep. If you want to and are close to sleep you just continue to focus on your breathing until you fall asleep.
- 6) Do not worry about being able to become deeply relaxed. Use a passive attitude and just notice what happens and let the relaxation come at its own tempo. When distracting thoughts enter your mind, try to overlook them, repeat your word or mantra, and let them pass. With exercise, the relaxation can come with less work from your side. Use the method twice daily but not right after a meal.

Try not to get irritated if you are not able to make this work the first times, just wait and notice what happens. If we let performance anxiety enter the relaxation, we only become tenser. Also, make sure that you sit or lie in a position where muscle groups are not tensed, that is without your arms or legs crossed.

Safe place method

This method makes use of a mental image to create peace of mind or relaxation. Here you should think of a place or situation that makes you feel calm and safe. This can be a place where you have spent a holiday, a place you visit to feel calm, a place you make up in your imagination or have seen on film or television. It can be from a mountain trip, a summer memory, a family gathering, etc. When you have decided on your safe place, you should go to this place in your fantasy. Then you do the following:

”Use your imagination to really be in that place with all of you. Most people feel that this is easiest with their eyes closed. Bring up the place or situation you chose and imagine being there. Look around you and notice what you see. Look at the details and notice the color and forms around you. Let your eyes rest on pleasant things you see. Let what you see increase the good feeling you have inside, let it relax you. Remember that this is your special place that you can go to whenever you want. Notice if you can smell some of the good, pleasant smells that are part of this place or situation. Notice how that pleasant smell can fill your nostril, while you at the same time hear the sounds you associate with this

place. They are well known pleasurable sounds that you feel are part of this place. Notice how good it is to sit, stand, lie, or walk about in this place. Notice what is around you. Maybe you are at a place where you can feel the wind lightly dance around your face, hair, the sun pleasantly warms your body, and birds sing. There may be the smell of flowers in the air or the smell of some favorite food of yours? Maybe you hear the voice of a loved one making you feel safe and calm. At your safe place you can see, hear, smell, and feel exactly what you want and what will make you feel calm and safe. To this place you can go anytime you want and just by thinking about it you can feel more safe and calm.”

Through such mental images, you can train your ability to control how your body feels and thus manage to lower stress and tension.

Which relaxation method to choose depends on several factors. The deep breathing technique can rapidly change your bodily activation in a situation where you need to do just that, while the other methods need more time to achieve an effect. They can provide a deeper relaxation and have other positive effects on your well-being. They have the same aim in common; to lower bodily arousal. In addition to these methods you can use other activities you previously have found to have a relaxing effect on you. Music should also be mentioned. Within stress management both music and physical activity have been found to lower tension and if this is part of your repertoire of interest you can further develop them. For some, dance that combines music and physical activity will function very well as a tension reliever.

METHODS TO IMPROVE SLEEP

Sleep disturbances are very common following traumatic events. Problems of falling asleep are most common, but poorer sleep quality and nightmares can also be bothersome. To improve sleep some simple advice will first be mentioned:

- Try to refrain from high activity or stressful interactions or experiences right before bedtime – calm down the last hour before you go to bed.
- Keep a quiet sleep environment. If this is difficult, use earplugs.
- Listen to quiet music.
- Keep away from very bright light just before and after going to bed.
- Try to keep up a regular routine and go to bed at the same time every day. It is no

good idea to sleep long during weekends as this disturbs your routine. It is better to have the same rhythm day in and day out.

- A physically tired body will make sleep more easy. Following physical exercise muscles may relax and sleep comes more naturally.
- It is very important to refrain from coffee, tea, lemonade or liquids with much sugar in the evening. This will make your body more aroused and delay sleep.
- Warm milk or other warm liquids (except tea/coffee) make you dozy since the warmth has a sleep inducing effect.
- Refrain from heavy meals late in the evening. A full stomach will make your sleep less sound. A banana might be good as it contains melatonin that promotes sleepiness.
- A warm bath or shower sends blood away from the brain, out to the surface of your skin, and makes you both relaxed and drowsy.

Usually it is intrusive memories or thoughts that keep one awake and then thought stopping, the screen method or some of the other methods described in this booklet can be of help. In addition to thought stopping (see later) it is a good idea to set aside some time early in the evening (or earlier) to go through the thoughts that usually enters one's mind at bedtime. You can also write down the intrusive thought(s) and then "talk to" or instruct your brain when you go to bed, for example by saying the following: "Now the parts of my brain that are controlling sleep and rest must make sure that I can fall asleep quickly and have a good night's sleep. I have given room for the disturbing thoughts earlier today. Now it is time to sleep". Such self-instructions can be repeated in a quiet and calm manner to keep one's attention away from entering the upsetting chains of thoughts. This is similar to mental training used in sport.

A distraction-based method that can keep unbidden thoughts from keeping one awake has been termed «*articulatory suppression*» (Level et al., 1991). The instruction is as follows:

Choose a syllable or a short word or syllable that you immediately do not associate with another word, for instance "that". Repeat the word three to four times a second (or in a tempo that suit you better). Be careful not to use intervals

that are too long, because this will allow other thoughts to interfere, and you could become distracted. You should move your lips and tongue, even though you say the phrase to yourself, because this will engage your vocal apparatus. If you are alone, and no one hears you, you can say the phrase aloud. This method prevents other ongoing thoughts from interfering. Keep doing this until you fall asleep. For many people, this method is effective without needing a great deal of practice, but some people are able to say such words and still think of something else. Then it may help to increase the complexity of the phrases that you say, for instance by changing the tempo or pitch, say the word every time other thoughts interfere, or by using another word every third time you say “that”. If this is not enough, you can make the method even more complex by choosing a category, for example countries, well-known persons, or soccer teams, and then list the names in alphabetical order.

If a visual picture is part of the events that prevents your sleep, you can try to imagine a figure, for instance a triangle, square, or circle, and then track it with your eyes. Here the visual channel is activated by something that counteracts or suppresses unwanted sensory images.

Use of breathing to fall asleep

A very useful method to induce sleep has been developed by the Spanish psychologist Mariano Chóliz (1995). He has described a breathing method for use by insomniacs that has proven very effective. The method utilizes some natural changes in the oxygen mixture of the blood that occurs during sleep. When we sleep the level of carbon dioxide (CO²) in the blood increases, and this is soporific. The altered concentration of CO² in the blood, and therefore the soporific effect, is enforced by the way you breathe. This is the procedure:

Lie on your back in a relaxed position, with your head at the same level as the body, or lower.

1. Close your eyes.
2. Breathe in calmly. Do not breathe too deeply. Breathe out all air. Repeat this three times.

3. After the third breath, exhale all of your air, and avoid taking another breath for as long as possible. This means that, after the third breath, without breathing in, you give yourself an extra breath where you exhale the air. Then, when you breathe in again, breathe three times and then repeat the special breath at the end of the third breath.
4. To avoid inhaling, you can distract yourself by a mental image (retrieve a memory of something nice you have seen) or by thinking of something else.
5. When you have repeated this cycle five to eight times, you will feel a need to breathe normally, and you will have become drowsy and relaxed. Then you can start to breathe normally and calmly.

Some people find this method a little unpleasant but it will automatically make you drowsier and you will more easily fall asleep. Even without the extra breath, people find that they fall asleep more quickly using this method.

Chóliz documented this method by studying 46 adult volunteers that suffered from sleeplessness and had great difficulty falling asleep. Their sleep difficulties had lasted for a minimum of six months. The group was split into two, and 23 persons were trained in the breathing procedure described above, while the rest were used as a control group. The results showed statistically significant differences between the two groups. Those who used the breathing method fell asleep much faster than the ones who did not use it: although they previously required on average 70 minutes falling asleep, after the training they needed only 13 minutes. No change was observed in the control group.

Taking control with nightmares

Nightmares are common following traumatic events. They can be exact replicas of what took place during the event, variations around what happened, or other disaster dreams. Though they are believed to be part of the processing of the event or preparing for future danger, they can become repetitive and bothersome, increasing tension and not relieving it. If they change in content from night to night and have lasted for less than a week, there is no reason to start doing anything. However, when nightmares continue over time with little variation it can be worth trying the methods described below.

There are different methods to choose from. You can try the following.

1. Choose a recent nightmare and write it down in detail, as if you are telling it to somebody. Write down the feelings and thoughts you had during the nightmare as well.
2. Then you change the nightmare as you wish. You may especially focus on changing the end (and make it more positive).
3. Write down the amended changes.
4. During a relaxed condition, you can review the altered version.

When you describe what happens in the nightmare you should write both what happens, what you are doing when this happens, what you are thinking, and how you are feeling. Also write the sensations you are experiencing in every sensory channel (what you see, hear, smell, taste or sense in your body). Then you make a new version or script with all the changes you want. When you have your new version written down, you can rehearse this before you go to bed in the evening, thus instructing the brain in the version it should use during the night. Just before you fall asleep you can say to yourself: "The parts of my brain responsible for dreaming must make sure that the "good" version is featured during this night's movie".

These methods, which can be very effective, were developed for use in collaboration with a therapist (Kellner and coworkers, 2002). However, there is no reason why they cannot be used as self-help methods. However, if the nightmares are accompanied by troublesome images and memories during daytime and your distress is high, you should contact a mental health professional.

The written nightmare can also be "wiped out" through a symbolic act, for instance by writing it down and then creasing the paper, tearing it apart or burning it. Someone may have seen a so-called "dream catcher" (look at <http://www.nativetech.org/>), which is a twig curved in a small circle, decorated with hanging feathers, and a "spider's web" in the middle of the circle. Indians use this to catch the good dreams, and let the bad ones pass through the middle. Using this as a symbolic riddance of your bad dreams may be a more poetic twist to reducing nightmares.

METHODS TO CONTROL THOUGHTS

Setting aside a specific time for worry, rumination or grief

One of the most effective methods that I have used for helping people take control over thoughts that come much too often, be that ruminative thoughts about guilt, anxious thoughts or thoughts about a loved one that is entering consciousness all the time, has been called the postponed worry exercise (Wells & Sembi, 2004). I suggest this variation for reducing intrusive thoughts:

I want you to set aside a specific time each day to bring up the thoughts that now are bothering you or being present too much. It may be 10-15 minutes or maybe you need more time in the beginning (not late evening). During this time, you can think about anything related to this thought, worry, or person. In the beginning you may need to do this every day, but gradually you can reduce the time spent, either by reducing the time each day or only setting aside every other day or less. Then, when the thought or worry appear outside of this time notice that the thought appear and tell yourself that you are not going to think about that now, but will think about it later in the time set aside for thinking. Then you just let the thought gradually disappear on its own. To recapitulate; you just notice that the thought comes, say to yourself that “I will not think about this now, but in my thinking period”, and then try not to pay any attention to it. If repeated over and over again, the brain will make this automatic, and the thought will be stopped before reaching consciousness. You may even be a bit surprised about how quickly you will manage to move these thought to the specific period and how difficult it can be to think on command. The result will be that overall you will think these thoughts a great deal less.

The thought stopping method

Sometimes it is not intrusive memories but intrusive thoughts that repetitively continues in one's mind. It can be thoughts about what one should have done or not have done, should have thought of or not have thought of, or thoughts about what one did in a particular situation. It can be frightening thoughts about the future or other distressing thoughts. Often they enter consciousness at bedtime when it is quiet around you, or when you sit down to concentrate. The thought stopping was first developed to stop compulsive

thoughts. Such thoughts seem to live their own life - as a form of automatic thought. The same chains of thought recur every night or during daytime, and they are hard to stop when they get started. In addition to this, they activate the body, especially when one starts being annoyed by them, or their content is upsetting. The purpose of the thought stopping method is to build up new automatic thoughts - that is, you first establish a thought contrary to the unpleasant thought, and then you repeat this new thought often enough for it to become an automatic thought. In this manner, you build new automatic connections in the brain.

In some ways, this is similar to learn to ride a bicycle or to swim. If you think about the first time you learned to bicycle you may remember that there were several things you had to think of at once. You had to hold your balance, use the pedals, look at the terrain, etc. Maybe you had someone holding the bicycle or a support wheel. You remember that it was difficult at the beginning and then gradually you did it more and more smoothly. When first learning you had to keep your thoughts consciously on every small detail, but gradually other parts of your brain took over and it all became automatic. If you now enter any kind of bicycle I am sure that you can cycle effortless and automatically. The thought stopping procedure makes use of the same principle of making things automatic: in the beginning, you have to think about stopping the unwanted thoughts every time but gradually it will become automatic.

Briefly described, the thought stopping method proceeds as follows: Retrieve and state the recurring and troublesome thought to yourself. If alone, when you have retrieved it, shout "Stop" loud to yourself. It ought to be practiced alone, so others will not question your sanity. If you are with others say it aloud within yourself. Have a replacement thought or image that you automatically think of or bring forward after shouting "Stop". This thought can be a visual memory, or a phrase - for example "I can control my thoughts", "I am calm", or "I can do it". Such thoughts, referred to here as strong thoughts, are useful as a counterweight to the unpleasant thoughts. You should practice this method by bringing up the troublesome thought(s), shouting "Stop" to yourself, and then replacing the unpleasant thought with the "replacement thought" or image. Start practicing with saying "stop" out loud and then do it covertly. If the same thought(s) come when you go to bed, it is important that you use your strength of will to follow this strategy every time the unpleasant thought appears. This will be exhausting, but gradually you establish a new chain of thoughts that

eventually becomes automatic.

Thought stopping has been criticised because research has shown that if we forcefully try to refrain from a thought the thought can come with extra force. If for example one is asked not to think of a white elephant over the next few minutes, a person will tend to think more about such an elephant than ever before. Some thoughts represent a thought content that one need to give time for once or several times during a day or week, i.e. thinking about a lost loved one. When this is the case you are advised to, in parallel with the thought stopping, set aside time (15 minutes or more) to enter the thought content you otherwise stop, for example by writing about the material.

Handling guilt and self-reproach

Guilt and self-reproach are very common even among those who did everything they could and where there is no objective reason to blame themselves. It is important to know that we are equipped with a mental mechanism from nature's side that is very important for our survival as species. In order for us to learn from experience in relation to critical or threatening events, we will automatically look at the situation in hindsight to see what we could have done, said, thought or not have done, said or thought. In this manner, we can turn every stone and accumulate experience that can guide us in the event of another similar threatening experience. This mechanism will be triggered regardless of the fact that we did (or said) something wrong or not, it is just a mechanism to broaden our experience bank, increase our response repertoire and secure our survival. It makes us more robust in handling the future. Unfortunately, for some this mechanism of looking at one's actions with hindsight continues even after extracting what is to be learned. People that continue to ruminate and blame themselves may add much pain to their own situation.

It is important not only to focus on the negative that you criticise yourself for, but also build on what you were able to do or the constructive act or choice that may have been part of you not doing anything. Sometimes refraining from doing something may save your life or served the purpose of preventing you from injury. It may reflect constructive thinking in the midst of a situation that was extremely chaotic for you. Self-critical persons often commit a thought fault in that they take knowledge they first obtained after their critical event back to the moments of the crisis event and judge themselves as they had that

knowledge then. It is important to judge what you did on the basis of the options you had at the time when you made the decision to act or not act in a certain way. To counterbalance such faulty logic it is important to consciously review what you did well, what choices you made that led to survival, and other constructive thoughts and acts you were able to make in the situation.

Many will disregard or not even have noticed how many important correct choices they made based on all their life experience, and how the brain rapidly made use of stored experience even though there was not enough time to direct one's attention to this during the event. People sometimes say that they intuitively did the right things in a critical situation. What really goes on is that the brain rapidly makes use of all one's experience and combines this with incoming information from one's senses, in order for us to rapidly make the necessary decisions for survival. We will act swiftly and most often correctly because there is not enough time for ordinary decision-making. We then act in an optimal (intuitive) way, without using time and conscious resources on this. This should be kept in mind when you start questioning your actions with hindsight in a safe situation. Where you did not do anything, you may emphasize that you could have made it more dangerous. An analysis of what you thought in the situation – and afterwards – can help you put what you did in perspective. Having the possibility to think about what we should have done in retrospect does not mean it would have been a smart thing to do, or that that option was available to you at the time. We also tend to forget how afraid we were and how our emotions may have told us to refrain from doing something dangerous. Our feelings sometimes help us to stay put in a situation where one could have added further danger to the situation.

Among the questions that it can be important to ask yourself is:

- How easy was it for you to influence what happened?
- If you criticize yourself now, how did you think about this in the middle of the situation?
- What did you have time to think about during the event?
- What was the reason for doing what you did?
- Did you think to do or say this in the middle of what happened?
- How could you know what was going to happen?
- How much time did you have to decide on what to do?

- What did you do that you think was ok?
- If it had been someone else than you that was part of this event, what do you think that this person would have done?
- What would you have thought about somebody else that did what you did? Would you have criticized him/her for this?

Such Socratic questions can break negative thought circles that lead to self-reproach and guilt. People often make the wrong assumption that because a feeling is very strong it is true. Naturally, it is not like this. Guilt and self-reproach often represent destructive patterns of thinking and if they continue over time, you should seek out professional help.

If you have done or refrained to do something that caused damage or death to others, you can use ritual acts to ask for forgiveness. By taking responsibility, you can face up to your actions. Such a situation is more complex and you should seek out professional help to get some assistance in how to handle it.

DISTRACTION METHODS

People make natural use of different distraction methods when they have experienced traumatic situations. By starting an activity, doing something else or lock one's thoughts, one is able to refrain from thinking on what happened. This does not mean that you should refrain from confronting what you need to gain control over, such as recurrent fear of the same thing happening again, but that you invest in developing skills that can help you gain control over intrusive memories and thoughts that no longer has any constructive function.

You may have noticed situations, activities or times when you think little of what happened. What do you do or think about during these situations? Such situations or activities function as a distraction and help you keep away from thinking negative thoughts and provide you with control over the thoughts passing in your mind. By steering your attention, you can control what fills your consciousness. There are different ways of distracting oneself. The most usual is behavioural distraction; that is take part in some activity, like exercise, a game, contacting someone, look at television, etc. Other activities are puzzles, crosswords, playing an instrument etc. However, it is also possible to distract

oneself by focusing one's attention on making a poem, enter a fantasy or something similar. Attention control can also be taken by focusing intensively on one's surroundings and sensory impressions.

Such sensory distraction can be useful when you need to control thoughts in everyday life. Just notice your surroundings and lock your attention outside yourself. What do you hear right now? What do you see? How does what you see look? Are there any smells present? What tastes do you notice? You can also turn your attention inwards to your body. Can you notice how you are breathing? Do you feel the contact between your body and the place you are sitting? What else do you notice in your body right now? By shifting between different sensory channels, you can steer your thoughts and deemphasize traumatic reminders or thoughts.

An old piece of advice is to keep an elastic band around your wrist (not too tight). Every time the thoughts appear, stretch the band and let go so it hurts a little, and then think of something else. An English psychologist, Paul Stallard (2002), has given other examples of distraction methods that can be used:

- counting backwards from 123 with nine at a time
- spell the name of every family member backwards
- name all the players on your favourite sports team

CONFRONTATION METHODS

Identifying and handling traumatic reminders

The next part of this booklet is often the hardest part to do on your own and having a therapist to assist you is preferable. Following traumatic or very disturbing events, many people start avoiding situations, persons or activities not to be reminded about what has happened as this leads to fear or other reactions. In order for you to prevent restricting your life, it is very important to challenge the fear or distress that lead to restriction of activities or avoidance in every day life.

For people who have been exposed to danger there are a variety of stimuli that can trigger the feeling of fear, such as sounds, images from the event, certain body positions, smells, tastes, etc. In the following, different ways to counteract restriction of ordinary

activities will be described. In the wake of a potentially traumatic event, it will be natural with a certain portion of avoidance of activities, situations or other stimuli that reminds one of the event, here called traumatic reminders. Very soon, however, the initial natural avoidance can be followed by avoidance that limit usual activities and serve a continuation of fear and anxiety.

Exposure means systematic work to approach the situations or activities that trigger fear and anxiety and represent the most distressing of the methods described in this booklet. The first part of this work is finding out what stimuli that continues to trigger a reaction in you. What stimuli are reminders of what happened? Sometimes one is not aware of what triggers a reaction, or cause reactions across different situations. If you think of the last time you felt fear or distress, you can try to remember if there was any smell, taste, sight, body movement, or sound that was present. You might not remember such details, but can identify if it was in a certain situation, certain people present, or if you were thinking about something specific, etc. The list below give some examples of traumatic reminders typical from danger situations that may help you identify the stimuli that you react to:

- Places and things:
 - the place you were at when the event happened
 - places that remind you of this place or that you connect to this place
 - things connected with the place

- people:
 - those you were together with when this happened
 - persons that remind you of a perpetrator or the person responsible for what happened
 - people in a movie or on television that experience a similar event to you or do what you did during the event

- situations:
 - situations that remind you of the event
 - the same time point during the day, or the same day in the week or

month when the event took place

- sounds:
 - somebody with similar voice qualities to a person you heard during the event
 - other sounds that remind you about the situation
 - loud noises

- bodily sensations:
 - shivering
 - body positions

- smells:
 - smells that you sensed during the event, i.e. after shave, perfume, smell of earth or other smells

- tastes:
 - tastes you experienced during the situation, such as blood or the taste you experienced when your lips made contact with things

If you cannot remember what causes fear or other reactions, you should start noticing common elements in the situation, and you may write them down, to help you notice traumatic reminders.

Just by identifying what triggers reactions, some people will gain more control over them, but for most, it is now that the real work begins.

Gradual exposure in fantasy or reality

It is important that you understand why you should expose yourself to something that initially cause fear or distress. If you have started avoiding situations, persons or things, this may have been necessary during a period to regain composure or some distance to what happened. However, avoidance usually cause problems for you over time. It can lead to a

gradual decrease in ordinary activities because there may be important activities you cannot undertake. Often there is a generalization of fear leading to avoidance of more and more activities or situations. By exposing yourself to traumatic memories and triggers, you gain control over them and your reactions, and you will not have to use energy to avoid all the things that trigger reactions. It should be said that if avoidance has become a great problem for you and has already led to a great change in your life with strong phobic reactions, you should seek out professional help.

To fight fear and avoidance you will have to confront what is unpleasant. You probably already have experience from taking on tasks that involve some anxiety or fear in your job or leisure time, i.e. talking to a large group, climbing a steep mountain, bungee jumping etc. When you did this you probably had the experience of confronting your fear and how you gradually managed this. It is natural to feel fear when you seek out something fearful, and if you keep away from the fearful situation or act your anxiety will decrease for a while, but it will come back when you approach the situation or act again until you have confronted your fear. An example will illustrate this:

A man saw his son be run over by a truck. He was badly hurt, had to go to hospital, but recovered fully. When the man was out driving after this, he had a strong reaction every time he saw a truck similar to the one that hit his son. He started refraining from driving and tried to drive only when the traffic was low. He was advised to start looking at pictures of trucks of the same branch as the ones he reacted too. He downloaded pictures from the internet and printed them out. In the beginning, he had to force himself to look at them and he could sense his whole body react. He was told to gradually increase the time he looked at the pictures. Even though he first reacted, he could gradually feel the reactions abate. Then he was advised to look at real trucks, to seek out the garage that traded these trucks. Again, his fear increased at first but then it decreased. He could gradually gain control over his fear. He could eventually start driving normally but continued to feel a little bit uneasy when he met these trucks when out driving. However, his reaction was tolerable and did not interfere with his driving anymore.

Depending on the traumatic memories you are bothered by, you have to choose whether to choose a gradual exposure to the situation making a list (hierarchy) of what is difficult. The list contains things that are a little difficult along a continuum to those that are

very difficult to do or face. Most people have to fight the fear or unpleasantness associated with the reminders one step at a time. If there are many different reminders, you should start with those that are most easy to confront and then go on to the more difficult ones. If, for example, you are afraid of approaching the place where it happened, and this is an area that you will have to frequent in your daily experience, you can make a list beginning with standing at a distance where it is almost okay to be, then to a place where you will definitely feel discomfort, and so on until the place where your discomfort will be at the highest point. Then you can follow the method above to take control with your fear step by step.

It is important to acknowledge that fear and anxiety usually are conquered gradually, step by step, and that this is achieved by gradually approaching traumatic reminders or difficult activities or places. It is easy to forget the gains you make and how you gradually are able to regain "lost terrain" as you gradually are moving the threshold of what you are doing. It is therefore very important that you remind yourself of what you have been able to do and what you have confronted. What seems a little step for others may be a major step for you.

When you are to practise handling of traumatic reminders or reducing avoidance behaviour it can be important that family members or friends get an explanation for why you have to train on this, how you go about the training and what you hope to gain from it. In this way, you can enlist them for support and assistance.

Training in fantasy

If you need to gain control with traumatic reminders or memories you can first approach these reminders in fantasy, or by talking and thinking about them. Here is an instruction you can follow:

Think about the easiest situation on your list. Imagine yourself approaching it and dealing with it. Think that you are in the situation you fear and notice that it is a bit upsetting. Remember what you could say to yourself and how you could breathe to calm yourself down: "It is not dangerous anymore", "I can do this", "I can relax, everything will be ok". "I should breathe deeply in through my nose, hold my breath and then exhale through my mouth". Continue with this until you can feel yourself relax. Think of the situation (or reminder) again and feel that you can handle it. Take one step further in

fantasy; think that you move on to something you feel even a bit more fearful of. Notice what happens and again use the words and breathe as you have learned to calm yourself down. You can control how fast you proceed, but it is important that you can lower your fear before you move on to the next step. If that does not happen, take one step back until your fear is very low again.

The use of strong thoughts is an important part of the exposure. When you expose yourself to your fear, you can build in thought control by repeating these thoughts to yourself. Just what phrases you should say to yourself will depend on the situation you are approaching, but some of the strong thoughts that are helpful are:

- I can do it
- This will go fine
- Nothing bad will happen
- I know I can do this
- I will conquer my fear
- The hardest part is the beginning, then it will be better
- The worst is over

It can be helpful to write down some strong thoughts that feel right for you. You can also "anchor" these thoughts to a place on your body, i.e. to the top of your middle finger. You do this by pressing this point every time you think of the strong thought as described before as a method to counteract unpleasant memories. When you approach the fearful situation you can press this point to activate your positive thinking.

Real life training

Here is a summary of how to approach something fearful in real life:

- 1) Find out what situation to confront
- 2) Chose a target situation where your fear is present to a manageable degree
- 3) Practice relaxation on entering the situation
- 4) State strong thoughts to yourself
- 5) Monitor your fear until it has declined to an acceptable level, 3 or less on a SUD-scale (see below)

- 6) Praise yourself for what you have achieved
- 7) Chose a somewhat more difficult situation and repeat the procedure for this

A SUD (subjective unit of distress or disturbance) is a subjective scale for example between 0 and 10 where 10 means that your fear/distress is as strong as it can be, while 0 means that there is no fear or distress at all.

Another variation of this instruction is:

- *First choose a situation that is not too difficult*
- *Tell yourself that you will manage this even though it is frightening*
- *Use the deep breathing method before you start to relax – or another method that you know*
- *When you are relaxed, enter the situation you fear*
- *If your fear increases, remember to relax and breathe as you have learned*
- *Tell yourself that you will manage this and use other strong thoughts. Press on the point of your finger to activate this positive connection*
- *Check where you are on the SUD scale*
- *Remain in the situation. Say to yourself that the worst is over, it is going to be better*
- *Notice how your fear is decreasing the longer you stay in the situation*
- *Stay in the situation until you at least are down to a 3 on the SUD scale*
- *Congratulate yourself on what you have done – you have made it. You are getting your fear under control and are able to do things you were not able to before.*

Writing about the event

For writing to have a positive effect it should be done in a systematic fashion, consisting of more than just retelling the facts of what you have experienced. The American psychologist James Pennebaker (1990) and his research group has shown that writing has a very good effect on our health following traumatic events. The instruction for writing can be the following:

- Write daily for five days in a row, or with distance between the days

- Write for 15-30 minutes a day. When you start writing continue until the time is out
- Write about your innermost thoughts and deepest feelings about what happened and what you experienced. Also write about sensory impressions that you took in, impressions that can be hard to convey to others
- You can write about the same theme or different themes each day
- What you write is not for other people's eyes
- Disregard spelling, sentence structure and grammar
- The only thing you have to think about is continuing to write until the time is out
- After writing the first days, you may change perspective. Look at what happened from outside and try to describe it from another perspective
- After having written over several days, look at what you wrote the first day and see if your story has become more coherent over time. If it is incoherent you may try to make it more coherent on the last days of writing
- On the last day, you can try to take one step back and analyze and try to understand what happened. Write about what you have learned from the experience and what you have learned from this that can be helpful for you later
- You may also write down the advise you would have given somebody else that had experienced the same as you
- If you want to you can continue writing for more than the five days
- You may notice that writing stir up feelings both when you write and afterwards, but it is not dangerous and it will pass. Over time, such writing may help you.

Writing is a form of exposure in fantasy. If you find that writing is beneficial for you, you may also want to write about:

- What happened prior to the critical event – what you thought when you realized what would happen
- How you knew something was wrong
- What happened and what you consequently did
- What the worst moments were and what you then thought or felt
- How you knew it was over

- What you did afterwards
- What others did afterwards
- What you did or thought that you find okay in retrospect
- What you have learned from what happened

It is a good idea to have a separate book to write in. It should be private, preferably kept in a lockable place, so others do not read it. If you write on a computer, make sure that others cannot enter the file.

It is obvious that the benefit of such writing methods not only has to do with exposure, but that they also help you process what happened, increase your understanding of the situation and create cohesion and overview of the event.

FINAL WORDS

In this booklet, different self-help methods for use following traumatizing events have been presented. For some these methods will be enough to gain control with after-effects that linger on. For others these methods can be used in parallel with seeing a mental health professional. Some need more help and the assistance of someone skilled in modern trauma therapeutic methods. In modern psychology, efficient methods have been developed to help with posttraumatic problems (intrusive thoughts, avoidance reactions, hyperarousal, or other reactions). A method that is very efficient and rapid and that is of less discomfort to those undertaking it than other methods is Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Due to its merits in the trauma area this method is the one recommended as the first choice here. However, cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and exposure therapy have also proven to be very efficient for traumatic stress reactions. All three methods consist of more than just talking about what has happened. If you continue to experience high distress over the first 4-5 weeks following the traumatic event, and the methods described herein do not lead to a significant reduction in your problems, you are strongly advised to seek out a mental health professional skilled in one of the methods mentioned above instead of just continuing to live with your distress.

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