



Remembering in order to forget

It is not unusual for prospective or current clients in psychotherapy to ask, “What is the point of me remembering that and feeling sad, upset or angry?” Even when not posed directly, the question plays in the unconscious through resistance in the therapy and a quick shift of content or a dissociation from emotions that are coming up.

Remembering to forget lies at the heart of psychotherapy, and it is no coincidence that, like so much in the world of therapy, it is a statement with more than a hint of the paradoxical to it. After all, how can remembering possibly lead to us forgetting? Perhaps the answer, or one of the answers, to how this paradox unfolds lies in why we often seem destined to repeat the past in our lives – a key factor in what often brings clients to therapy.

The past repeats – particularly in our relationship to ourselves and others – until we become conscious of our past; our unconscious drives us until it is brought into consciousness. One way of thinking about this is that as we travel through life, we all collect trauma (with a small ‘t’.) Trauma is shapeless and formless, yet, once again paradoxically, it takes a substantial hold and can exert significant influence over our lives. Trauma, or the effects of it, also reside in the unconscious – the body.

Therapy is about giving shape, form and language to trauma – whether that is trauma with a small ‘t’, or more substantial trauma in the shape of single incident PTSD or Complex Childhood Developmental Trauma. We give shape, form and language to our trauma by listening to the communication of our unconscious, which uses symbolism, repetitive behaviour and the body to communicate to us.

This is why we need to remember. We remember so that we can bring our emotional being back into contact with the sensations, emotions and feelings that were evoked when the event we are remembering occurred. Our emotional system is not linear or logical: when we remember, we feel what we felt at the time.



What good is it to feel what we once felt?

It is only through the remembering of the felt sense – the somatic memory – that we can allow our emotions to express themselves in the way they could not at the time of the original event or experience. And unexpressed emotions do not go away, they simply find other ways of telling us that we are hurting.

Psychotherapy is about feeling those unexpressed emotions – giving shape, form and language to them – and allowing ourselves to feel without becoming overwhelmed.

How do we know the outcome will be different this time around?

We may find we are defended against remembering as, after all, it did not make us feel better when we felt the pain the first time around. The art of feeling, whilst staying present with the here and now as well as being attuned to and witnessed by a psychotherapist is where the potential for change resides.

And so it is through a grounded and gentle approach to being witnessed and validated in our process of remembering that we can process our trauma and finally allow ourselves to forget the need for unconscious reminders that dominate our lives. Remembering to forget thus ceases to simply be a paradox and instead becomes a road to freedom.