# Memory Network

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Any variety of severe trauma experiences and smaller adverse life events can be clustered together by the brain. These trauma memory networks are the key to understanding how EMDR therapy works to resolve symptoms

in the present by processing memories from the past. The dark tree represents a memory

network and it’s branches of flowers, the memories themselves.

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The light tree in the background represents the positive, reality-based adaptive information, that exists in the brain but is automatically ignored as irrelevant when the trauma memory network is activated.

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The brain is designed to heal from painful experiences, just as the body is designed

to heal from injuries. If a memory is processed adaptively, the experience is tempered by positive memories and reality-based

evidence of empowerment,

safety, and worth.

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When experiences are processed maladaptively, trauma memories hold their intensity regardless of time passing. The sights, sounds, feelings, and sensations remain vivid.

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In the case of Complex Trauma, the brain has multiple clusters of trauma memories that the brain instinctually gives precedence to over any positive, reality-based information.

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# Memory Network

Memories are clustered according to meaning. A negative, distorted belief about self is often a core defining factor for each memory network. In this example, the brain has three primary trauma memory networks.

**I’M POWERLESS**

**I’M UNLOVEABLE**

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**I’M NOT SAFE**

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When a current experience reminds the brain of a particular memory network, the memories in that network are triggered. This can cause a myriad of symptoms.

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A trigger may or may not cause flashbacks, but the nervous system activates the emotions, body sensations, and beliefs of the memories in that cluster. The past feels like it is very much present.

**I’M NOT SAFE**

## I’M NOT SAFE

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Each triggering experience is then added onto the memory network as “supporting evidence.” EMDR therapy is based on the theory that change in current symptoms is best accomplished by processing the memory network

driving the brain’s reactivity.

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A trauma memory network takes root when a memory is maladaptively processed, and a particular negative, distorted meaning is assigned by the brain for the first time. This memory is called the Touchstone Event. The first memory of a memory network can be a severe trauma or smaller adverse life event.

Imagine this is the brain of a man in his early 20’s who was bit by a dog when he was five years old. The effect of the event is dependent on how it was processed.

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If this experience was processed adaptively, he could now think of the memory with no disturbance and connect to the light tree of adaptive information – remembering how his mother came running and bandaged him up, that he was taught how to tell if a dog was friendly, and that he often felt protected and comforted by his grandparents’ Labrador. In fact, this event would become a part of the light tree, an experience of overcoming something frightening and finding safety and comfort.

If this experience was maladaptively processed, the memory would instead feel as vivid, painful, and frightening to him now as if it had just happened yesterday. The light tree full of adaptive information would not matter. And, the meaning his 5 year old brain made of it – I’M NOT SAFE – would take root.

## I’M NOT SAFE

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Once a memory has been maladaptively processed in this way, the brain becomes sensitized to pay attention to events that feel similar to the first event and interprets these events to have the same negative, distorted meaning. So, when the man in our example had to walk past a snarling dog on the way to soccer practice at seven years old, his brain instinctively connected that to the memory of the dog bite.

## I’M NOT SAFE

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The memory network grows with each experience the brain links together. In our example, the man’s mother often had to work long hours and arrived later than the other parents to pick him up from daycare. He was scared she wouldn’t come. Despite there being no dog involved, the brain connected his mother not being there to the memory of the dog bite, and concluded this also meant I’M NOT SAFE.

## I’M NOT SAFE

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# Memory Network

Each experience activates the disturbance and meaning of the root memory as it becomes connected into the memory network. This reactivity can become a highly distorted lens and create confusing responses.

For instance, the young man’s worst memory connected to the belief I’M NOT SAFE was of

losing his first love in high school.

They had fought after his girlfriend did not return a text for over a day. She had lost her phone and did not understand why he seemed so unreasonable about it. His anger was triggered by a deep sense of fear. The experience had nothing to do with a dog or his mother, yet his brain drew the connection.

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## I’M NOT SAFE

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EMDR therapy can often be more efficient and effective if the primary trauma memory networks and are mapped in advance. Just as important is gathering information as to whether the light tree in the

background is robust enough to counter the dark tree

of trauma memories, or if it will need some bolstering

in advance of any work on the trauma memories themselves.

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Strategic mapping allows for more stabilization and effective management of triggers between sessions. It creates a clear idea in advance as what memory networks need to be prioritized to reduce key symptoms.

It facilitates generalization of each memory processed, as less memories need

to be addressed individually when trees are taken out by the root versus branches clipped at random.

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Strategic mapping can be especially important and challenging when memory networks are intertwined, as this complicates what all must be addressed in order for a symptom to be resolved. In Complex Trauma, a symptom is often driven by more than one memory network, and a memory can be stored partially in one network and partially in another.

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In our example, the dog bite and other memories in the I’M NOT SAFE memory network may also be connected to the belief I’M UNLOVELABLE. However, there may be many other separate experiences that his brain has gathered as supporting evidence for the belief I’M UNLOVEABLE.

## I’M NOT SAFE I’M UNLOVEABLE

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While there may be exceptions, it is usually ideal to process the first (Touchstone) memory that caused the trauma memory network to take root. In our example, this would be the memory of the dog bite.

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The most generalization tends to occur when the worst memory in the network is processed next. In some cases, the first memory may be the same as the worst memory. The high school break up

would be the worst memory in the I’M NOT SAFE example.

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Sometimes the processing of the first and worst generalizes effectively to the entire memory network, and the remaining past memories are left fully neutralized and connected to positive, reality-based information.

Other times, other past memories, such as the daycare memory

in our example, continue to have some level of disturbance and need to be processed.

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Other significant past memories may be identified when the memory network is first mapped, but they also may spontaneously become apparent during the course of treating the other memories

in the network. Each one should be double-checked

to ensure they are individually processed if necessary. In our example, this would include the memory of the snarling dog on the walk to soccer practice.

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# Memory Network

The final step in completing a memory network is to process any recent triggers and imagined future triggers that could cause the symptoms related this memory network. The tree image shows how some things that were

triggers may no longer be disturbing, and each of the triggers that

still are disturbing

reveal bits of unprocessed

memory material that remain.

**RECENT TRIGGER**

**RECENT TRIGGER**

These tendrils, if left unaddressed, could leave ongoing vulnerability to a resurgence of symptoms in the future.

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# Memory Network

Once a memory network is fully processed, it is not erased. Rather, it becomes a robust source of positive, reality-based information that allows healthy responses to what used to be triggers.

Feel free to capture your thoughts, feeling, or questions here. I look forward to hearing your thoughts about EMDR.

Warmly,

Laura