

# RESOLVING PAINFUL MEMORIES

This is a chapter from an upcoming book:

**Restoring Hope:  
Appreciative Strategies to Resolve Grief and Resentment**  
By Rev. Robert J. Voyle, Psy.D.

*I am deeply indebted to **Andy Austin** for my understanding of the relationship of painful memories and perceptions of time, and to **Steve Andreas** for my understanding of the structuring of experience in consciousness that form the basis of this presentation.* — Rob Voyle

*You can find more information about Andy's work at [www.23n1people.com](http://www.23n1people.com).  
Steve's work can be found at [www.realpeoplepress.com](http://www.realpeoplepress.com).*



**Clergy Leadership Institute**

ENABLING INNOVATION AT THE *SPEED OF LIFE*

[www.clergyleadership.com](http://www.clergyleadership.com)

[robvoyle@voyle.com](mailto:robvoyle@voyle.com)



## Resolving Painful Memories

When we remember painful events from our past we may find one of two different emotional responses. Some past events evoke distress in the present moment when we remember them while others, though painful at the time, no longer evoke distress when we recall them.

**Painful Memory:** We experience distress or pain in the present moment when we recall a past event. While the actual event is over, emotional distress continues in the present moment when the event is recalled. From an emotional or psychological perspective we could say that the event is still not finished because we continue to experience distress in the present moment. The current distress gives a sense that we have “not gotten over” the event. The distress in the present also impacts our ability to function resourcefully in the present.

**Resolved Memory:** We experience minimal distress and impact in the present when we remember a past event that was painful at the time it occurred. We can recall that it was painful when it occurred, but it is now quite difficult to experience that pain in the present. The lack of distress in the present moment as we recall it gives us the sense that the event is “over” or “finished.”

**Avoided Memory:** Some people may try to resolve a memory by avoiding recall of the memory. This does not resolve the memory. Avoiding distress is not the same thing as resolving distress.

### **Metaphor for Painful Memories**

I can recall observing a young child painfully stubbing his toe. It was almost possible to see a scream travel from his toe, up his leg and chest to his mouth which had been opened to scream. The scream though seems to take for ever to actually get to his already open mouth as he appeared to be in a form of suspended animation. This example is often used as a model to explain people’s response to traumatic or painful events. Some people in the midst of a traumatic experience find that the pain becomes so unbearable that they emotionally shut down and the scream never comes. They remain in that place of suspended animation and may never “wake up” to the fact that they survived

Some schools of psychotherapy base their therapeutic approach on this understanding of painful memories and encourage their clients to “relive” the experience and scream the unscreamed scream or cry the unshed tears. The cathartic experience is supposed to release

---

*The challenge of this life  
is not to stay alive.*

*The challenge of this life  
is to stay in Love.*

— Chris Rankin-Williams,  
9.16.01

---



---

*Denial is a common  
strategy that substitutes  
deliberate ignorance for  
thoughtful knowing.*

— Adapted from  
Charles Tremper

---



---

*I’m not upset that  
you lied to me,  
I’m upset that from now on  
I can’t believe you.*

— Friedrich Nietzsche

---

---

*I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not yet ended.*

— Nelson Mandela

---

---

*If we don't change our direction, we will likely end up where we are headed.*

— Chinese Proverb

---

the stored up emotion and resolve the event. From my experience this may or may not be true. I have witnessed people experience significant relief from a cathartic experience and I have seen others become more deeply awash in emotion that did not heal. In fact it left the person in a worse place as they seemed ensnared in an endless loop of reliving the trauma.

### ***Memory Triggers and Levels of Distress***

Painful memories result in varying levels of distress. There are two aspects to the distress: one is the intensity of the distress and the other is the person's ability to control or influence the process of recalling. The most debilitating experience is to have high levels of distress combined with minimal ability to control the course of the recall. The sense of powerlessness over the memory will leave the person feeling additionally victimized by the memory as well as the initial experience.

In its most severe form a traumatized person experiences flashbacks and intrusive memories with little conscious awareness of the current triggers that cause the person to relive the initial trauma. This can result in high levels of anxiety as the person is continually on guard against possible flashbacks. At this point the problem is not simply that the person had a traumatic experience in the past but that they are now afraid or phobic in the present moment of having another flashback. This current phobia and high anxiety levels can cause severe disruption to their current functioning. This level of distress is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Less severe episodes are intrusive memories and distress in response to identifiable triggers in the environment. The person may intentionally avoid places that parallel the original trauma and may evoke a painful recall of the trauma. While the triggers may be identifiable the person's present fear of being flooded with memories and pain remains a key feature of their current distress.

Milder, painful memories are those that arise, usually in response to an identifiable trigger, and result in emotional distress such as sadness or anger but are not accompanied with a fearful sense of reliving the trauma. While not afraid of having "a painful memory attack" the person may still be debilitated in the present moment by feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness, or sadness that limits their ability to experience pleasure and happiness in the present moments.

## Goal for Resolving Painful Memories

We cannot change one iota of our past. The past is past and what was done cannot be changed. To try to change the past would actually be delusional. While we cannot change the past we can change how we view the past. We can also change how we allow the past to inform or influence our present and future decisions and behavior.

Many years ago I badly tore up a finger with a chainsaw. When I went to the hospital the doctor looked at the finger and after x-raying it said that while I had not injured the bone there was no flesh left to stitch or repair. They applied a dressing which allowed a scab and finally scar tissue to form. Fortunately I still have full use of the finger despite the significant scar tissue. I was also fortunate that the accident did not leave me afraid of working with chain saws or woodworking, which is a hobby I continue to enjoy.

What I find interesting is that I remember that the injured finger hurt and throbbed for days but I cannot experience or access that throbbing in the present moment. I do not want to forget the experience as I use it to help ensure I engage in safer woodworking practices. When I think of resolving painful emotional memories I look for the same kind of response. I want to be able to recall the event, when I chose, without accessing the pain or distress, and be able to use the event to inform my current or future behavior.

When resolving a painful memory we do not want to obliterate or erase the event from memory. It would actually be unwise to erase something from a person's memory. If I forgot my chainsaw accident I am likely to continue in dangerous behavior and suffer additional injuries. People who forget their history are doomed to repeat their history. While that is a good thing if we have good history, repeating bad history is not a good idea. The critical goal is to help the person regain control over how and when they remember and to be able to remember from a place of well-being and resourcefulness.

In summary there are three goals for helping a person resolve a painful memory:

- To be able to **recall** an event without **reliving** or reexperiencing the pain or distress of the event.
- To be in control of when and how the event is remembered.
- To be able to freely access and use the event to inform present and future behavior.

---

*We cannot change one iota of our past. We can however change how we view the past and how we allow the past to inform and influence our future.*

---



---

*We don't want to obliterate a painful event from our memory because then we would have to go and do it all over again to learn that it wasn't a smart thing to do in the first place.*

---



---

*We want people to be able to freely recall their past and not to painfully relive their past.*

---

---

*Never put a period  
where God  
has put a comma.*  
— Gracie Allen

---

---

*Thou shalt not  
be a victim.  
Thou shalt not  
be a perpetrator.  
Above all,  
thou shalt  
not be a bystander.*  
— Holocaust Museum,  
Washington, DC

---

## A Narrative Approach to Resolving Painful Memories

When someone has survived a trauma there are three perspectives from which their story can be told. There is a victim story, a survivor story, and a thriver story. These three stories represent three “truths” that need to be told if a person is to resolve their painful memory.

### ***Whole Truth Telling: The Three Truths***

#### **1. The victim story: A bad thing happened.**

This is the story of the negative event and the circumstances that gave rise to suffering, pain, fear, and anger. Unfortunately many helpers and the public in general often get voyeuristically attached to the trauma and are unable to help the person see beyond their horror to the life-giving realities that still exist. Some people, in a desire to “tell their truth” get trapped in this partial truth, telling the victim story endlessly and in ways that “re-members” them into a state of helplessness. The problem is no longer the trauma which occurred in the past but that the person has lost their resourcefulness in the present moment.

There may also be considerable secondary gain by telling this victim story as it elicits caring and assistance from others. The person may now be using the trauma to tap into the resourcefulness of others rather than rediscover their own resourcefulness.

Victim stories are often typified by focussing on the emotional effect the trauma has had on the person rather than the actual events. Also neglected in the victim story is any mention of what the victim was doing prior to, in the midst of, or just after the trauma. Sometimes the deletion of the person’s actions from the narrative are because the person experiences shame as they recall their vulnerability and powerlessness.

Others may neglect to report their actions because they had some part in their victimization. It is very rare for anyone to be a totally innocent victim of a painful event. In victim stories unhelpful absolutes are often created. The victim is perceived as totally innocent and the perpetrator totally guilty. This is not to go down the blind alley of apportioning blame. Rather than pursuing ideas of blame we need to be able to recognize our acts that contributed to our injury if we are also to be able to recognize what we did to survive the injury.

## 2. The person or group survived.

This second story is crucial because many people who have experienced trauma do not realize, from a psychological perspective, that they survived. They are trapped or frozen in the trauma and need to discover that they survived. While the person may have been rescued by others, the person needs to focus on what they did during that time to ensure that they survived. Some of the survival strategies, such as avoidance or, in extreme situations, dissociation may eventually become problematic. However, in listening to these stories we need to behold with wonder and awe the sheer creativity of the human psyche to respond to life-threatening situations. It is from this place of wonder, and not from judgment, that we can help them discover more effective strategies for living their lives.

Several years ago I was at a gathering of psychotherapists who were having a conversation about a man who had been injured in a national disaster. He had been triaged in the field and set aside to be “medi-vac’d” to a hospital. In the chaos he was overlooked and left abandoned for 8 hours before he was discovered and taken to the hospital. The man was now suffering not only from his injuries but from the terror of having been abandoned in the midst of his suffering. The psychologists were talking about how terrible it was, who was to blame, and who should be sued and punished, especially for the traumatizing neglect that had compounded the man’s suffering. All of these conversations were in collusion with the man’s sense of victimization, and ultimately unhelpful to restore him to a place of resourcefulness. What I wanted to do was find the man, help him find the part of himself that had not abandoned him when all of humanity had, and take that part out for a beer so that we could celebrate and thank it for keeping him alive.

Most victim stories have a quality of powerlessness or things being beyond the victim’s control. To counter these feelings, when telling the survivor story it is important to find the behaviors that the person actually did to assist in their survival. While a person may have been rescued from the roof of their house in the middle of a flood, the person needs to describe how they were able to get up on the roof and how they sustained themselves while they waited to be rescued.

It is in their stories of survival that people can see and regain their resourcefulness. In the telling of these stories of survival they are “remembered” into a state of resourcefulness. They can discover strengths

---

*Don't become a  
victim of yourself.  
Forget about the thief  
waiting in the alley;  
what about the  
thief in your mind?*

— Jim Rohn

---



---

*Denial ain't just  
a river in Egypt.*

— Mark Twain

---



---

*The turning point in the  
process of growing up is  
when you discover the core  
of strength within you that  
survives all hurt.*

— Max Lerner

---

---

*Show me your face before  
your mother was born.*

— Buddhist Koan  
or put another way:

*Show me your God-given  
face before the world  
tore it apart.*

---



---

*We don't want to explain  
yesterday's world, what  
we want to do is articulate  
tomorrow's possibilities*

---



---

*What the caterpillar calls  
the end of the world,  
the master calls a butterfly.*  
— Richard Bach

---

where previously they only saw weakness and put these strengths to work, not in re-living their past, but creating their future.

Both the story of the bad thing that happened and the story of survival need to be told in relationship to each other. If we only tell the stories of the negative thing that happened, then we will foster victim consciousness and keep the person trapped in their past. If we only tell the positive stories of how they survived, we would minimize their suffering and foster denial. We need to tell both stories, because each only has meaning in relationship to the other. Only when both stories are told can we create the possibility of transformed living in the Life that is beyond the notion of positive and negative. This leads us to the third truth that needs to be told.

### **3. The thriver story: Despite the trauma, there is a life-giving future to be lived.**

I have heard people who have gone through horrendous ordeals say: "While I wouldn't wish this on anyone, including myself, I know I am a better person for it and my life to day is much richer for the experience." Somehow through the entire experience the person has come to a place of thriving. They are not feeling victimized or that they simply survived. Despite their experience they are fully alive and find life rich and rewarding.

While it may be a trite oversimplification, if you have a pulse you are being given life, and no matter what difficulties you have experienced, these difficulties have not deprived you of life. How you may engage in life may have been changed radically, but life itself has not been taken from you. It may be more profitable to wonder what that life wants to do with you rather than try to figure out what you are going to do with it. Our human history has numerous stories of people who have been disabled and who subsequently focused, not on what they have lost, but on what satisfaction they can find in the present and the future despite their limitations.

We can also rephrase the thriver story from a theological perspective: **God, the Source of Life and Love, is greater than humanity's capacity for evil.**

Where is God in the midst of suffering? Where is God in the horrors of the Holocaust, or genocide, or when a pastor molests a child? Why did we survive when others didn't? These are common and profound existential questions which most religions seek to address in some form. Despite all the evil humanity has inflicted upon itself



throughout history, life goes on and is continually offered to each one of us, despite our deeds and the deeds done to us. For example, it continually amazes me that in the Spring of 1946 grass began to grow on the killing fields of the Nazi concentration camps. It seems to me that no life-giving thing would have the audacity to grow in such a place of torture and death. Yet despite all that horror, life irrepressibly goes on.

If your god does not have an adequate response to suffering or cannot “handle” human evil, such as the Holocaust or molestation, then it is much too small and you need to find another god.

Theologically the thriver story is the story of redemption. The scriptures are full of stories of God being able to bring something good out of bad. The story of the resurrection following humanities crucifixion of Christ is the classic Biblical thriver story, life for all comes from the death of one man. Joseph sold by his brothers into slavery and subsequently being able to rescue his brothers from famine is another.

### ***Healing and the Three Stories***

These three truths represent three different stories that can be told about any traumatic event: a victim’s story, a survivor’s story, or a thriver’s story — the redemption story of new life. Helping a person to tell each of these stories will be essential if they are to truly resolve painful memories and put these events in their past.

When a person has a prevailing victim narrative it will contaminate their future functioning. Their powerlessness will often defeat their efforts to engage in a satisfying life. This will create cycles of ongoing effort to change and feeling victimized by the subsequent failure. Attempts to make changes in their life are unlikely to be successful as long as the victim narrative is their prevailing narrative. Helping the person tell the survivor story will disrupt the ongoing power of the victim story and allow the person to work on creating their thriver story.

---

*If your god does not have an adequate response to suffering or cannot “handle” human evil such as the Holocaust or molestation, then it is much too small and you need to find another god.*

---



---

*To create a better world we don’t need better people; we just need to help the people we have discover and be their best.*

---



---

*You are the author of your own story. If you don’t like the story so far, start rewriting.*

---

---

*Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.*  
— Martin Luther King, Jr.

---

---

*When we change the way we look at things, the things we look at change.*  
— Unknown

---

---

*Blessed are we who can laugh at ourselves for we shall never cease to be amused.*  
— Unknown

---

## **An Structural Way to Resolve Painful Memories**

In the proceeding section I described the experience of painful events and memories from a narrative perspective of the, victim, survivor and thriver. Even though a person may be able to tell all three stories they may continue to be distressed by painful memories of the trauma. This is similar to the experience that many people have when they have great insight into the causes of their problem but they experience no relief from the distress.

In the narrative approach the focus is on the content of the stories. With respect to the content we are faced with two alternatives: changing the content or viewing the content from a different perspective. If we set about to engage in changing the content we will be engaged in delusional thinking, which ultimately will be unhelpful.

An alternative approach is to view the content from a different perspective. This is in essence what we have done when we get the person to tell the story from the perspective of how they survived and then from the perspective of thriving. When we change the perspective from which the event is viewed we are likely to experience a difference in how we feel about the event. For example, we are likely to feel distressed and powerless if we view the event from the perspective of the victim. In contrast we are likely to feel relief and strong when we view the event from the perspective of the survivor.

In addition to changing the perspective from which the event is viewed we could also change “how” the event is represented or structured in our minds when we recall the event. Since changing the perspective changes how we feel about the event, then changing “how” we represent the memory in consciousness will also change the associated feelings we experience when recalling the event.

### ***The Structure of Painful Memories***

To create a solution to painful memories we need to discover how people structure or represent a prior experience in consciousness. We also need to explore any substantial differences between the structure of a painful memory and a resolved memory.

The first step to discovering the structure of a painful event it to remember a painful event and, rather than focus on the content of the memory, become aware of how you are remembering. On the following page is an exercise to help you explore how you represent or structure the experience in consciousness.

*This exercise is designed to help you discover how you represent or structure in consciousness memories that you would like to resolve.*

## **Instructions:**

1. *Chose a memory that you would like to resolve. Because this is a discovery exercise chose a memory that evokes some distress but does not overwhelm you.*

2. *Take a moment to recall the painful memory...*

*Rather than focus on the content of the event observe how you are representing the experience in your mind...*

*Are you "seeing" the event or representing the event in your mind as a picture...?*

*If you are seeing the event, explore a little further and see whether you are seeing it as a series of still pictures or as a movie...?*

*You can also check whether you are seeing it in color or in black and white and what quality of brightness the colors are...*

*Do the pictures seem close or far away from you...?*

*Are you "hearing" the event, are you listening to the conversations and sounds of the event...?*

*If you are hearing the event observe the quality of the sounds such as loudness, tones, pitch...?*

*Do the sounds seem close or far away from you...?*

*Apart from emotions of hurts that you might be feeling are you "feeling" any physical sensations in your body associated to the memory as you recall the event...?*

*If you are, where in your body are the sensations located...?*

*Are you aware of any smells or tastes associated to the memory...?*

*If so, are you "smelling" or "tasting" them now as you recall the event...?*

*Observe whether one way of representing; seeing, hearing, feeling, smell, taste, dominates the representation or how they are combined to give you a total sense of what happened...*

3. *"Shake off" the previous experience by stretching or changing you posture before doing the next exercise.*

*Recall a memory of an event that was painful at the time but is no longer distressing when you recall it. Repeat the above process, observing how you represent that experience in your mind.*

*Are you "seeing" the event...? (movies, still pictures, color, size, clarity, closeness etc.)*

*Are you "hearing" the event...? (loudness, tones, pitch etc.)*

*Are you "feeling," "smelling," or "tasting" anything associated to the memory...?*

*Observe whether any way of representing the experience dominates the memory...*

4. *Compare any differences between how you represent or structure the two experiences in your mind as you recall them...*

---

*What I see is  
not what I am looking at  
but what I am looking with.  
And so my first and  
principal duty...  
is to find my eyes of love.*  
— Dan Jones

---



---

*I started out with nothing.  
I still have most of it.*  
— Michael Davis

---



---

*A positive attitude  
may not solve  
all your problems,  
but it will annoy  
enough people  
to make it  
worth the effort.*  
— Herm Albright

---

### **Reflections on the Structure of Memories Exercise**

For most people visualization is the dominant aspect of recalling a memory. Even when the specific images are not well developed most people can recall colors, shapes, sizes etc. of the various components of their memory of the event. This parallels our sensory development. Barring visual disability, most people have a highly developed visual system and are well equipped to deal with complex pictures or montages. This enables the person to attend simultaneously to a variety of visual images. In contrast, our other representational systems, such as our hearing, are not as well developed. For example it is very difficult for most of us to pay attention to two different conversations at the same time.

Because our visual processing is usually more developed than other forms of sensing, it is likely to provide a larger portion of how we represent the memory of an event. Because it is a well developed sense we will also be more skilled at altering the visual representations when we develop a strategy to resolve painful memories.

In the previous exercise when you compared your visual representations of painful and resolved memories, you were likely to have noticed some significant differences. While each person's representations will be different, I have found that painful memories are more likely to be represented by pictures that are large and vivid in color. In contrast resolved memories are likely to be represented by pictures that are smaller and often blurry with less saturated colors.

People have also reported differences in their subjective sense of where the pictures are located. In general, resolved memories seem more distant from the person. In contrast, painful memories often seem very close to the person.

We can use these representational differences to help a person restructure their painful memory to match the structure of a resolved memory as part of an overall strategy to resolve a painful memory.

### **Painful Memories in Relation to Perceptions of Time**

In the previous exercise we explored the differences between the structure of a painful and a resolved memory. We can also explore differences in the way we relate our painful memories to our perception of time. Take a moment and think of how you state your goal for resolving the painful memory...

When I listen to people describe what they want in relation to a

painful memory they will often say things like:

“I want/need to get over this.” or

“I want/need to put this behind me.”

In contrast when someone reflects on a resolved memory they are likely to say:

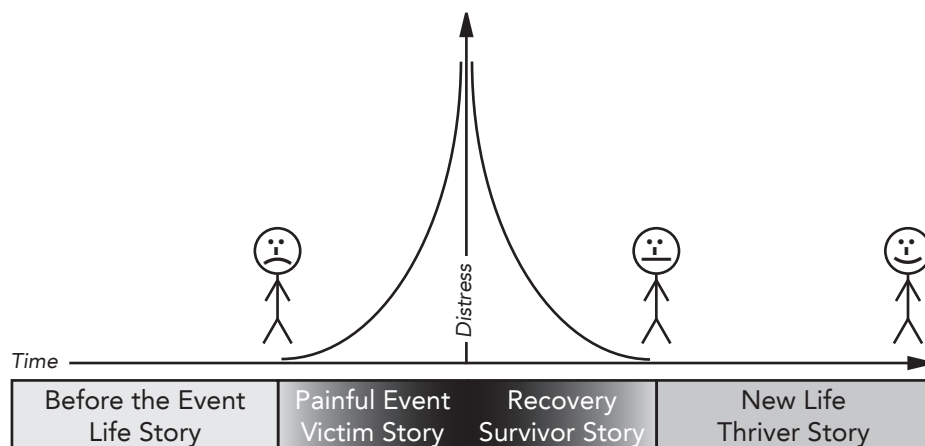
“It used to hurt but I got over it.” or

“It was painful at the time but I put it all behind me.”

Where are we “standing” in relation to the event if we need to “get over it” or “put it behind us”? These statements suggest that when we are experiencing a painful memory we have somehow placed ourselves before the event and are looking toward the event. This indicates that painful memories represent a distortion or disruption to the person’s perception of time. This gives rise to the sense that we are trapped in the past, or in the midst of the event, rather than being free to live in the present moment.

In contrast, when a person recalls a resolved memory they are putting themselves “after” the event and are looking back on the event. This suggests that one of the things we need to do to resolve a painful memory is to understand how the person experiences time and restructure the disruption to their experience of time.

These differences are represented on the following graphic. The level of experienced distress depends on where the person is “standing” or positioning themselves with respect to their experience of time:



### Painful Memories and Perception of Time

When a memory is very distressing there is likely to be an even more severe disruption to the person’s experience of time. The person will continually be standing just before the event always anticipating

---

*You have to go and  
fetch the future.  
It's not coming towards  
you, it's running away.*

— Zulu Proverb

---



---

*When I was  
a boy of fourteen,  
my father was so ignorant  
I could hardly stand to  
have the old man  
around. But when I got  
to be twenty-one, I was  
astonished at how much  
the old man had learned  
in seven years.*

— Mark Twain

---



---

*You can't change  
the past,  
but you can ruin  
the present  
by worrying about  
the future.*

— Unknown

---

---

*If we want an end  
to terrorism,  
then you and I  
must renounce  
using fear  
as a means to  
motivate anyone.  
When we use fear  
to motivate others  
or even ourselves  
we have become  
a terrorist in their lives  
and in our own.*

---

---

*If you keep telling the same  
sad small story,  
you will keep living the  
same sad small life.  
— Jean Houston*

---

the experience erupting from their memory. From this perspective the painful event is the next thing to be experienced in their future. Attempts to go forward into the future or imagine a future is likely to evoke a re-experiencing of the old experience. From this perspective the experience of a “flashback” is actually a “flash-forward” as the person is propelled into reliving the experience.

As we prepare a strategy to resolve painful memories we will need to insure that the person’s perception of time is not distorted. That means that the person is able to view the event as a past event from the perspective of present time.

### ***Anticipated Pain and Actual Pain***

Many of us have had the experience of anticipating a painful event, such as a root canal, as more distressing than the actual pain of the subsequent procedure. Previously, I mentioned injuring my finger with a chainsaw. When I tell the story as part of teaching on pain I find that many people will flinch and experience distress at the thought of my finger being all torn up. What I find interesting is that I look back on that event without distress, but the people who are experiencing distress when I tell the story are anticipating what it would feel like to tear up a finger with a chain saw rather than actually feeling the pain of the injury.

As I have pointed out in the previous section, painful memories involve a distortion of perceived time. When a person is standing before an event, with respect to time, they are anticipating pain not feeling the actual pain of the event. When we reflect on how we experience a painful memory we are likely to find we engage in the following process:

- We will remember the event by playing a “movie” of the event in our mind.
- Since we know the story we will begin to anticipate pain or distress as the movie begins to play.
- At some point the pain will get severe and we will stop watching the movie, long before we ever get to the part of how the experience was resolved. What the person is actually playing is the movie of the victim story.
- Since the movie is not completed to resolution, the person “slides” back in time to before the event began.

This suggests that a large component of a painful memory is a

repetitive remembering of the beginning of the painful memory, the anticipation of pain, and then aborting the memory as the anticipated pain becomes severe. Because the memory is never completed the person “slides” back to the beginning of the memory. Repeated remembering of only the victim portion will reinforce the anticipation of pain rather than resolve the painful memory.

### ***Coming to Terms with the Past or the Future or Both***

A common assumption in many therapeutic approaches is that people need to “come to terms with” their past. I find that understanding quite limiting as I think we really need to “come to terms with” our future since that is where we will spend the rest of our lives. From my experience, many approaches to “come to terms with” the past which involve seemingly endless conversations about the content of the past, keep the person trapped in the past rather than freeing them to live fully in the present moment as they work on creating the future they desire.

From an experiential perspective, painful memories from our past are often in our immediate future. Rather than coming to terms with the past we need to put the past in the past so that we can focus our attention on creating our preferred future.

### ***Creating a Strategy to Resolve Painful Memories***

On the following pages are a series of exercises that focus on:

- How you internally represent and experience time.
- Creating an essential awareness that, regardless of what has happened in our past, we are still being given life and this can be used to create a preferred future.
- How you represent painful and resolved memories and how to transform painful memories into resolved memories.

These exercises are designed to integrate your understanding of the structure of painful memories and their relationship to time. In training programs I often lead people through these exercises before any of the preceding discussion. This is because the approach is novel and often outside of the typical paradigms of for treating trauma. The experiential exercises create a more powerful learning experience than the intellectual presentation.

Do the exercises or have someone lead you through them in the order that they are presented to develop your experiential understanding of how to resolve painful memories.

---

*There is nothing  
so useless  
as doing efficiently  
that which should not  
be done at all.*

— Peter Drucker

---



---

*We are here on earth  
to do good for others.  
What the others  
are here for,  
I don't know.*

— W. H. Auden

---

*This exercise is designed to help you discover and understand how you personally organize your internal experience of time.*

**Instructions:**

1. *Take some time to find three pictures in your mind:*
  - a. *A picture from your past (at least several years ago) of some pleasant memorable event.*
  - b. *A picture from your present or very recent past of some pleasant memorable event.*
  - c. *A picture from your future of an anticipated pleasant memorable event.*
2. *Look at the three pictures simultaneously and pay attention to how you have organized them with respect to time.*

*Have you sequenced them past to future from left to right, or right to left, or back to front, or top to bottom?*

*How do you know from their arrangement, rather than their content, that one picture represents the past and another the present and the other the future?*

*Most people, but not all by any means, will sequence the pictures left to right.*

*If you want, you can try sequencing them in some other order just to understand how you organize your internal experience of time. Most people will feel uncomfortable or have a sense of "its not right" if they alter the sequence. After checking just allow your pictures to return to their "right place".*

3. *Now take some time and add lots of pictures to your past, present, and future to create a personal history or timeline. The future pictures will be of you doing things that you are currently planning to do or imagine doing.*
4. *Once you have filled in your time line take a look at the pictures, and without paying attention to the content of the pictures, determine how you know something occurred before or after an event...?*

*Some possibilities include. Their location on the sequence. Older pictures may be further out or more distant from your viewing place.*

*Older pictures may be smaller, faded or less intense with respect to color than more recent pictures. Notice any other differences.*

5. *Try experimenting with your position on the time line. Feel what it is like to go back in time and stand on your time line and look forward toward events that have already occurred.*

*Now go into the future to the time when you have achieved a future goal. Look back and see what you did to achieve the goal. (This is can be a very helpful strategy to reverse engineer a goal and develop the resources you need to achieve the goal.)*

*We will use your experience of time when we create specific strategies to resolve painful memories.*



*This exercise is designed to help you distinguish an eternal life-giving quality from its temporal manifestation.*

### **Instructions:**

- 1. On a 0 to 10 scale (0 being not hopeful to 10 being very hopeful) determine how hopeful you are about your future.*
- 2. Think of a quality or value that you find particularly life-giving that you are currently experiencing.*
- 3. Separate that quality from any specific temporal experience of it. For example you may currently find friendships very life-giving. You can see a thread of friendship running through your life, through many different people. Your current friends are not your first experience of friendship, nor will they be the last, and you can imagine that quality going out into your future.*

*An eternal quality is something that exists beyond time. It predates your birth and will post date your death.*

*If you have had the quality in the past you can have a realistic hope of having it in the future.*

*See the thread going from before your time, through your time and out into the future.*

*When you image the quality in the future, do so with curiosity, wondering how the eternal quality will be manifested in the future. You can be confident that it will be manifested in the future because it has been in the past. As you imagine the future stay open to a range of possibilities rather than focusing on how the quality will be manifested in a specific person or context.*

*In addition to "your" golden thread of a quality you can also see the same quality being experienced by others. Your thread and the threads of others form one great "rope" of that quality that spreads out through the universe connecting and giving life to humanity.*

- 4. Now that you have learned the process take some time to include other life-giving qualities, so that it is not a single thread but a woven rope of life-giving qualities that give you life.*
- 5. When you have a strong rope of eternal qualities in your time-line, take a moment and step into the present moment and feel the rope flowing from your past into the core of you being in the present moment and then continuing into the future.*
- 6. Reassess your sense of hopefulness on the 0 to 10 scale. How has it changed?*

*If you would still like to increase your hopefulness, ask yourself what other qualities or abilities you need to grow your hopefulness. Make sure that the answers are qualities or abilities that you can develop and are not dependent on specific people or external things that are temporal or beyond your control.*

*If they are qualities, repeat the above process. Later in this book we will look at developing a skill or ability.*

*We will use the golden thread as a resource for helping to resolve painful memories.*

**Instructions:** For the purpose of learning about how you experience and can resolve traumatic memories I invite you to think of some past experience that you still find moderately distressing and that you would like to resolve. Because this is a learning exercise to explore how you structure and experience painful memories, use the following criteria to choose the event you want to work on:

- Choose an event with a **moderate** level of distress so you can also attend to the learning process. Do not choose an event that overwhelms you. A later strategy will be presented to resolve more severe levels of distress.
- Choose an event that you would like to resolve, or that you have no substantial objections to resolving.
- Choose an event that is a discrete event from your past and is not part of an ongoing conflict with the people involved in the past event. Because these conflicts are in the present they will contaminate your experience of the past event that you are remembering.

**Note:** If you are leading a person through this exercise you will not need to know anything about the event. Attend only to the process and do not discuss the content of the person's experience.

1. On a 0-10 scale (10 being the most severe) assess your current level of distress as you recall the event.
2. Recall the event as a brief movie.  
Notice how you are experiencing the movie with respect to time.  
If you are saying to yourself, "I need to get over this" you must be standing before the event looking toward it rather than looking back on it.  
The distress you are experiencing is from anticipating the event rather than looking back.
3. "Step back" from your experience so you can see the movie as part of your timeline.  
From this vantage point add a brief movie clip to before your movie. The additional movie clip should be from a place of calm or well-being to the beginning of the painful event.  
Run the combined movie.
4. Now "step back" from the movie so you can add a movie clip to the end of the movie. The movie clip should be long enough to take you from the painful event to the first time you recall being calm or at ease after the event.  
From this vantage point run the combined movie with the "before and after" clips.
5. Now "step back" from the short movie so you can see the event as one small part of the entire movie of your life. Play your life movie through very quickly in high fast forward and when you get to the present moment "step" into your present moment.  
From the perspective of the present moment look back on the event which is now in your distant past.
6. In the present moment assess your level of distress as you recall the event.  
You will still be able to remember the event but most people will report a substantial reduction in current distress as they recall the previously distressing event.  
Notice how you are now standing after the event looking back rather than looking forward.

7. *Stand in the present moment and be aware of what gives you life today. Separate the life-giving quality from your temporal experience of the quality. For example see the quality of friendship as distinct from your specific friends. Be aware of this life-giving quality as a golden thread in the present flowing out into the future... Now look back and see the thread of life flowing up from your past before the event... Into your present... and into your future... Realize that this bad experience in the past was not able to stop that which gives you life. Check your level of distress as you recall the event now.*

*The following steps may be helpful to resolve any residual distress.*

8. *Check to see if you are responding to sounds of the event, if so repeat the process of adding movie clips, but watch the movie as a silent movie. You could also try running the movie as a black and white movie. Check your level of distress as you recall the event now.*

9. *Look back on other events from the same time period as the event that do not elicit any significant emotion. Note how you are representing them. Are they in color or black and white, clear or fuzzy, etc.? Note also the size of the images from that time period.*

*Check the representation of the distressing images.*

*Convert the distressing pictures to the same size and quality of the non-distressing pictures. If you still have a movie of the distressing event, convert the movie to a poster, and then convert the poster to the same size and quality as the non-distressing pictures.*

*Check your level of distress as you recall the event now.*

*If you are unable to transform the pictures to the quality of other non-distressing pictures. Ask the pictures: "What wisdom do you have to share before you will allow yourself to be transformed." Allow the picture to teach you what to do differently in the future if you are confronted with a similar situation. Often our inner wisdom will not allow us to resolve a painful experience until we have learned its lesson.*

*Take a moment to see yourself in the future doing the new behavior.*

*Now return to the past images and transform the distressing images into the same form as the non-distressing images.*

*Check your level of distress as you recall the event now.*

10. *Check to see whether a part of you objects to letting go of the distress completely. Ask that part what the objection is and what would satisfy the objection. Satisfy these objections rather than overcome them. Check your level of distress as you recall the event now.*

*Final Step: When you have the current distress down to between 0 and 1. Repeat step 7.*

*Now try very hard to recall the event with the old level of distress.*

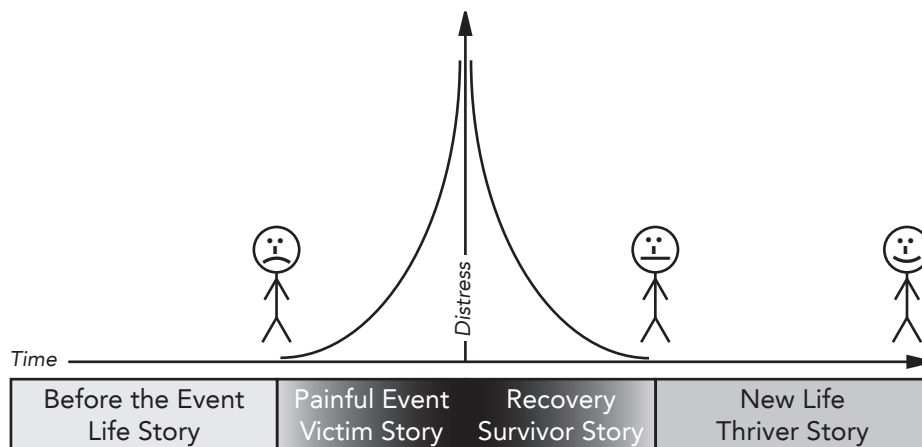
*Most people will report that while they are able to recall the event they are not able to access or experience the feelings of distress.*

### Using the Process to Resolve Memories

The preceding exercises can be used to help a person resolve a painful memory. The scripts will need to be adapted to the particular needs of the individual you are working with.

I would not use this process when the person has a high level of anxiety or distress that makes it difficult for them to stay comfortably engaged in the healing process. Examples of these would include sustained abuse or trauma that resulted in symptoms of PTSD such as flashbacks. These symptoms often include severe anxiety or a phobic response toward situations that trigger the intrusive memories and reactions. In the next chapter I will describe a process that can be used to resolve these types of severe traumatic memories.

### Integrating the Narrative and Structural Approaches



### Integrating the Narrative and Structural Approach

The small abbreviated movie of the event is the victim story. When a person gets caught in the victim story, repeatedly telling the story only reinforces the distress rather than alleviating it. Each retelling evokes the anticipation of distress, which is then aborted thus returning the person to the beginning of the story.

The additional clip of what happened afterward is the survivor story. It completes the story. Now a retelling of the enlarged story will allow the person to enter a non-distressed state.

Awareness of life in all its fullness in the present moment is the foundation of the thriver story. This story firmly places us in the present moment from which we can look back and see the event as one aspect of our past. As one person reported the event has become "one speck in the spectrum of my life."

---

*Hanging onto  
resentment is letting  
someone you despise  
live rent-free in your head.*  
— Ann Landers

---



---

*The second kick  
of the mule has no  
educational value.*  
— Steve Andreas

---



---

*We need to stop trying to  
earn God's love and just  
start spending it.*  
— Steve Bhaerman

---

## Resolving Organizational Memories

Organizations such as a congregation can also be effected by traumatic or painful events, such as clergy misconduct or conflict between members. While it is possible to see the resulting problems belonging to each individual there are synergistic effects among the members of the congregational system. These will either reinforce the negative effects of the trauma or can be used to provide resources for healing.

Communities of people such as congregations create and maintain their sense of identity by virtue of the stories they formally and informally tell about themselves. When people get together and simply share the story of being victimized they create and maintain a victim identity which will result in a sense of powerlessness that will flow into all aspects of their life and ministry.

Some of the results of repeated telling of victim stories:

- Demotivation of people to engage in ministry.
- Loss of trust and willingness to engage with others in the ministries of the church.
- Life-less worship.
- Conflict, often over apparently trivial issues unrelated to the trauma.
- Conflict between people who have moved on and those who haven't. Some are accused of not forgiving while others are accused of forgiving too easily.
- Members using threats of withholding resources such as pledges to influence certain outcomes. In the midst of powerlessness people may use fear to terrorize others as a way to gain power and influence.
- Loss of membership and the inability to attract new members.
- Loss of financial resources.

Trying to deal directly with any of these issues will be unsuccessful as long as the underlying victim narrative remains the congregation's predominant narrative. The sense of powerlessness will often defeat attempts to confront these issues in a self-fulfilling way. Pejorative labels such as resistant or pathological may be applied to the congregation by church leaders and consultants who seek to rescue the congregation from their problems. These labels reinforce the victim consciousness and create ongoing negative spirals of enfeeblement.

---

*Congregations need to come to terms with their future rather than spend time dwelling in their past.*

---



---

*I still say a church steeple with a lightning rod on top shows a lack of confidence.*  
— Doug McLeod

---



---

*Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.*  
— Dr. Seuss

---

---

*Those who do not have  
power over the stories  
that dominate their lives,  
power to retell them,  
rethink them, deconstruct  
them, joke about them,  
and change them as times  
change, truly are powerless  
because they cannot think  
new thoughts.*  
— Salmun Rushdie

---



---

*If you want to build a ship,  
then don't drum up  
people to gather wood,  
give orders, and  
divide the work.  
Rather teach them  
to yearn for the far  
and endless sea.*  
— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

---

## ***Transforming the Underlying Narrative***

Since the victim narrative is maintained by storytelling it can also be transformed by storytelling. Appreciative inquiry processes that engage a congregation in shared storytelling of their best experiences of the congregation will help the members tell and establish their thriver story. These stories are elicited by the use of predetermined questions that focus parishioners on the life-giving qualities of their congregation. When dealing with a congregation that has gone through a difficult time the congregation also needs to focus their attention on how they survived as well as their best experiences.

For example, I once worked with a congregation that had gone through a major upheaval and lost over half of their members. When we began all they could do was talk about the bad thing that had happened. After listening to their victim story I asked them: "I am curious what is here that is so valuable that you stayed rather than left like the others?" As they began talking what was valuable and life giving they began sharing their survivor narrative and spontaneously began to call themselves the faithful remnant.

The faithful remnant is a huge Biblical narrative and the people could see their small narrative as part of this greater narrative. It was from the joining of their narrative to God's narrative that the people could begin to plan a thriver narrative, because despite what had happened God was still present and offering them life.

Here are some appreciative inquiry based questions that can be used to transform a congregation's narrative. The goal is to deeply engage the congregation in shared storytelling about what they value and find life-giving in their congregation.

- Tell me the story of your best experience of being a parishioner at your church. Recall a time when you felt most alive, most involved, spiritually touched, or most excited about your involvement.
- Recall a time when you or people from your church reached out and cared for people in the wider community that left you feeling proud of being a member of your congregation.
- What do you deeply value about your church. Tell me a story about a time you got to experience what you value.
- If God gave you three wishes for your church, what would they be?

Additional appreciative inquiry resources can be found at the Clergy Leadership Institute web site: [www.clergyleadership.com](http://www.clergyleadership.com).

## Conducting a History Day

Another approach that is used to transform a congregation's narrative is to conduct a history day where people can come and tell the stories of the congregation's past. From these stories the life-giving qualities of the congregation can be discerned and used as the foundation for imagining and building the congregation's future. Here are some things to help prepare for and lead the history day.

- Advertise the day well in advance so that people can include the day in their schedule.
- Prepare a room with newsprint on a wall. Create a timeline of the congregation's history including a portion for the future. divide the timeline into periods of time that make sense to the congregation, such as senior pastor's tenure or decades.
- Invite people to bring photos and memorabilia of the different times to add to the timeline.
- At the history day invite people to tell the story by writing notes on the newsprint. One strategy is to invite the people who joined the church during a particular time frame to begin the history telling and then invite others to share their experiences.
- Remind the people that there are multiple perspectives or versions of the history, especially the history of a time that was conflicted. Rather than argue over whose view of history is correct simply allow people to put their version on the time-line.
- If a period in the life of the church was traumatic or distressing ensure that the people include on the time-line the things they did to survive, and how they have survived the problems.
- After the stories are told invite the congregation to discuss and discover the life-giving qualities of each period. Pay particular attention to any particular life-giving qualities that have been manifested consistently across periods of time.
- Engage the congregation in imagining the future by seeing the life-giving qualities going out into the future. Have the congregation imagine they have been really successful over the next 5 or 10 years and what they would have achieved and be doing. Add these to the future on the timeline.
- On the following page is a mediation that can be used at the end of the history day to help the congregation integrate their personal experience into the community's experience and also resolve any painful memories in the church's history.

---

*In times of profound  
change the learners  
inherit the earth,  
while the learned  
find themselves  
beautifully equipped  
to deal with a world  
that no longer exists.*  
— Eric Hoffer

---



---

*Nobody gets to  
live life backwards.  
Look ahead – that's  
where your future lies.*  
— Ann Landers

---

The purpose of this exercise is to synthesize and integrate the shared histories into one congregational history. If there has been a difficult period in the congregation's history that still causes members to experience distress the purpose will be to help the members integrate the victim narrative with their survivor narrative and lay a foundation to create a thriver narrative if they have not already begun to do so. The overall goal of the exercise is to leave the congregational in a resourceful state as it considers its future.

**Instructions:**

1. The exercise will take about 20 minutes. Depending on the time of the day and the previous activities it may be appropriate to take a brief personal refreshment break before doing this exercise.
2. Inform the people that you will be leading them on a guided imagery meditation. Although you will be referring to imagery it is not a guided visualization. Some people are unable to visualize, but all can imagine. Proof of the ability to imagine is in the universal ability to worry, for worry is pure imagination.
3. For those unfamiliar with leading a guided imagery exercise we encourage you to practice with a couple of people before the session. For most people the key thing is to slow down and allow the participants to actually take the time to remember and to imagine.
4. Invite the people to get comfortable, relax, and remove items from their laps. It is preferable for them to be able to see the history day posters.
5. Integrating their personal story:
  - Remember the story of your first day in the congregation...
  - Remember what you valued and how you felt...
  - Remember what interested you and brought you back... and then joining...
  - Now remember the highlights of your time as a member...
  - Identify what has been life-giving and valuable to you...
  - Distinguish the life-giving quality from your temporal experience of it...
  - See this life-giving quality as golden thread running through you time and out into the future...
  - See this life-giving quality flowing back before you arrived...
6. When there has been a distressing event.
  - Play the distressing event through in your mind as a video...
  - Now in your mind "take a step back" from the event so that you can see it all as a set of still photos or events on the time-line...
  - Now "step back" so you can see what came before the event and add those pictures to the set of pictures of the event...
  - Now "step back" so you can see what happened after the painful event and how you have survived... See what you did and what resources you relied on to survive...
  - Now "step back" so you can see the difficult time as a part of your entire time in the congregation...
  - Step into the present moment and see the life-giving quality flow back through the event...



7. *In your mind "step back" from your story so that you can see your story as part of your entire congregations story...  
See the life-giving threads running through the congregation's story and through you...*
8. *If your church is part of a denomination. In your mind "step back" from the congregation's story so you can see the congregation's story as part of your denomination's story..*
9. *In your mind "step back" so you can see your church (and denomination) as part of Christ's church, the ongoing expression of Christ's ministry in the New Testament...  
In the communion of Saints we are one with all who have followed Jesus...  
See the life-giving threads weave through the church's history through your church and out into the future...  
Notice how, even though they may get frayed, new forms and ways of experiencing these life-giving qualities occur...  
We can remember St. Paul's words: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."  
That nothing has been able to destroy or overcome these life-giving threads.*
10. *In your mind "step back" so you can see the entire church as part of God's entire story.  
From the beginning of time when God gave life to all things...  
Through the Old Testament...  
Through the New Testament...  
Through the entire church history...  
Through your church's history...  
Through your history...  
  
Be aware, that God's power to bring new life is greater than any darkness...  
That there is nowhere that is beyond the reach of God's love...  
That time and again humanity has turned from God's love only to be loved back into Love...*
11. *Now stand in the present moment and look into the future.  
See those life-giving qualities flowing from God through the course of history, through you and others, out into the future to make new history...  
Allow yourself to be curious as to how you and the people who will follow you will experience...  
Take a moment to look forward to the day when you can look back and behold with wonder the great things you and God have co-created...*
12. *And now allow your attention to return to the room bringing it with it your awareness that God's Spirit is within you and your community, and that in God's Spirit you are fully equipped to love and be loved, and to fulfill God's purpose.*