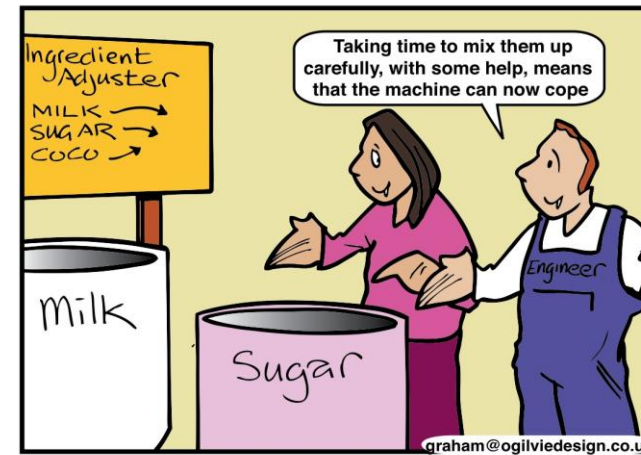
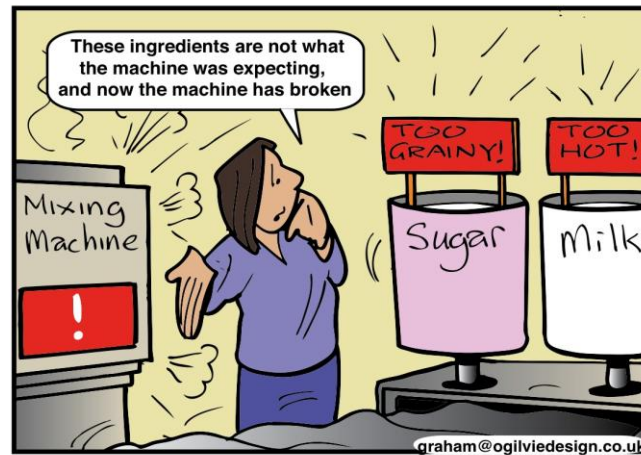


Explaining the Rationale for Trauma-Focussed Work: *Why it's Good to Talk*

If the traumatic memory is to be processed sufficiently to alleviate symptoms, it may have to be brought to mind and thought through or “processed” in one way or another. But because this is likely to be accompanied by a great deal of fear, horror, helplessness or other psychological distress, the client may understandably be trying hard *not* to think about the event.

Explaining how thinking through the event might help to reduce symptoms can enable them to make well-informed decisions about whether to consent to, and engage with, the intervention. Active engagement is necessary for processing to take place.

The cognitive model of PTSD can be a useful place to start, but it often helps to explain it further using a number of metaphors. This leaflet contains three that I commonly use. An example of these explanations being used in clinical practice is contained in Trickey, D. (2008). Experiencing refugee status after previous trauma. In P. Appleton (Ed.) *Children's Anxiety – A Contextual Approach*. Routledge.



A chocolate factory takes all the individual ingredients like the coco, sugar, and milk, and mixes them up in just the right quantities to make bars of chocolate which are then wrapped up. On the wrapper are words (the ingredients) which explain what is inside. This means that different chocolate bars can be sorted out and stored.

Our minds take different sights, sounds, smells, touches, tastes, feelings and thoughts and mix them up into packages of memory which are then "wrapped up" in the words of a story. The "wrappers" usually stop the different bits of sensory information spilling out when we do not want to open them up. We know what is inside each memory from the words on the outside, which enables us to store them tidily in the right place.

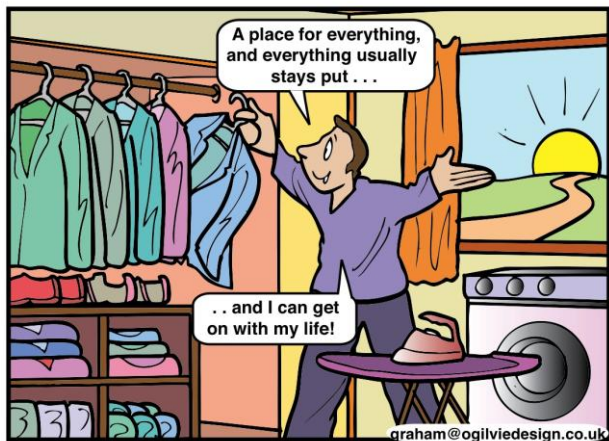
In a chocolate factory if the milk is too hot, or the sugar is not ground down enough, then the machinery will not be able to mix up the ingredients properly and may stop working. The ingredients will be left swilling around in the factory waiting to be processed. The machine might try again. But if something is still too hot or too big, it will break down again.

Some events are so scary or horrible in some way, that people are unable to process the information into memories. So the "ingredients" or the sensory information such as sights, sounds, smells etc. are left swilling around in their brains and might come back into their awareness even when they are not wanted. Each time this happens, it might be too scary or horrible to think through and so the memory remains unprocessed.

The factory might need to get an engineer to help, or it may just need to wait for the milk to cool down a bit, or it might need to grind up the sugar a bit more before the machinery can start working again.

Sometimes after a short while, people are better able to process the memory, or they may need some help from another person (social support or therapy) to think it through gradually, piece by piece in order to develop the story; i.e. wrap the memory up in words and accept what has happened.

The idea for comparing processing of memories to a factory is from Richards, D. & Lovell, K. (1999) Behavioural and Cognitive Behavioural Interventions in the Treatment of PTSD. In W.Yule (Ed.) *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: Concepts and Therapy*. Chichester, Wiley. The idea of "wrapping them in words" is novel.



Imagine a well organised wardrobe - each item is carefully put away alongside other similar items. When you need something, you know where to find it, you can take it out, wear it and when you've finished using it you can wash it, *occasionally* iron it and put it back in its place. There is a place for everything, and everything usually stays put. This means that you can close the doors and get on with other aspects of life.

Our memories for normal events work in a very similar way. Each memory is stored alongside other similar memories. When we want to remember an event we can recall the event by bringing the memory to mind, and when we've finished we can put the memory back. The memories usually stay put, which means that we can "close the doors" and get on with other aspects of life.

But if someone throws you a duvet full of stinging nettles and shouts "Put it away - quick!" It would hurt to touch and so you might shove it away quickly and try to close the door. But because it is not put away neatly, the doors would not close, so you have to stand there holding them. Whilst you're holding the doors, you might be able to partly get on with other things, but when you turn your back, the duvet would fall out - stinging you again.

Traumatic memories are like the duvet; painful to handle and so we try to avoid them. We "shove them away" rather than think them through. This means that they are not stored in the same way as other memories. So they fall into our minds when we don't want them to. Avoiding them may work for a while, but often they intrude into our consciousness again, just as we begin to relax.

We need to take the duvet out, which might sting a bit, and we might need to get someone to help us. We need to fold it up, we might need to make room by moving some of the other things in the wardrobe and we need to place it carefully on the shelf. This will ensure that the duvet stays put until we want it.

In much the same way, traumatic memories need to be processed. Sometimes this is best done with some help from someone else (e.g. social support or therapy). We might need to adjust our view of the world a bit, but thinking the memory through enables the memory to be processed and stored with other memories so that it stays put until we want it.

This is elaborated from a personal communication from Kerry Young (2000), which is based on an idea in Ehlers, A. & Clark, D. M., (2000). A Cognitive Model of PTSD. *Behaviour, Research and Therapy*, 38, 319-345.



I was working with a 14 year old boy, and just before we went through the traumatic event again, I reminded him about why we were doing the trauma-focussed work using the wardrobe analogy. He listened patiently and then said "It's a bit like that Dave, but actually, it's more like this":

He filled up the waste paper bin with scrunched up pieces of paper until it was over-flowing and said "These are all the bad things that have happened to me, and as I walk along the road to school [he made the bin walk along and bits of paper fell out of the top] they fall in front of my eyes. And as I go to sleep [he lay the bin down and more pieces of paper fell out] they fall into my dreams

But when I come here and talk to you, we take each piece of paper out [he took each of the pieces of paper out], un-scrunch it [he unscrunch them], and we read it through carefully.

*Then we fold them up neatly and place them back in the bottom of the bin [he folded up each piece of paper neatly and placed it in the bottom of the bin] **This means that they don't fall out the top, and I have more room in my head to think of different things**.*