

Coping with Memory Problems Following Trauma

Objective

To use strategies for accessing memories and monitor your “memory bugs.”

What to Know

You may be haunted by recurrent, involuntary, intrusive, and distressing memories of a traumatic event. The memories might be even more upsetting than the event itself. Becoming aware of your memory issues, knowing they will go away, and having the patience to work through them allow you to move forward with your life.

Experiences result in two types of memory. One is conscious and includes verbally accessible sensory information. The second type is unconscious and is automatically retrieved when you are in a situation like the trauma.

Researchers have identified several types of memory problems following a trauma:

- **Hypermnnesia** is a vivid or almost total recall of the past. You may display an extraordinary ability to recall details about specific events.
- **Hypomnesia** (amnesia) refers to difficulty remembering the past. Lacunar amnesia is the loss of memory about one specific event.
- **Retrograde amnesia** (RA) is a loss of access to memories of events that occurred or information that was learned before the trauma.
- **Anterograde amnesia** is a loss of the ability to create new memories after the event that caused amnesia. Long-term memories from before the event usually remain intact.
- **Dissociative amnesia** involves the inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness.
- **Confabulation** is the production of fabricated, distorted, or misinterpreted memories without the conscious intention to deceive.
- **Allomnesia** is an illusion of memory, or distorted memories, of something in the past that really happened, but it is distorted.
- **Pseudomonas** (hallucinations of memories) refers to memories of something that did not happen.
- **False memory** is a phenomenon where you recall something that did not happen, or your memories are very different from the way it happened.
- **Flashbacks** (involuntary recurrent memory) are vivid experiences in which you relive some aspects of a traumatic event or feel as if it is happening right now.

In the weeks after a trauma, intrusive memories are common. Over time, intrusions become less frequent and distressing.

Memory has many functions, and it is vital for maintaining your identity. Memory issues related to trauma are often reflected in your perception of your identity. This worksheet will help remind yourself who you are by remembering your life before the trauma.

What to Do

The following are a series of activities that include strategies for coping with memory problems.

When you experience memory problems, go to a safe place, and ask yourself the following questions. Write down your answers in the left column. After you answer all the questions, take a break, and then answer the same questions thinking of your present circumstances.

1. What adjectives would you use to describe yourself? Write at least ten positive or neutral adjectives.

Before the Trauma	After the Trauma

2. What activities did you enjoy? What activities didn't you enjoy?

Before the Trauma	After the Trauma

3. Where did you like going? What places did you avoid?

Before the Trauma	After the Trauma

4. What did you like to eat?

Before the Trauma	After the Trauma

5. How did you spend your free time? Whom did you spend your time with?

Before the Trauma	After the Trauma

Pick five ordinary objects (photos, pencils, mugs, books, and so on) in your home. For each object, write a short account of how you got it and who gave it to you (or, maybe, you bought it yourself). Remember the details. Where do memories of this object take you? Do you have any other associations when you look at the object? What are they? How do your thoughts make you feel? What bodily sensations do you have? Do this activity once per week, using a different set of objects each time.

Object 1: _____

Object 2: _____

Object 3: _____

Object 4: _____

Object 5: _____

Choose two or three close friends and ask them to tell you all about you. Summarize their answers below.

Visiting places from earlier in your life can help you retrieve memories you have not recalled for many years, vividly and in detail. For each place you visit, write about it. Focus on your senses (smells, sights, sounds, colors). Compare your perception of the place now with how you remember it.

Place: _____

Place: _____

Place: _____

Think about a time in your life and concentrate on your sensations and experiences.

Talk to parents, siblings, old friends, and former teachers about ideas and attitudes you had.
Write down their responses.

Person you talked to: _____

Person you talked to: _____

Person you talked to: _____

If you are ready, visit the place(s) associated with the traumatic memory. Write about the visit.

Finally, monitor your memory bugs. A memory bug, or a memory leak, is a disturbance or glitch, a short-lived fault, in your memory. Every time you experience a memory problem write it down on the following chart for 21 days. At the end of the exercise, review the entries and see if you can spot patterns.

Date and time	Memory glitch	Situation	Thoughts	Emotions	Physical sensations

Date and time	Memory glitch	Situation	Thoughts	Emotions	Physical sensations

Reflections on This Exercise

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, to 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?

