Why does negative memory come up when focusing on positive memory and what to do about it

The purpose of recalling positive memory and appreciating it in the context of the Immanuel Approach is to turn on relational circuits, heighten activity in them and lead into an interactive connection with the Lord. Another reason is that the facilitator can later use these memories as safe places to remind the client of or steer them back into if needs be. Lehman calls it establishing a safety net.

It can be awkward when the client is supposed to be resting in a positive memory, appreciating it and beginning to enjoy the Lord’s presence that a negative/ painful memory intrudes and interrupts. Why does this happen?

One answer is quite paradoxical. Imagine you were a negative memory, knowing you needed to be processed and waiting for the right time to come forward, be processed and finally contribute to the person’s knowledge, skills, empathy, wisdom and maturity. In a very real way it is a good time to come forward because the conditions for successful processing have just been established. So at a deep level it makes sense.

Briefly some of the factors that need to be in place to be able to rapidly process previously unprocessed painful experiences include the following:

1. Feeling reasonably safe
2. Having a stable person with you who you can connect with and disconnect with as it suits you
3. Feeling that you are in control of what is happening and have choices
4. Feeling that you are able to do things that contribute to minimising pain and maximizing pleasure
5. That you are able to focus on what is going on for you and be aware of what is personally relevant
6. That you can assess your memory as good, bad or scary yet not be overwhelmed
7. That you were able to stay in touch with your experience and share it with another
8. That you could get a sense from that other, or others, of how me and my people respond in these circumstances
9. And you were able to have a little time to let all that come home to rest and see things from a new perspective[[1]](#endnote-2)

Our response to a positive memory leading to a painful one can vary: On the one hand we could feel disappointed that our peaceful, joyful, blissful experience of the adult self has been interrupted. Yet the other hand this intrusion could be seen as a confirmation that we have been successful in setting up the conditions needed for successful processing.

## What to do about negative memory intruding in a session?

There are two options:

1. go ahead and process it now or
2. chose to not process it now and address it at another time

So why don’t we just go with it and process this painful memory now? To my mind there is only one main problem. And that is adults need to be able to chose and to be in control of when, where and how they go about processing painful memories. The most remarkable incident I’ve seen of choosing to put off processing a memory was when Dr Ed Smith was doing a week long training in Canberra in 2003. A mature resourceful Christian lady started having a panic attack during morning tea. Ed happened to come by at that time. To cut a short story even shorter, he simply said to her, “you are processing a body memory and this is not the time or the place to do it.” And very promptly she just stopped. I know this can sound unfair for all those who have struggled with panic attacks and not found it so easy to stop. Yet on this occasion Smith’s clear conviction and belief in her ability to control the process gave her that control. If effect she was able to acknowledge to herself what was happening and say (to herself), thanks for making me aware, “I will definitely get back to you and I’ll tell you when we are going to sort this.”

The issue with simply pursuing whatever presents itself is, have I got safe places to take this person back to if we are unable to continue connecting with Jesus in the memory. If you are not confident that you have then it is not safe to proceed.

## How to put off processing a memory

It doesn’t work to have to process negative experience, or be obliged to entertain it whenever some trigger brings it forward. We need to be in control of the timing and there is a great sense of mastery when we can be. So rather than launching in to process whatever intrudes on the consciousness of our clients we need to support them to come to terms with what is happening and make a free choice about what they want to chose to focus on now. Of course if they are connecting with the Lord the smartest thing to do is get them to ask him about it.

If we can support them to do this they build a neurological strength that serves them and those around them very well. It is part of growing in maturity.

Yet as facilitators, how do we muck this up? For a start we can view intruding thoughts or feelings and something bad. Yet if you were an unprocessed memory and the conditions for processing just became perfect you’re not bad coming up now, you are smart and deserve to be encouraged. So the alternate respond is, this is so good let make a time for when we can do this properly.

The other response is to calmly affirm the person that they can chose what to focus on and support them to make the choice that best suits the circumstances. For instance, “at this point in time we are establishing positive memories that can act as a safety net in the future.” “So would you like to come back to that now?”

We also intuitively undermine our clients by the beliefs we hold about how processing works. We can think processing involves talking about it, me understanding your situation enough so I can genuinely offer empathy and do something to help. Well sometimes that is true, yet often, very often it is not true at all.

What if the client is already feeling listened to, seen, heard, understood and that someone cares and can help? This is precisely how they are feeling when doing interactive appreciation with you and the Lord. The biggest heresy in emotional healing is that you have to do much here. You don’t. If the person is interacting with the Lord, simply direct their focus back to him. “Jesus I was feeling appreciation and positive about... but now I’m remembering...” Stop. Just tell Jesus that and let’s see what happens. Let me know. We can think that Jesus needs big long explanations so then he can help. We can also think that the client needs to give him a big long description so He knows what he is needed to help with. It is very weird for those trained in counselling, pastoral care and psychotherapy, but very, very often he needs almost nothing to do excellent and complete processing. It can also be terribly affronting to someone trained in counselling that they don’t know what Jesus needs to be able to heal, as if somehow we know the rules and he should follow them. The only solution is to support the client to keep connected to Him. If your client can keep reconnecting with Him they really can work it out. Who would of thought!

## An example of a simple script to validate and re-direct focus

This is the sort of thing you can say to a person when negative memory comes up by you don’t think it is a good time to process it:

*This is a really important memory that is coming up and we currently don't have time to process it right now. It will be so good when this is processed and I believe that God has a plan for exactly how and when to process it. If you would like we could pray right now for God to suggest a time and place to fully process this experience. In the meantime I want to make sure to get you back to a good place, so let's go back to your original positive memory ...*

1. Dot point 1 correlates to the necessary foundation in neuropsychotherapy

   Dot point 2-4 correlates to the three pillars of successful neuropsychotherapy

   Dot points 5-9 correlate to Wilder and Lehman’s 5 levels of the emotional pain processing [↑](#endnote-ref-2)