

Treating Traumatic Memories Metaphor

Our brains are just like one large filing cabinet full of memories. But before memories can be filed in the correct place for use later they need to be moved from the 'In' tray. Most life events we have dealt with many times before are easy to file. However, some new events may require some work before filing. However, we can use all the processes we have used before to help us place these memories in our memory filing system.



Event



**In tray
Processing**



Memory





When a traumatic event occurs, which can lead to individuals coping mechanisms being overwhelmed, it can be especially difficult to file the memory as there is no prior learning that can be accessed to help with the filing process. Because the event has not been processed it remains in the 'in' tray and is prevented from becoming a memory. Having a raw thought or emotion in the 'in' tray means it is constantly at risk of being used or knocked or falling out into your consciousness. When this happens the memory of the traumatic event is no longer in the past but is very much in the present.

When things happen that remind us of the event (sight, sound, smell, taste) we can all too easily access the 'in' tray event which can lead to re-living the emotions and physical sensations as if the event was happening now. These episodes are known as 'flashbacks'. What usually happens is that we try and manage these distressing events by avoiding triggers which reinforces the lack of processing of the event.

Effective treatment of a traumatic event will enable individuals to open the distressing folder and work through its contents in a controlled way, rather than constantly trying to avoid them. This will enable them to learn from and understand the event (process) which will then enable them to move the file from the 'in' tray (the present) to the filing cabinet (memory).

The treatment will inevitably be somewhat distressing as we expect the individual to think about something they have put a lot of effort into avoiding because of the distress it evokes. But the process of moving the event to a memory will have the effect of reducing the distress in the longer term.



Feel free to discuss this further with your therapist to help you understand how EMDR can help you process traumatic and difficult past life events so they have less of an impact on you in the 'here and now'.