

Your Personal Truth

Summary

Clients are guided to identify their personal truth—the meanings they derive—from their experience of trauma and addiction. *Truth* is understood as an evolving perspective rather than a static set of facts. Two exercises help them explore their truth: (1) discussing a photo or other reminder from the past; and (2) “opening the door” to revisit an event from a new perspective.

Orientation

Clients experienced trauma and addiction in real time from *within*, from their own perspective. They saw what they saw and felt what they felt. Part of healing now is shifting perspective to see it from the *outside*—to see the events with enough distance, enough objectivity, to bring in alternative meanings.

There are many questions one can ask to bring forth new meanings: “What do you understand now that you didn’t back then?” “How could you have known if your family never taught you?” “Is it really true that you could have prevented it?”. The idea is to help clients notice the conclusions they drew about themselves and the world in light of trauma and addiction. Some meanings go to the heart of human experience: why bad things happen, whether life is worth living, how someone can hurt a child, why some people get addicted but not others, whether there’s a God, why there’s war, who can be trusted, why evil occurs. Clients will come to their own answers but the counselor can offer space and a compassionate presence to support their search.

It’s important to note that today’s topic doesn’t try to turn negatives into positives or to have any particular conclusion in mind. Rather it’s shifting perspective to see the past from a new vantage point. The concept of “truth” is a postmodern one: it’s not a static set of facts, but more a lens or filter that evolves over time. It’s more like a painting than a news article.

The work relates to the concept of narratives in psychotherapy. As ___ have written, “The narrative metaphor has influenced therapists from different traditions, but what they have in common is the idea that it is beneficial to develop ‘rich’ stories about one’s life which offer opportunities for change...When people seek professional help, their lives have often become single storied, limiting, limited and superficial rather than richly textured and multiply storied.... The aim is to help people see that they have options of which they were previously unaware.”

Your emotional reactions

A powerful way to explore the myriad of meanings in trauma and addiction is to watch movies or read narratives of people in recovery from them. To locate up to date lists, search online for “books [videos] about trauma”, “books [videos] about addiction” etc. However if you’re in recovery yourself note that some have painful details, so self-care is key if you find them triggering.

Acknowledgements

The quotation is commonly attributed to Frank Lloyd Wright [<https://www.thoughtco.com/frank-lloyd-wright-wit-and-wisdom-175867>]. The quotation at the top of Handout 1 is from Herman (1992) *Trauma and Recovery* (pg. ___).

Preparing for the session

Plan how you’ll cover the exercise “Explore a Photo or Other Reminder” (Handout 2). See the section “Ways to Relate the Material to Clients’ Lives” for this.

Session Format

1. Check-in (per Chapter 3).
2. Quotation. A client reads it aloud, then you link it to the session—for example, ***“Today we’re talking about different ways to view your past. As the quote says, it’s not just the facts of what happened but the meanings it holds for you.”***
3. Handouts (relate the topic to clients’ lives):
 - Handout 1: **Your personal truth**
 - Handout 2: **Explore a photo or other reminder**
 - Handout 3: **Open the door to a new perspective**
4. Check-out (per Chapter 3).

Session Content

Goals

- Encourage clients to explore meanings they hold about past trauma and addiction.
- Have them discuss a photo or other reminder to explore their perception of the past
- Try the *Open the Door* exercise to help them see a past event from a new perspective
- Emphasize the concept of personal truth

Ways to relate the material to clients’ lives

- *Discuss the concept of personal truth (Handout 1).* Handout 1 is an entry into the two exercises that follow (Handouts 2 and 3) so can be done briefly, highlighting key points. Help clients understand that the meanings they hold about their trauma and addiction are fluid and evolve over time as they gain increased recovery. They may discover all sorts of things—difficult truths, new growth, self-compassion, increased awareness of harm they did, and so on. Whatever they discover can help move them forward.
- *Plan how you’ll do the exercise “Explore a photo or other reminder” (Handout 2).* The best way, if possible, is to cover just the first part of the handout in today’s session (“choose a photo or other reminder to discuss”). They would then bring their photo or reminder to the next session and you’d go through the rest of the handout then. Alternatively, if you want to do the full exercise in today’s session, they could pull up a photo or other reminder on their mobile phone (or even just describe one they remember, if they can’t access it on their phone).
- *Help clients take different points of view in the “Open the Door” exercise (Handout 3).* Encourage them to imagine a scene from different perspectives: their own point of view now, that of a sympathetic observer, etc. They don’t have to fully believe it at first; they can just try various ways until they arrive at what feels true. The key is that they’re *observing* their younger self (and whoever else is in the scene). It’s also helpful to emphasize visual aspect such as zooming in and out of the scene, watching it at a distance or from up above, etc.
- *Play with metaphors about opening and closing the door (Handout 3).* For example, the door may feel stuck or difficult to open. It may feel scary to push it open and see what’s there, like a horror movie. Maybe others closed the door for you by silencing you. Etc.
- *Discussion*
 - What would your current self say to your younger self?
 - Has your view of your trauma / addiction changed over time?
 - How would you want to be able to view your trauma / addiction?
 - Who most influenced your view?
 - Does your culture impact the way you see your experiences?
 - How does it feel like to “open a door” to your past?

Suggestions

- *Validate that clients may have difficulty holding onto their truth.* They may wax and wane in their understanding of what happened. It may feel real at one point and unreal at another. They

may avoid parts of it, and then later be able to see it. It can be reassuring to understand that this is part of the process.

- *Help clients hold themselves accountable.* In addition, for example, they may have harmed or neglected others or abandoned important responsibilities. As they go through the handouts, give them the emotional space to explore mistakes without judgment. It can be healing to acknowledge that they failed others at times as long as it's accurate and proportional to what they did. Some clients go too far in self-blame while others don't admit mistakes at all.
- *Emphasize choice.* In Handout 2 *clients* choose the photo/reminder and the questions they want to answer about it. In Handout 3, *clients* choose to walk through the door. The exercises are voluntary but the idea is that they have the power now, in contrast to the past where they felt powerless in the face of trauma and addiction.
- *Discuss how perceptions may be influenced by culture, personality, and history.* Such factors can impact the meaning clients draw from their experiences. For example, a girl growing up in a home where males are more valued than females may devalue herself without being conscious of it. Even in the same family, siblings may have very different perceptions of what occurred; there is no one truth.
- *Observe feelings.* A focus on meanings can sometimes become too analytic or intellectual. Watch for feelings and help clients notice how they connect to their interpretations of events. For example, "What are you feeling right now?", "Does that photo bring up feelings?"
- *Explore both positive and negative meanings.* Clients' truth may include wonderful aspects, such as people who were there for them and ways they transformed painful experiences into growth. It's just as important to recognize beautiful moments as to recognize painful ones. So too, a client may have positive, not just negative, views of an abuser (people are complex). Allow clients' their truth, although if they appear to be missing some key elements, ask questions to clarify as needed. For example, "You say your family was very happy but you've also mentioned that no one ever talked about conflicts or problems. I'm wondering if it's more of a mixed picture?"

Tough Cases

- "Photos of my past just make me sad; there's no point in doing this."
- "The meaning I draw from my experiences? People suck."
- "I have no memory of most of my childhood."
- "My truth? God doesn't love me or this stuff wouldn't have happened."
- "When I look back on the worst days of my addiction I feel lower than dirt."

Quotation

“The truth is more important than the facts.”

~ Frank Lloyd Wright, 20th century American architect

Handout 1

Your personal truth

“Survivors of atrocity of every age and every culture come to a point...where all questions are reduced to...‘Why?’...[and]... ‘Why me?’”

~Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery



As your recovery expands, so does clarity about your past.

It can take a while to understand what you lived through. Your perception may shift as you let in different sides of the story.

Early in recovery from trauma you may believe, “It’s my fault” or “I’m damaged goods.” In addiction you may believe, “I don’t really have a problem” or “I can’t picture a life without using.”

With recovery, your story affirms a compassionate view of yourself, while taking personal responsibility when that’s relevant (in addiction, for example).

-“I learned that I could get through tough times without using.”

-“I came to understand, deep down, that the abuse wasn’t my fault.”

-“I found that I could love even though so little love was given to me.”

Research shows that as people recover from trauma and addiction, their dreams and nightmares change (feeling more powerful, fighting back); their language changes (e.g., from *victim* to *survivor*); and their sense of purpose in life grows.

But some truths may be difficult to face.

-“I realized I was addicted to anger.”

-“I discovered that sexual abuse goes back three generations in my family.”

-“I had to admit to myself that it was up to me to get better; no one could do it for me.”

Getting to your truth

It can be challenging to figure out what you really believe, especially if you were silenced in the past or told what to think. Addiction too can distance you from yourself.

The next two handouts offer exercises to explore your view of your past. You can integrate old and new ways of understanding.

It’s more than the facts of what happened—it’s about the meanings you give to them, the conclusions you draw.

There’s no one way and no “right” set of conclusions. Your truth is personal.

It’s a process of discovery.

Handout 2

Explore a photo or other reminder of your past

A photo or other object can be a powerful way to explore your past that goes beyond words alone.

The idea is to share it in the session and talk about what it means to you. It can be positive or negative – bringing up pride, joy, distress, guilt or anything else.

(1) Choose a photo or other object to discuss

Examples of *photos*:

- your family or other people
- a place
- you at an important age, such as before trauma or addiction
- anything memorable (a pet, a car, etc.)

Examples of *objects from your past*:

- a letter, email or text
- a news article about you
- media (a song, poem or short video)
- a small physical object, such as jewelry or a souvenir

Please be sensitive to not triggering others if you're in group treatment (no gory accident photos, for example).

If you don't bring something, you can still participate by describing what you would have brought.

(2) Explore the meaning

You can speak aloud about any of the questions below; or prepare ahead by writing it out and then reading it in the session.

Questions about your photo or object

- ✦ Why did you choose it?
- ✦ What do you see looking at it?
- ✦ What would others see looking at it?
- ✦ Is there a story behind it?
- ✦ How old is it?
- ✦ What does it represent: isolation? belonging? injustice? yearning? pretending? love? hate? beauty? pain? strength? weakness?
- ✦ Does it bring up feelings? body sensations?
- ✦ What do you want it to mean, going forward?

For a photo, additional questions

- ✦ What's happening outside the frame?
- ✦ Did anything important happen before or after it was taken?
- ✦ What would you have wished to see in it?
- ✦ If there are people in the photo:
 - What do you see in their eyes?
 - How do they relate to each other?
 - What advice would you want to give them?

Handout 3 Open the door to a new perspective

“People tend to remember a terrible event exactly as they always have-- the way it looked to them when they were living it. But viewing it from a different angle can help free them from guilt, shame and other feelings. I had always remembered, dreamed about, even smelled the first assault in the exact same way it occurred, from the eyes of my 10 year old self. I was always part of it and so couldn't see it differently.

One day I was reading and came upon an assault scene and I realized I felt sorry for this woman. What would happen if I viewed my assault the same way? Instead of being on the ground inside my body, feeling what I felt then, what if I stepped back and viewed the entire episode as though I was a camera person filming it? The difference was remarkable. For the very first time I saw an adult male assaulting a little boy and instantly felt a lift of guilt and shame. It wasn't permanent and I still had work to do but it was a critical moment. Change the way you view your trauma.”

~ John, survivor of child sexual assault



In this exercise you can see a scene from your past in a new way.

❖ **Step 1: Choose a memory to explore**

It could be a difficult trauma or addiction memory; or a poignant memory that shows your resilience or has some other meaning for you.

❖ **Step 2: Imagine that you open a door, walk through, and see the scene in a new way**



❖ **Choose a perspective to view the scene**

- ❑ *From above* to see the big picture
- ❑ *Zoom in* to see it closely
- ❑ *Zoom out* to see it broadly
- ❑ *Through your own eyes*, with compassion and honesty
- ❑ *Through the eyes of a nurturing person* in your life
- ❑ *Through the eyes of a kind observer*
- ❑ *As seen by your higher power*
- ❑ *As if on a movie screen*
- ...or any other perspective

Step 3: Explore what the scene means to you

❖ Consider any below. You can speak, write, or draw about it.

- ✦ What's a compassionate view of yourself in that scene?
- ✦ What do you know now that you didn't know then?
- ✦ What did you need that you didn't get?
- ✦ Do you wish you had done anything differently?
- ✦ Who were you then versus who are you now?
- ✦ How much control did you actually have?
- ✦ Were you isolated or supported during the event?
- ✦ Were you equipped to handle the situation (given your age, knowledge, maturity)?
- ✦ Did you take *too much* responsibility? ("The trauma was all my fault") or *too little* ("I'm not addicted")?
- ✦ Who was responsible for what happened? (It may be several people.)
- ✦ What do you give yourself credit for?
- ✦ What were you up against?
- ✦ What did you get, or not get, growing up that helps explain what happened?

Step 4: Come back through the door

❖ Decide what you want to do now, such as:

- ◆ Get support from your counselor and/or group
- ◆ Appreciate the wisdom you have gained
- ◆ "Lock the door and throw away the key"
- ◆ Do something kind for yourself today
- ◆ Identify how to make the future better than the past

Ideas for a Commitment

1. Find a photo or object that represents *growth*, *hope* or *health* to you. Keep it near you to remind yourself of a meaning you cherish.
2. Are you the hero or villain of your story? Or a mix? Write about that.
3. Expand your “Through the Door” exercise. Write, draw or use music or art to represent how you view it.
4. Take one of the exercises you did today and share it with someone trustworthy—help them understand more about your perspective.