



When the Past Intrudes

Know What to Expect, Know What to Do

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Memories... they fill our days, organize our lives and bring us pleasure and pain. Without an effective memory we would not be able to function. Schedules, qualifications and relationships would be meaningless. Fortunately, we do have the ability to absorb and interpret information and thereby plan and act accordingly. Much of our thinking and behaviour is based on past experiences, either our own or those we have witnessed. We interpret our world and the events within it according to our knowledge, perceived patterns and expected outcomes. This is a necessary and usually helpful process. Unfortunately, our memories aren't always positive and their impact isn't always helpful. In those situations it is up to us to make sense of the memories, create constructive change and plan a positive future despite our history.

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The good times...

Remembering good times helps us maintain a positive approach to life, giving us hope during those times when things go wrong. Favourite memories bring a pleasure which we can call upon at any time. Taking time out to reflect on happy, successful or content occasions will confirm our belief that life holds so much. When we are feeling fortunate, productive, comfortable, relaxed, energetic or optimistic we are thriving on the effects of positive memories. We are creating an atmosphere where these feeling can expand to take in all components of our environment: our work, home, relationships and personal sense of well-being. To enhance each day we collect treasured moments, commit those descriptive mental pictures to memory, and build a repertoire of positive, on-call images.

To really appreciate the positive impact of memories and the power of thought, recall a personal experience, or one that you have witnessed, of “falling in love”. Feelings of euphoria permeate all aspects of one's life. Even dealing with otherwise difficult situations is less stressful because we are convinced of the ultimate good in the world.

The bad times...

Now compare that feeling with the sense of foreboding which accompanies the onset of a serious illness or the impending death of a loved one. This solemn or even fearful state of mind influences our thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It is helpful if we understand that the physical impact of these negative emotions can continue to affect us long after the events have become memories.

Unresolved issues, past hurts and traumatic experiences may all leave a mark on our minds, emotions, spirits and bodies. These affect the way we interpret new or anticipated events and can lead to much distress in our daily lives and the lives of those close to us. This often results from an inability to make sense of the situation or to understand why or how it could have happened or an unwillingness to accept the situation or its consequences.

We may mistakenly think that we can just ignore the past, that the pain will just go away. We can actively try to forget things and only focus on all the good things for which we should be thankful. Still, the past remains and haunting memories keep coming back. Normal exposure to specific sounds, events, behaviours or characteristics displayed by others may trigger unwanted memories and the attached emotions and seemingly irrational responses. Because our bodies (not just our brains) store significant information, we may physically react to these triggers in our environment without even knowing why. Anger, depression, anxiety and overly reactive emotions may all signal underlying issues. When any pain is left untreated, it has the potential to generate undesirable physiological, physical, mental, emotional and behavioural reactions. Although we may think we have things under control, others may think differently; that instead, we are being

controlled by the past. Despite the fact that the trauma is no longer a current entity, the memory of it has become a physical reality capable of continuing to cause harm.

Why is this happening now?

As children or as adults, when we are undergoing significant stress we are less able to process complex events. After exposure to trauma we tend to remember isolated details and emotion and our bodies often hold that pain. Because of our limited abilities and the intensity of our reaction, it is not unusual to become overwhelmed. However, our brains may go into a protective mode allowing us to continue functioning instead of immediately dealing with the consequences. That does not mean that we have forgotten the event or that it does not affect us. It merely means that we have a reprieve while we take time to do other things like grow up, get a job, establish a significant relationship or handle a crisis. Eventually we have to face our past and find a way to make sense of it. Only then can we learn to adjust emotionally, take any necessary action and finally leave some of the pain behind.

Some past hurts can be handled relatively simply. Examining what happened and why, then deciding what can be learned from it, corrected, or put in place to ensure that something similar isn't repeated may be all that is needed. Other hurts are much more complex and require in-depth emotional work. The more pervasive the impact, the more complicated the recovery process becomes.

Recovery – What can help?

There are things we can do to bring a sense of emotional peace and intellectual resolution to issues of our past. Each person may have different needs and may require a different pathway to overcome the impact. Each person who takes on that challenge, also arrives at a point when "it is time" to do something about the past. It is clear that things will not just go away and there is a frustration and resentment of the personal disruption that has been caused. This is an important decision-making point. It can potentially start the process of returning life to the individual's control and introducing a "new normal".

Realistically exploring the negative memory in a safe environment with adequate support is crucial to being able to readjust personal thoughts and behaviours. If a significant trauma has interfered with normal functioning, the guidance of an objective, qualified professional may be required.

When we have done what can be done to address past hurts, we must consciously decide to accept the past as history, then start (or continue) to build a future. We must decide on our future goals, then work toward achieving them. As adults, we have seen many injustices and felt the pain within ourselves. As teachers, we must care for our own injuries because there is so much at stake. Our present and future health is at risk if we don't take the time and action when it is needed. We also can't ignore the profession we have chosen and the influence we have in the lives of our students. We have an opportunity to teach well beyond the curriculum. From the basics of coping in a sometimes hostile environment to overcoming the injustices we face, we can model an attitude of resilience. Each of us can acknowledge that life has great potential for happiness and for pain. It is important to also acknowledge that, following any experience, it is our approach to life that determines which of these we keep with us.

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