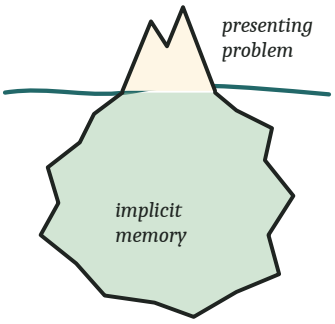
A COUNSELOR'S GUIDE

When the Past Runs the Present

Leading a client through the 3 R's, from the first session to the last



Clients come in with the tip of the iceberg: the fight, the shutdown, the reaction that doesn't fit. Underneath is **implicit memory**, emotion and body states learned early, often before words, and stored without a clear timestamp (de Quervain et al., 2017). The client isn't overreacting. Their body is answering an old alarm. Your job is to help them NOTICE it, give the old emotion its turn at a pace they can hold, and PRACTICE something new.

THE ARC OF TREATMENT

EARLY
1 RECOGNIZE
Safety, curiosity, and naming the pattern.

MIDDLE
2 RESOLVE
Following the emotion back, a little at a time.

LATER
3 RESTORE
New choices, practiced and reviewed.

Most expert clinicians surveyed endorsed a sequenced, phase-based approach for complex trauma: stabilize, process, then integrate (Cloitre et al., 2011). The path isn't a straight line. Return to RECOGNIZE whenever the client needs more safety.

IN EVERY SESSION

OPEN Check in. Ground. Ask for a 0–10 distress rating.

WORK One R, at the pace the client can hold.

CLOSE Back to the room. Distress at or below where they started.

1 RECOGNIZE *Is this then, or now?*

Goal: help the client notice when an old pattern is running the present moment, without shame or blame.

LISTEN FOR

- **Size mismatch.** The event is a 3, and the reaction is a 9.
- **Repetition.** The same fight, just with different people.
- **Age shift.** The client looks, sounds, or says they feel younger.
- **Certainty.** They are sure they know what the other person is thinking.
- **The body first.** A shift in breath, posture, or color before any words.

ASK

> *On a scale of 0 to 10, how big was what happened? How big was your reaction?*

> *Have you had this fight before, with anyone else?*

> *How old do you feel right now?*

> *Where do you notice that in your body?*

> *Is your body sounding an old alarm? Is there really a fire?*

Normalize it. Teach the timestamp idea in plain words: "That was then. This is now." Understanding why they react this way lowers shame and blame, and that makes the next step possible.

THE RESEARCH Under strong threat, stress hormones strengthen emotional memory while weakening the brain's tagging of time and place (de Quervain et al., 2017). The nervous system can detect danger where there is none, which Porges calls faulty neuroception (Porges, 2007).

Continued on the back →

2 RESOLVE *What emotion never got its turn?*

Goal: unprocessed emotion is the FUEL SUPPLY that keeps the past running. Give it its turn, a little at a time.

GUIDE THE MOMENT

- → **Ground first.** "Feel your feet on the floor. Notice the chair holding you."
- → **Follow the emotion, not the event.** "Close your eyes if that will help you focus on the feeling. When have you felt this before?"
- → **Keep one foot in this room.** Your voice, their breath, the floor.
- → **Check the dial.** Ask for 0–10 often. If it climbs fast, slow down and come back to the present.

ASK

> *What did you need back then that you didn't get?*

> *What weren't you allowed to feel or say?*

> *What do you still need to grieve?*

> *What is happening in your body as you say that?*

PACING GUARDRAILS

EMOTIONAL FLOODING IS NOT THE GOAL. PACING IS. Lane et al. (2015); Powers et al. (2010)

VENTING FEEDS THE FLAME. Bushman (2002)

LOOPING DEEPENS THE GROOVE. Nolen-Hoeksema et al. (2008)

DON'T MAKE THEM TELL IT ALL, RIGHT AWAY. Rose et al. (2002)

ONE FOOT IN THE PRESENT. Siegel (2020), window of tolerance

THE RESEARCH A leading model holds that change across therapies comes from reactivating an old emotional memory and updating it with new emotional experience (Lane et al., 2015). Dosed, structured retelling helps (Powers et al., 2010); unanchored venting and rumination do not.

3 RESTORE *I have a choice now.*

Goal: help the client hold then and now side by side, and practice one small new response until it becomes theirs.

ASK

> *What do you know now that you didn't know then?*

> *What do you need now, and who can you ask for it?*

> *What's the smallest different thing you could try this week?*

> *What will you say to yourself when the old alarm goes off?*

REINFORCE

- ◊ **The itty bitty.** A tiny rudder turns a cruise ship. Aim for 10% different.
- ◊ **Catch it later, then sooner.** Noticing after the fact is progress.
- ◊ **Repair counts.** Going back to make it right is a new pattern too.
- ◊ **Name the wins.** When the client says "that was then" on their own, point it out.

THE RESEARCH When the old emotional learning is active and the client has a new experience that contradicts it, the old learning can be revised (Ecker et al., 2012; Lane et al., 2015).

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