

## **But How Can It Work If I Don't Remember It?**

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Try this experiment... Ask a friend to close their eyes and “notice” what happens while you, in a stern voice, say “No” repeatedly (with one or two seconds in between). Then, do the same, this time repeatedly saying the word “Yes” in a positive, warm, enthusiastic way. What do they notice?

For most of us, we will notice some differences. The stern “no” may elicit some discomfort – perhaps tightness in the throat or stomach, slight pressure in the head, or feelings of anxiety. In contrast, when we hear a warm “yes” we may have positive feelings. We may feel our body relax, our facial expression ease, and our breathing slow down, and we may experience a sense peace and calm. (Is it any wonder, then, that our physical health is affected by stress and conflict? But that’s for another article...) This simple experiment shows us that when exposed to negative life events, we tend to have an emotional and/or physical reaction. We may not even have conscious thoughts about the event, yet we may have a negative internal experience.

I don't know about you, but I can't remember much at all before the age of five (and even after that is spotty!) Thankfully, I grew up in a loving home where I was cared for and treated with kindness and respect, but even in that type of environment, hurts happen. And these hurts are remembered, perhaps not consciously, but certainly emotionally and physiologically. Now imagine the emotional and physiological effects on a small child who is neglected, abused, exposed to parental conflict, or whose parent has difficulty forming a secure attachment with them due to their own personal issues or circumstances. Likewise, traumas that a mother experiences during pregnancy, like being in a car accident or losing someone they love, can have an emotional effect on the baby.

Individuals who experience these “preconscious traumas” may struggle with anxiety, low self-esteem, or phobias. They may have difficulty in their romantic relationships by pushing others away, smothering them, or feeling jealous and insecure. Or they may have physical problems (digestive issues, headaches) that doctors can't seem to explain. The wonderful news is that these preconscious traumas can be reprocessed so that they no longer interfere in the present! Thanks to the work of people like Katie O'Shea and Sandra Paulsen, we can “reprocess” these early traumas using EMDR.

When I share this with people the most common question I get is, “But how can it work if I don't remember it?” The answer I give them is, “You don't have to remember it consciously; your body remembers.” Inevitably these discussions include statements like, “I know it sounds strange but...,” as I see the skeptical faces of my listeners! But it's not so strange when you reflect on the fact that the smell of cinnamon buns can conjure up positive emotions about grandma's house, or that the sound of screeching tires can elicit a fear response due to a previous accident.

In my own practice, as I have asked clients to simply focus on a very early period of their life, I have observed them have bodily reactions that they don't necessarily understand and seen emotions arise that catch them by surprise. When I did my own work on my preconscious traumas, I was amazed by the thoughts and feelings that were stirred up about my brother who died five years before my birth, and of the insight I gained

regarding the connection between his death and ongoing themes in my life. Yes, it is clear that our early experiences affect us.

If you are aware of early childhood trauma in your life (or suspect it), perhaps you would like to consider EMDR. Don't worry if you can't remember what happened; your body remembers.

*Susan is a Registered Psychologist providing assessment and counselling services at Eckert Centre. Susan makes a unique contribution to the Centre as a trained EMDR therapist, counselling those dealing with depression, anxiety, and trauma. She also provides faith based counseling services to our clients seeking counseling from a Christian worldview, and works with individuals, couples, and families.*