

The Ericksonian Approach to Trauma Therapy  
By Dan Short, Ph.D.



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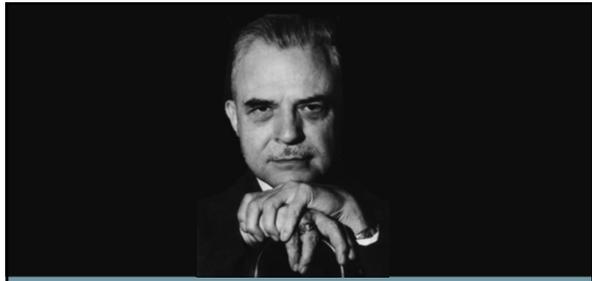
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"I think any theoretically based psychotherapy is mistaken because each person is different."  
Erickson, 1980

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"A model is a simplified version of reality, something that is not entirely accurate. If it were perfect, it would cease to be a model and would instead be reality."  
"Do not believe entirely in any model of treatment."

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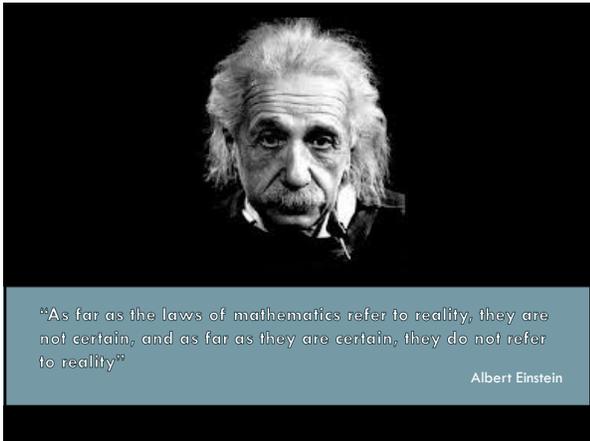
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**What makes it Ericksonian?**

**Singularity**   ▪ No "Trauma protocol" All treatment is tailored to the needs of the individual.

**Inclusion**       ▪ Utilize existing behavior as part of the treatment strategy, always support the client's efforts to cope.

**Relativity**      ▪ Success is relative to the client's personal goals & objectives

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“What is the worst thing that you have experienced?”

(which you are prepared to deal with at this time)

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### What is reconsolidation?

Under certain conditions, protein chains destabilize, physically altering long-term memory (ranging from updating to full retrograde amnesia)

- C1: Conscious retrieval of LT memory
- C2: New emotional context (activation of the amygdala)
- C3: Novel information is provided, with high relevancy to the existing memory

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### Why Reconsolidation Matters

It is the avoidance of traumatic memory that prevents the emotional realization of a new, less catastrophic reality. If the memory becomes conscious only under conditions of panic, then it is reconsolidated with even greater disturbance. Recall needs to occur within the context of a safe environment in which novel information is provided.

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### Hypnosis for Memory Recovery

- **Recalling traumatic events from childhood will not automatically or easily resolve one's difficulties**
- Some clients become increasingly depressed or traumatized when confronted with events for which they are not prepared to cope
- Hypnosis will increase memory recall, but it also increases the recall of false memories, which are then held with greater confidence than misinformation implanted w/o hypnosis
- Highly suggestible individuals are more likely to recover false memories

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Unlike the traditional catharsis model, memory retrieval in Ericksonian therapy is not aimed at obtaining insight as much as the process of reorienting the client to the meaning of one's past and its value relative to the future.



"The objective observer that sees and describes current realities can also alter and change earlier childhood realities."

Erickson, 1979

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Scanned at the American Institute of Physics

"When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

Max-Planck—Father of Quantum Physics

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## What is trauma?

Trauma is not defined by what occurred but instead by the protracted involuntary reaction to that event. It is an indisputable subjective reality.

- Hyperarousal**
- Avoidance**
- Re-experiencing**
- Disconnect**
- Disempowerment**

"Trauma can make life HARDD."

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*"My will and reason were powerless against the imagination of danger..."*

[Upon seeing a caged puff-adder strike at his face] Darwin, 1872

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## Physical Hyperarousal

- Problem:** Rapid breathing, tense muscles, chronically fatigued, on edge
- Problematic Solution:** Use of drugs: stimulants to become active, sleep aids to become unconscious
- Healing Strategy:** Use physical movement to deliver therapy. Provide direction and purpose to the client's movements so that the energy can be released.

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### Space & Movement

"The purpose of emotion is movement."

- Erickson: Sitting in this chair versus that chair
- Use of physical movement to catalyze mental shifts: Walking or running during process work
- Erickson: Climbing a mountain or exploring a park

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### Body & Movement

**Intellectual therapy does not change conditions of the CNS and muscular memory**

- Mindfulness: "What is happening in your body right now?"
- Release: "What muscle is holding the memory? Tense it as tightly as you can, then release, fully."
- SE: Completion of an interrupted movement

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## Emotional Hyperarousal

- **Problem:** Easily overwhelmed by emotion, intensity is reset to higher maximum levels
- **Problematic Solution:** Suppress emotion or numb it with drugs & alcohol
- **Healing Strategy:** Help manage the experience of fear by introducing other incompatible emotions.
  - Cummings: The cure for jump door fever
  - Darwin: The Principle of Antithesis *(involuntary)*

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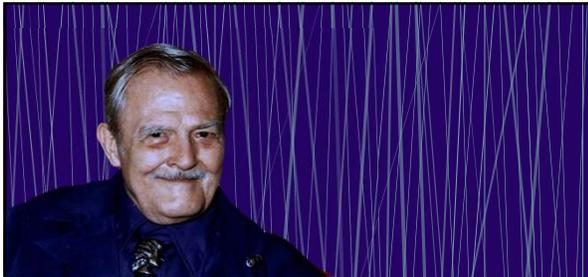
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"...in therapy, you are very careful to use humor, because patients bring in enough grief...You better get them in a better frame of mind right away."

Erickson, 1980

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## Power of Imagination

- Little boy, "I am scared of the monster in my closet!" Father, "What would make the monster go away?" Boy, "If I shouted, 'Monster go away, really loud!'"
- Client, "Every night I am traumatized by my dreams. A man with razors for fingers is coming up the stairs to slice me up!" Therapists, "What if you imagined yourself holding an AK-47?" Client starts laughing.
- Self-determination is essentially a creative process, thus it is directly connected with the exercise of intentional imagination. Furthermore, all problem solving is essentially a creative endeavor, for both the client and the therapist.

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### Intentional Imagination

- **Moral imagination:** How will the trauma give you greater ability to help others?
- **Visionary Imagination:** How can you make this suffering meaningful? What is your cause?
- **Miracle cure:** What will things be like when you recover? How might you get there?
- **Revisionist History:** "When a creature can run or fight, it does not get traumatized. What can you imagine yourself doing back then, what would have allowed you to escape or overcome it?"

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### Avoidance

- **Problem:** Chronic anxiety & decreasing freedom of movement
- **Problematic Solution:** Avoid cues that are emotionally linked to the event
- **Healing Solution:** Help the person distinguish actual danger, which should be avoided, from overgeneralized fear, which can be transformed into opportunities for success.

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"...sometimes the best way to dig out those repressions, those horrible memories, is to have them bring out the emotion, or the intellectual part, or the motoric part." [in piecemeal fashion]  
Erickson, 1980

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## Exposure Therapy

- May harm clients if done incorrectly. First create an environment of safety & choice.
- Identify the most problematic situational cues.
- Introduce choice, what does the client want to feel: **pride** in overcoming an obstacle, **anger** at the injustice of what has occurred, **relief** in finding a solution, **laughter** the absurdity of it?
- Create an experiential event (reconsolidation), in pieces: motoric, emotional, then intellectual.

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## Re-experiencing

- **Problem:** The trauma is repeated, in dreams, flashbacks, or subconsciously
- **Problematic Solution:** Primitive part of the brain takes charge, survival instincts are activated, the client no longer listens to reason.
- **Healing Strategy:** Offer protection: the brain is still responsive to tone of voice, facial expression, movement & proximity
  - Move slowly, speak softly, soften the face, keep a safe distance, and be patient.

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## Hope, Resiliency & Purpose

**People who are equipped with hope, resiliency, & purpose do not become traumatized.**

- Struggle is not bad for you. It produces hope.
- Suffering is not bad for you. It produces strength and resiliency.
- A serious threat is not bad for you. It produces motivation and purpose.
- But it is the perception of inescapable threat, unending suffering, and pointless struggle that will eventually break the mind.

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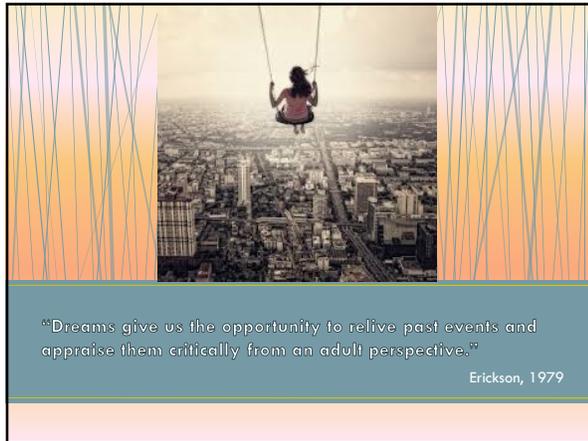
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### Sleep and Dreaming

- Dreaming contributes to reconsolidation, it is how we create a new emotional perspective as details are altered and new information added while sleeping safely in bed. But when it is a repetitive nightmare, the person becomes frightened of sleep, no new information is available, there is only panic and a broken story that never completes itself.
- Nightmares should be processed. You help the client create a new ending for the dream, practice deliberate dreaming.

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### Disconnect

- **Problem:** Feel isolated, the world seems cruel & uncaring (blind to other's acts of kindness)
- **Problematic Solution:** Be less vulnerable, hide internal experiences, limit social exposure
- **Healing Strategy:** Empower the client by establishing his/her right to safety, need to feel safe enough to revisit terrifying events
- Alliance should precede attempts to engineer change.

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"Trust is like a bird.  
You make yourself approachable,  
and wait for it to come to you."



"There is a tremendous need for protecting patients in ordinary psychotherapy. How often is resistance the result of the therapist intruding upon intimate memories, intimate ideas?"  
Erickson, 1977

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### Alliance Formation

- "Do not tell me more than you are ready to disclose."
- "What would make you feel more safe?" (prepare to adjust your demeanor, interpersonal space, the physical surroundings, any negative cues)
- "Who showed you love, at any point in your life?" (important if parents were abusive)
- Collect feedback at the end of each session. For example, use the PEP talk method (Patient Estimate of Progress: "Ranging from 0% to 100%, how much progress do you feel that you have made toward your goal?") Offer validation, "I have seen you take important steps forward."

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### Alliance Maintenance

- Protect the client's ego, with every remark, "Tell me about the good you were trying to achieve?" "What choices can you be proud of given the limited number of options at the time?" "What have you learned?"
- Avoid negative statements about friends, family, or romantic interests, even if they have been abusive. "What do you think he did right and what did he do wrong?"
- Allow the client to set the pace of therapy

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## Disempowerment

- **Problem:** Feeling weak, controlled by outside forces, the emotional thread that creates organized purpose is lost
- **Problematic Solution:** Ruminates, self-blame, ask "why" questions that cannot be answered
- **Healing Strategy:** People need to recognize evidence of their capacity for self-determination. Through the use of humor & creative play, a new narrative is created.

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"For those with PTSD, the danger is not outside, it has become trapped within."



"If you are uncertain about yourself, you can't be certain about anything else."

Erickson, 1976

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## Uncertain Past = Uncertain Future

- Traumatic memories are fragmented, there is not a sequential narrative.
- Rumination is substituted for narrative coherence and future orientation.
- People need emotional goals to work toward. But if the goal is in the past, they remain stuck. In order to be of value, goals need to be shifted to the future.

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### Autobiographical Narrative

- All stories require a beginning & end. This enables us to organize our feelings about self & the outside world.
- With trauma, there is not a full realization that it is over and that they have survived.
- Therapeutic storytelling is collaborative, it incorporates a reinterpretation of events, increased emotional perspective, and new conclusions.
- Jamie Pennebaker (1997): "Write about the most upsetting or traumatic experience of your entire life," 15 minutes, 4 consecutive days: 1 year later, there are fewer trips to the doctor or hospital compared to those who "vented" or expressed emotions.
  - Must make sense of what occurred, draw lessons from it, and establish new goals.

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### Can progress occur w/o talking?

It is not what the person tells the therapist that is important. What matters is the person's willingness to intentionally reexperience the past in such a way that it is redefined by the present.

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### 3 Central Tasks of Trauma Therapy

Ally  
Study  
Catalyze

1. Form a strong alliance, interact as a caring protector
2. Examine/Alter traumatic memories & their impact on the autobiographical narrative
3. Act as a catalyst for new emotional experiences and for the intentional use of imagination

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Can you recall the picture on the 1st slide?  
How has your understanding of it changed?



Irvine Peacock: "It is possible to decode and strip off a layer of what is real and get a glimpse of something else."

Engineer, "All models are a lie...and some lies are more useful than others."

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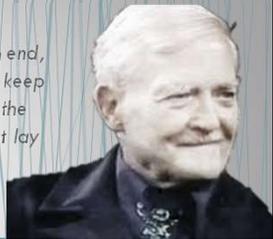
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*"All good things must come to an end, as will the bad. What you get to keep is your increased readiness for the challenges and opportunities that lay before you."*



"The important thing is to have certain experiences recorded in your mind. Some day their presence will be of service to you. It is necessary for you to be aware that you know they are there."

Erickson, 1976

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