

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF EMOTIONAL MEMORY

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About a hundred years ago,

Russian psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik was sitting in a café in Vienna waiting for her coffee refill. It never came. She noticed that her waiter had an excellent memory for all of his customers' orders, but somehow had forgotten her coffee.

Bluma set herself to the task of investigating this phenomenon further. What she found in her subsequent studies was this: People tend to remember the details of things exceptionally well *when those things are unfinished*. She had already paid her waiter, so he had forgotten about her because he was finished with her as a customer.

What is unfinished haunts us. It stays with us, nagging us to bring it to completion. Benjamin Franklin once said that houseguests, like fish, begin to smell after three days. What is unfinished has an uncanny ability to stink up our lives. There is something immensely useful to understand here.

Bluma theorized that incomplete tasks create psychic tension within a person, which motivates them to complete those tasks. Painful memories of the past often have a quality of regret. Regret for having had to endure some sort of trauma; for having missed out on a relationship we might have; for having done something that went against our values – or having *not* done something that mattered to us.

What is fascinating is that these painful memories seem to lose their energy as soon as we do something in *the present*; so that we are no longer perpetuating what was painful in the past. If we are lonely, and have been lonely for a long time, the emotional energy of our loneliness dissolves as soon as we begin having the kind of social interactions we have been longing for. The reality of our past loneliness doesn't disappear, but the sadness and the draw to ruminate on the memory of it does.

Another way of thinking about this is that the emotions of sadness and loneliness have done their job. We've changed our behavior so we aren't perpetuating any longer what was painful in the past. So the memory no longer has the meaning and purpose that it had.

We can spend a lot of time thinking about what was missing when we were little, or what we wished would

have happened; our many desires unfulfilled, things we left unsaid, support we longed for that wasn't available or wasn't strong enough.

I've known people who spend a good percentage of their lives absorbed in such memories. Their self-concept, their sense of "who I am," becomes wrapped around "how it was," until the two are nearly indistinguishable.

This is not a good way to live.

The way through is to change the ongoing hurtful patterns that were established in the past, and that we are continuing to some degree in the present.

If I was lonely when I was younger, and it haunts me still today, are there ways that I am behaving that are keeping me lonely now? Is there anything I can do to change that? If I felt bad for having not completed certain things in the past, are there ways that I am still leaving similar things unfinished today? Can I find a way to finish them?

We can't go back and change the facts of the past; but we can change what we do now. Once we stop repeating the painful patterns of the past, the psychic tension is relieved, and we can get on with life in the present and into the future.

Of course, for some people the pain and trauma were so horrible that the memories intrude, the terror lives on in their nervous systems, and the emotional wounds still bleed. This can make it harder to simply change our behavior in the present.

That's the time to seek help. There are effective ways for healing trauma, allowing our nervous system to come to a better equilibrium. (I write about this in some detail in my new *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions Workbook*).

Understanding that there can be more severe issues which can be overwhelming, it still holds true that if we can change what we are doing now so we are not repeating what may have hurt us in the past, that pain of the past can also lessen to a degree.

If you find that you spend time ruminating about past regrets, ask yourself if there is any way that you are perpetuating that cycle today. If so, is there some positive action you could take now that would move you in a better direction?

The function of our emotions is primarily to learn. Our hurtful memories are not so much painful wounds from the past to be endured; rather they are messages from our emotions to encourage us to change our habits in the present and the future.

When we can stop doing now what hurt us then, we, in effect, complete the function of those past memories, and we can get on with living more fully now.

PS: My course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. And now you can purchase the *workbook* for this course separately for \$29.95 plus shipping. You can still get the online course with the downloadable workbook at a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

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