



How Your Brain Encodes Trauma (+ 18 Tips to Interrupt Intense Emotions & Flashbacks)

Everything you have ever experienced—from the day you were created until today—is coded in these pathways in your mind. This means that whether or not you consciously remember something your brain has stored the information in the subconscious realm. It does this in strings of neurons called neural pathways. Here's how it works:

You experience your world and interpret it through the five senses of sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. These representational systems are how your brain understands, codes and decodes the information it stores. The most dominant representational systems are sight, sound and feeling.

For example, think of a song you really love; when you **hear** it, doesn't it bring up a pleasant memory? Don't you feel good? Or, think of a **smell** that makes you feel excited; isn't it tied to a memory of an experience in which you felt excited?

Sure, it is! That's because of the process the brain uses to store and access cues and stimuli. When we experience anything – good or bad – our brain uses all of the 5 senses to record aspects of the experience. This is why after a car accident so many people are afraid to drive; getting behind the wheel of the car makes them **feel** frightened because the brain has recorded that environment with a bad feeling.

As you move through life your brain constantly scans stimuli every second of every day – and then seeks to recall what it knows or has recorded about each stimulus. Some estimates say we receive 14 million stimuli every day. That's a lot of cues! In order to make sense of it all your brain picks and chooses what it thinks is important and filters out the rest.

By doing this your brain constantly adds information to its warehouse of encoded stimuli. It uses this stored knowledge throughout your daily life to inform you and your behavior.

Whenever you experience anything the brain performs a ***Transderivational Search***: it goes back into its neural pathways and seeks similar encoded information. And then a very fascinating process unfolds:

First, **the brain seeks** and finds similar stored stimuli;

Second, it **activates those neural pathways** and brings this information forward to form a picture in your brain;

Third, your mind **sees the picture** and interprets it in any of a variety of emotions;

Fourth, based on that emotion **your mind and body respond** both psychologically and physiologically.

TO SUM IT ALL UP:

Thoughts create a physical reaction. Literally, your brain represents information in pictures, your mind interprets each picture and formulates emotions, and then you react with specific behavior. This process is also what can bring on intense emotions or a flashback.

By using language and methods associated with reforming the neural pathways in your brain together with a practitioner you can revise, revamp and reconstruct how you perceive the world so that your interpretations support your best interest, desires and overall health and wellbeing. It is entirely possible to disconnect neural pathways associated with trauma and put in their place new neural pathways that allow you to no longer experience severe post-trauma emotions. Alternative healing methods such as information processing techniques, hypnosis and Neuro-Linguistic Programming, among others, all achieve this kind of work.

Changing stimulus associations, information, encoding, representations, pictures and interpretations changes the emotional charge associated with any situation; this changes your behavior. When you neutralize your emotion reactions you enhance your ability to achieve your healing goals, which can then allow you to achieve a reduction in and even elimination of symptoms.

Reclaiming control:

While you work toward creating change in your brain, *The PTSD Workbook*, by psychologists M.B. Williams and S. Poijula, has a list of ways to intercept a flashback. These are also terrifically effective options for interrupting intense emotions. Read over the following recommendations—it will be up to you to try each one and find out what works best for you.

1 - Focus on something you know to be real in your immediate environment, then blink your eyes hard while staring at it. This can break up the flood of visual memories.

2 - **Move around.** Just changing your body position can break the flow of physical memories, bringing you back to present reality.

3 - **Really move around.** Get up and walk around. The exercise can increase blood flow and add real sensory input from your environment.

4 - **Use a deep breathing exercise.** The extra oxygen to your brain and concentration on the simple life-act of inhaling and exhaling can help to reign in your runaway thoughts.

5 - **Do you have a safe place?** Somewhere to go that is calming and restoring? Go there. Actually, physically go there if possible.

6 - **If you can't get to your safe place, use visual imagery** to go there in your mind. Put that vivid imagination of yours to work on something positive and calming.

7 - **Look around you.** What's there? Start naming things off out loud. Identifying real objects around you and the sound of your own voice can help to ground you in a neutral reality.

8 - **Carry or have in your environment a "safe object"** that reminds you of what is real and true. Grab your safe object and hang on, reminding yourself of truth and reality.

9 - **Listen to a soothing tape or CD** or MP3 file. This can be your own voice calmly and confidently speaking truth, a recording of your therapist's voice or words, a good friend or loved one's reassurance, or calming music. Whatever works for you.

10 - **Clap your hands.** The sound and feeling can banish unwelcome sensations.

11 - **Stamp your feet on the floor.** This is the same idea as clapping your hands, but gets more of your body mass involved.

12 - **Splash cold water on your face.** The changes in temperature, pace of breathing and body position all help to remind you of present reality.

13 - **Gently wash your face...** this can help by symbolically washing away unwanted thoughts and memories and reinforcing feelings associated with positive self-care, self-affirmation and self-esteem.

14 - **Say positive things about yourself.** It helps to have these truths written down somewhere, (like a card in your back pocket, wallet or purse) or have a short list memorized that is easy to repeat during the stress of a flashback.

15 - **Pretend to spray the memory away** with all-purpose cleaner until it dissolves in front of you and melts into a puddle on the floor.

16 - **"Project" the flashback onto an imaginary whiteboard** in front of you, then erase it. Actually move your hand back and forth and do the erasing motion, watching the memories get wiped away.

17 - **Draw the intense emotion/flashback, or a symbol or scene of it; then destroy it.** You can sketch with a pencil on paper, use crayons or markers or anything at hand, then shred it or burn it or bury it.

18 - **Lock the intense emotion/flashback away from yourself in some type of container or vault.** You can do this with a real piece of paper, that has a description or narrative or drawing of the intense emotion/flashback, or do it symbolically in your head.

About Michele Rosenthal: Michele Rosenthal is a Trauma Recovery Specialist, award-winning trauma and PTSD blogger, award-nominated author of multiple trauma/PTSD recovery books, popular keynote speaker and workshop/seminar leader, plus Certified Professional Coach, Board Certified Hypnotist and Licensed Master Practitioner of Neuro-Linguistic Programming.

For many years Michele hosted a radio program and podcast series dedicated to interviewing the top experts in the fields of trauma, psychology, neurobiology and recovery. A trauma and PTSD survivor herself, Michele struggled with PTSD for almost 30 years. She affectionately calls her recovery process a “healing rampage.” It worked: Michele achieved 100% recovery.

Almost fifteen years later she remains symptom-free and now dedicates her career to creating customized concierge trauma recovery programs for mid-life professionals who want to end the habit of fear, grief, guilt, shame, loss, sadness, anger, sleep disturbance, stress, or identity loss and instead experience emotional control, confidence, and calm.

Frequently seen in the media in such places as *CBS, NBC, The Palm Beach Post, Orlando Sentinel, The Washington Post, Newsday, Psychology Today, Ladies Home Journal* and *The Dennis Miller Show*, Michele is also the founder of Holistic Health Connections, a membership-based organization for the holistic health community. Learn more at **MyTraumaCoach.com**.