

Thinking differently could affect power of traumatic memories

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Accident response: Emergency service workers are among the groups who can prepare for the traumatic scenes they can expect to see. Image credit: Jaromir Chalabala/ Shutterstock

People who may be exposed to trauma can train themselves to think in a way that could protect them from PTSD symptoms, according to a study from King's College London and Oxford University.

Clinical psychologists Rachel White and Jennifer Wild wanted to test whether a way of thinking about situations called concrete processing could reduce the number of [intrusive memories](#) experienced after a traumatic event. These intrusive memories are one of the core symptoms of PTSD.

Dr Rachel White explained: 'Concrete processing is focusing on how a situation is unfolding, what is being experienced and what the next steps are. It differs from abstract processing, which is concerned with analysing why something is happening, its implications, and asking 'what if' questions with no obvious answer.

'Previous research has shown that [emergency workers](#) who adopted the abstract processing approach showed poorer coping. Another study

compared abstract and concrete processing of negative events and found that the abstract thinkers experienced a longer period of low mood.'

Dr Jennifer Wild said: 'If we consider groups more at risk of PTSD, like military personnel, emergency workers or journalists in conflict zones, they are all groups known to be likely to experience [traumatic events](#).

'This means they have the opportunity to train themselves in strategies that might protect them from the ill effects. For that reason, we wanted to test whether training people to adopt a concrete processing approach could be one such strategy.'

Fifty volunteers were split into two groups. All were asked to score their mood. They were then shown a film with traumatic scenes and asked to rate feelings, such as distress and horror. Each group was then given instructions to watch a set of six further films, while considering different questions.

The first group was asked to consider abstract questions, such as why such situations happened. The second group was asked to consider concrete questions, such as what they could see and hear and what needed to be done from that point. At the end of this period, each volunteer was asked to score their mood again.

They were then asked to watch a final film in the same way as they had practised, rating feelings of distress and horror as they had for the first film.

The volunteers were given a diary to record intrusive memories of anything they had seen in the films for the next week.

While both groups saw their mood decline after the training, those who had been practising concrete thinking were less affected than those who had been practising abstract thinking. Concrete thinkers also experienced less intense feelings of distress

and horror when watching the fifth film. When it came to intrusive memories in the week after viewing the films, abstract thinkers experienced nearly twice as many intrusive memories as their concrete thinking counterparts.

Dr Jennifer Wild said: 'This study is the first to show empirically that the way we think about trauma could affect our memories of it. Further study is now needed, with people who have experienced real-life trauma and to confirm that this can be applied in groups who regularly experience trauma, like emergency workers. This could be the basis for training to improve people's resilience in the face of expected traumatic experiences.'

More information: Rachel White et al. "Why" or "How": The Effect of Concrete Versus Abstract Processing on Intrusive Memories Following Analogue Trauma, *Behavior Therapy* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.beth.2016.02.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.beth.2016.02.004)

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