

Influencing Flashbacks by Using Voluntary Muscular Effort A Case History

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Abstract

In this article, I describe how a person learned to manage the involuntary flashbacks of a traumatic experience. Memories are anatomic structures and somatic organizations. Flashbacks are involuntary memories.

Keywords

Flashback – Voluntary Muscular Effort – Containing

Several years ago a young woman came to my practice in Germany asking for help with repeated episodes of lower back pain. The somatic shape and state she presented was porous, a semi-firm shape with a boundary formation that is swinging between losing its boundaries and trying to keep its boundaries.

I introduced the Formative method to help her learn to recognize how she used herself. We began with standing, walking and sitting. In the sessions, I asked her to muscularly organize a typical muscular, somatic shape, then in measured steps to give it more intensity. She responded by making more muscular tonus in the upper legs and buttocks. Practicing moving and holding herself with more voluntary muscle tonus gave her the experience of more shape and firmer boundaries for herself. She reported that standing, sitting and moving in a slightly different way gave her a different experience of how she was in the room and with me.

After a few months, she was able to manage her lower back pain and I thought she would stop coming. But to my surprise she did not, and I wondered why. I chose not to ask her and to let her decide the steps she wanted to make in our relationship. Years later she told me that my acceptance of her way of relating and working with the exercises was very important. She said it gave her, “the beginning of a new feeling of confidence in myself and the people around me.”

It was only months later that she told me that she had been sexually abused by her father over a period of several years.

She felt this caused her to have frequent panic attacks. She said she was often overwhelmed by flashbacks of the abuse and would cry for hours curled up in a hibernation pattern and did not dare to sleep without a light. When I asked her to imitate what she called a panic attack I saw a freezing pattern of such intensity that she disassociated. This involuntary pattern of extreme stiffening, pulling back her neck and taking her head to one side was so intense, the only way she could influence the contractions was by hurting herself. I explained that voluntary influence of an involuntary behavior begins as an inhibition, a slowing down or holding still of a simple reflex act. Over time she learned to voluntarily differentiate the reflex pattern of stiffening by organizing and disorganizing the muscular pattern that led her to disassociate.

She discovered that she had to make very small and deliberate steps in the differentiating process. After each step she had to wait and hold the shape, otherwise she was overwhelmed by her own involuntary responses. She learned that containment is a muscular act and that by making a muscular edge she could make a new shape with a firm boundary. She also learned how to give her porosity some rigidity by using macro and micro muscular contractions to make more firmness in her shape. She did this by intensifying the muscular tension in her hands and feet. This localized action had a generalized effect, a more firm shape. Organizing herself this way gave her the experience of more stability in her relationships and in her daily life. She also noticed that the tension in the small muscles around the spine could disorganize a little bit, which helped her to better manage the lower back pain.

In working with her, I learned to recognize a somatic pattern in myself. It was a familiar response I call “saving helplessness” where I organized the muscular pattern of stiffening my body wall and pulling up my lower body accompanied by thoughts of taking away her suffering or finding solutions for her. Working with this pattern by using the steps of the Formative method, I learned how to receive and contain my own feelings and excitement that were evoked by her suffering.

Working with my somatic patterns, I learned to manage my urge to tell her she was not guilty. I could respond in a different way and be present to listen to her.

Over time, she was more and more able to manage her episodes of flashbacks and panic. Although they were not gone, she had learned more functional ways rather than hurting herself to influence a pattern of behavior. Most of the time, she could influence herself and form different responses. The quality of her life changed profoundly and she became a more self-confident woman. Her whole story changed from one of being a trapped victim to a more Formative narrative, “Oh, so this is the way I respond to the insults done to me. Now I can form different responses.”

At this point, she decided to have less private sessions and to participate in an ongoing somatic practice class and a group with a Formative focus. During a practice class, one of the exercises stimulated flashbacks of the abuse. She asked to work on this in a private session. The important part of the exercise, for this article, is the action of lifting the pelvis. Beginning in a lying down position, class participants were asked to organize a muscular motor pattern to raise the pelvis up toward the ceiling and lower it in small discrete steps. For my client, the lowering of the pelvis seemed to stimulate the flashbacks.

In our private session, I asked her to repeat the exercise with as much differentiation in shape as possible, to raise and lower her pelvis in the smallest, slowest steps she could manage. She discovered that in the action of lowering her pelvis she responded with involuntary squeezing and this evoked the flashback. Now we had a connection between doing something—organizing a muscular pattern in the pelvis—and the involuntary response of squeezing and the involuntary flashback. She had direct

experience of the flashback as it connected to the involuntary squeezing of the muscles of the pelvis. This underlined Stanley Keleman's statement that memory is structure and structure is behavior.

The next step was to practice differentiating the shapes of the muscular pattern. She was increasingly able to make smaller and slower movements. As she did this, she learned to wait after each step and hold the shape long enough to give it more duration. In the disorganizing she could hold a shape long enough to experience a sensation of swelling and expanding. I asked her to give this shape an edge by giving it some rigidity (that is, making a firmer boundary).

I asked her if she could do one step more and use micro movements to give this edge a bit more rigidity then hold it—less rigidity—hold it and then to repeat this in her own rhythm. By doing this she was able to recognize a range of instability and stability in organizing the shapes and the accompanying changes in her experience. When the shape was unstable she had the impulse to squeeze and when she did the movement she was accompanied by the flashback. By giving the edge more rigidity, she was able to form a more stable organization and she had no impulse to squeeze and no flashback. As she repeated and practiced giving more form to the swelling shape she was able to stay more in contact with the sensations deep in her pelvis without having a flashback. She did this exercise regularly at home and gained confidence in her ability to influence and manage her responses.

At this point, I asked Stanley Keleman what he could suggest as a next step. He replied, "How about organizing the pattern of self-reliance and see how she can form her own behavior and sustain her own sensations and thoughts." She continued to use the Formative method to discover how she could use voluntary muscular effort to influence involuntary behavior in different patterns that evoked the flashbacks of the abuse. She was very committed to the process and practiced it in daily life. In another somatic practice class we explored the motor pattern of "being responsible" in the sense of being at fault, of doing something wrong and being blamed. The feedback she gave of her experience with this exercise illustrates her growing ability to sustain her own sensations and to form a different sense of her self. "I experienced a well-known pattern and if I did not make an edge the flashbacks came accompanied by thoughts, "Of course I am guilty, I have done everything wrong and everyone is angry with me." But when I give each step an edge, I have no flashback and my thoughts change. I now understand how I do it, how I always responded with a pattern of blaming myself. I can experience how I have been formed by this reflex pattern of squeezing and how it is associated with the deep fear that has been with me for so many years. In doing this exercise, I am able to be actively involved in a dialogue with my fear and to regulate my behavior by organizing different response patterns. I have also learned that I can use the practice in my daily life, and not just when I am in trouble, because I enjoy doing it and because I feel gratitude for being able to grow my personal power."

At approximately the same time she wrote me about what growing meant to her. "Formative Psychology and the method of somatic practice has taught me that I can influence my form. First I learned to do it with help from the outside. You asked me, what do you do... do it more and do it less. After a while this became an inner voice helping me to be attentive to how I am doing things and to the voluntary and involuntary effort it takes. I now experience this learning as basic to my growth. Knowing how to use voluntary muscular effort gives me the ability to influence myself by containing my experience or by reorganizing my shape and changing my experience. When I first started working with the issue of abuse, I would experience the instant reflex of squeezing whenever I heard or experienced anything related to sexuality. Today I recognize the response and I am able to influence it. My growth is directly connected with organizing and differentiating an edge, which I now know gives me a boundary for my experience. I have also learned that influencing my form gives me a sense of my own interiority and subjective experience. Creating an edge and making a boundary has become an experience in my muscles. It gives me the experience of a container for my porosity. Growing is, for me, being able to say good-bye to how I judged myself. When I am able to influence my somatic shape and reflex responses, questions of good or bad are no longer important. As long as I am pulsating I can form myself."

References

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Biography

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