



Difficulty Finding and/or Connecting with Positive Memories

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Occasionally, the recipient will have persistent difficulty with finding and/or connecting with positive memories. Fortunately, most of the possible underlying causes are fairly easy to identify and reasonably easy to care for.

Ask for guidance and help: An important reminder: whenever we encounter any problem, of any kind in any context, the basic Immanuel Approach troubleshooting intervention that we *always* turn to first is to ask the Lord for guidance and help. Even when the recipient is not yet perceiving Jesus' presence and has not yet established an interactive connection, you can still coach her to ask *in faith*: "Lord, what's in the way of my recalling and connecting with positive memories?" In some situations, this simple, basic troubleshooting intervention results in all the help you need. For example, the recipient might report, "I think the Lord is showing me that I am a lot more depressed than I realized. I think God is also showing me that it would be helpful to see a psychiatrist – I think my brain will cooperate with the Immanuel Approach, and especially the positive memory piece, much more easily if I get some help to re-balance my brain chemistry first." In these situations a layperson beginner can effectively troubleshoot the problem, even without any of the intermediate-advanced information included in the rest of this essay.

I. Clinical depression:

Lot's of research shows that the memory systems in a person's brain actually work differently when they are depressed. With serious, clinical depression it is particularly *easy* to find and connect with *negative* memories, and it is particularly *difficult* to find and connect with *positive* memories. It's as if all of the person's positive memories are hibernating.¹

Mild to moderate depression: For mild to moderate depression, the recipient will still be able to find and connect with positive memories, *eventually*; but this step will require a lot more work. The facilitator will have to be especially persistent and directive with helping the recipient to find positive memories, and also especially persistent with helping her to describe the memories in detail.

Furthermore, recipients who are depressed often won't feel like remembering and describing positive memories. It is important for the facilitator to acknowledge this, but then to encourage the person to press into positive memory recall and appreciation even though it is difficult and they don't feel like it.

Finally, recipients with depression will have to describe and connect with several positive memories in order to generate adequate gratitude momentum.

¹See, for example, J.Mark G Williams and Jan Scott, "Autobiographical memory in depression," *Psychological Medicine*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (August 1988): pages 689-695; and Richard B. Moore, Fraser N. Watts, and J. Mark G. Williams, "The specificity of personal memories in depression," *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (September 1988): pages 275-276.

Severe clinical depression: With clinical depression that is severe, the biological brain is so deeply mired in negative patterns that positive memory recall and deliberate appreciation will be *extremely* difficult. Using antidepressant medication to re-balance the recipient's brain chemistry will make it much easier for her to participate in the Immanuel Approach process.

II. Lives that have been incredibly bleak, tough:

It is moderately common for a recipient to start out with some version of "I've had a hard life – I don't have any positive memories." But in most of these cases the person can find at least a few positive memories with persistent coaching. For example, if I go through, "Did you ever get a birthday present that you were especially happy with?" "Think of your best childhood Christmas-morning experience," "Have you ever had a pet that you especially enjoyed playing with?" "Tell me about your best experience on a family vacation," "Have you ever had a good friend? Tell me about one of your favorite memories with her," "Have you ever had a particularly beautiful experience in nature? – even just watching a particularly beautiful sunset?" "Can you describe, in detail, thoroughly and slowly enjoying your absolutely most favorite food?" I can almost always collect several positive memories.

However, on rare occasions you will encounter a recipient who has had a truly, profoundly bleak, tough life – a person who has spent his entire life in a refugee camp, or a person who has spent her entire life in a profoundly blighted urban slum. For example, a colleague was doing Immanuel Approach training with a mission team in an urban slum. He was working with a woman who had lived in this crowded slum her whole life, surrounded by concrete, trash, poverty, and social decay. 85% of the people in the area where she lived were alcoholic, she had never been on a vacation, and she could not find any happy family memories. On top of all this, her husband beat her up on a regular basis, and he had just thrown her out of the house the day before the training event. Finally, because of the recent violence with her husband, DCFS had just taken her two young children. My colleague wasn't quite as thorough as I usually am with respect to asking about specific possibilities, but even so he was quite persistent with his coaching. Unfortunately, the young woman was still without any positive memories when he got to the end of his usual list of questions.

In light of this bleak memory landscape, he decided to try something a little different. He asked her if she had ever seen any place that she thought was nice, and that she could use as an imagination context for connecting with Jesus. She remembered that she had once driven past a city park that looked pretty. He coached her to imagine herself sitting on one of the benches in the park, and then they invited Jesus to be with her and to help her to perceive His presence in that context.

I usually work really hard to find an actual memory context because actual memories tend to be stronger in a number of ways, and I try to avoid imaginary scenarios because people can get into trouble when they start generating imaginary content in the Immanuel Approach process; but the good news is that this plan worked. The young woman was quickly able to perceive Jesus' presence with her, and reported that he had picked her up, that he was holding her, and that he was telling her how much he loved her. By this point she was weeping tears of joy, and stated "I have never in my life felt this much love. Ever."

The key with respect to this imagination context approach is that the recipient uses her imagination *only for the context*. Coach the recipient to proactively construct *the imagery for the positive context* with her imagination, but make sure that she understands that she should *NOT*

construct Jesus with her imagination. After inviting Jesus and asking him to help her perceive his presence, it is important for her to go back to just observing and reporting whatever comes into her awareness.

As discussed in the sections in the big lion book on accidental counterfeits, trying to “help” by constructing Jesus with her imagination will just get in the way. First of all, if the real Jesus’ living interactive presence is manifesting in subtle ways, imaginary constructions will get in the way of recognizing these subtle manifestations. And secondly, if there is something in the way of perceiving Jesus, an imaginary Jesus construction will obscure the important information that the process is not yet working. An imaginary Jesus will just postpone the next step of recognizing that something’s in the way and then moving on to troubleshooting.²

C. Looking only for gigantic, once in a lifetime memories:

Sometimes it turns out that the recipient is looking for only exceptional, gigantic positive memories – once-in-a-lifetime positive memories, like the memory I describe in Chapter 6 of the big lion book about walking through a mega-flock cloud of migrating tree swallows. And she misses all of the more usual positive memories that are available because she is thinking that this huge, spectacular kind of positive memory is the only kind that counts or that will work.

Once this problem is identified it is easy to address. First, help the recipient to find a simple, common positive memory. For example, as just mentioned earlier, the recipient can use a memory of a birthday present that she was especially happy with, a memory of her best childhood Christmas-morning experience, a memory of a pet that she especially enjoyed playing with, best memories from family vacations, a favorite memory with a good friend, *simple* beautiful nature experiences – like watching an especially beautiful sunset, or a memory of thoroughly and slowly enjoying a particularly delicious meal. And once the recipient has found a simple positive memory, help her to describe the memory in minute detail: What did she see? Hear? Smell? Taste? Feel on her skin? What thoughts was she having at the time? What thoughts come as she thinks about it now? What emotions was she having at the time? What emotions come as she thinks about it now? How does her body feel now, as she is remembering and appreciating the experience?

If the person is having difficulty with the detailed description, it can also be helpful to demonstrate with a simple positive memory of your own. When I teach about this at conferences, I demonstrate with one of my personal-favorite simple positive memories – eating a piece of Chicago deep dish pizza. I close my eyes, picture myself inside the memory, and describe the experience in detail:

“I’m sitting with Charlotte at one of the little tables at Lou Malnati’s. We’ve been out walking in chilly November weather for the past 90 minutes, and after putting in six miles we are both hungry. It feels good to come in out of the cold, and our anticipation is pleasantly intense as we wait for the kitchen to finish our order. It will be 30 minutes until our pizza comes to the table, but the aroma from the tables where other patrons are already eating fills the room, and we choose to embrace the waiting as part of the fun. Wow! It *really* smells good, and we are *really*

²For additional discussion of the ways in which imaginary content can be problematic, see *The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life*, Chapter 32 (pages 449-455) and Chapter 33 (pages 538-536). **also third reference, specifically re blocking recognition that it’s not working?*

hungry. The room is full of the sounds of people enjoying good food with friends and family. “When our waiter finally sets our pizza on the table, we are prepared to fully appreciate it. Straight from the oven, it is piping hot, and the distinctive smells of garlic, oregano, cheese, tomato sauce, and Italian sausage rise from the surface in tantalizing waves. After I put the first piece on my plate, I take one additional minute to just enjoy the smell – I lean over so that my nose is just inches above the melted cheese and tomato sauce, I inhale deeply, and I wait just a little bit longer. In case you haven’t already discovered this technique – this is the way to absolutely maximize the enjoyment of the first bite.

“The first bite is incredibly, amazingly delicious, and I close my eyes and shake my head slowly from side to side as I chew slowly and savor every nuance of flavor. The specific Italian sausage they use is particularly good, and when it mixes with the thick melted cheese, the spiced tomato sauce, and the double-garlic that I always order the final result is just exquisite. I’m famous for my yummy noises. Ummm, ummm, *uhmm, uhmm!!!* Charlotte smiles and laughs as I show the rest of the customers how it’s done. We work our way through each thick, juicy slice at a very leisurely pace, pausing frequently to deliberately focus our attention on the pizza-joy being created by our taste buds; and as we thoroughly enjoy the pizza, we also take time to think about and name specific things we especially appreciate about the day, each other, and our marriage.

“We are warm, we are relaxed, we are enjoying delicious pizza, we are grateful, and we are glad to be together. (We have found that gratitude and being glad to be together make pizza taste even better.)

“I felt warm, relaxed, grateful, and relationally connected at the time of the original experience, and I feel warm, relaxed, satisfied, grateful, and relational right now, as I think about and describe this memory.”

(Note to self: Record this demonstration at a conference, and then post on website and include link here.)

D. Positive memories contaminated by negative splinters: Some people experience difficulty finding positive memories, especially initially, because every positive memory they go to is quickly contaminated by something negative that is associated. For example, a good memory with a best friend from second grade might be quickly contaminated by negative memories of the friend leaving suddenly in fifth grade. Or a good memory of playing with a favorite pet might be quickly contaminated by the negative memory of the pet being run over by a car. Fortunately, there are several interventions that are usually effective:

1. Use a very simple positive memory: The very first, simplest intervention is to help them try a *very* simple positive memory, like eating a piece of pizza. Just recently I was working with a person who was convinced that all of her positive memories were contaminated with splinters. I explained about very simple positive memories, demonstrated the pizza memory, and then carefully, persistently coached her to try it. She was quite surprised to discover that it worked.

2. Coach recipient to stay with the positive: If you are just doing the appreciation and connection-with-Jesus parts of the Immanuel Approach, and therefore don’t need to use the positive memory for a trauma-work safety net, this intervention can help the recipient use a

positive memory that *does* have splinters. This is a brain-skill exercise, just like the simple mindfulness exercises in which one practices noticing when the focus of her attention wanders and then practices bringing it back to the original target.

First you validate any pain associated with the memories, and then you coach the recipient to *choose* to keep the focus of her attention on the positive pieces: “I’m not dismissing, minimizing, or invalidating this pain, but for right now – for this exercise – I’m asking you to keep choosing to bring your focus back to the positive pieces. I am 100% confident that Jesus wants to care for the negative pieces in some other context, and I really encourage you to make that happen. But for right now, I want you to keep choosing to bring your focus back to the positive.” When the negative pieces are acknowledged and validated first, and with the help of close, persistent coaching, most people will be able to do this.

Note again that this coaching-the-recipient-to-choose-to-keep-her-attention-on-the-positive intervention is *NOT* appropriate for Immanuel Approach sessions that will include working with trauma. You cannot afford to have a positive memory with splinters if you get into trouble and need to use the initial positive memory and connection with Jesus as a safety net.

3. Work with a mental health professional: Another option is for the recipient to just observe as the rest of the group goes through the exercise (if she is in a group exercise setting), and then afterwards arrange for work in a therapy setting, with a mental health professional who can do trauma work without the usual Immanuel Approach safety net. In this setting, the person can just go to the painful memories, and then connect with Jesus in the painful memories for healing. With this work, traumatic memory pieces will steadily transform into positive memory pieces, and the problem with negative splinters contaminating all positive memories will steadily decrease. At some point the person will be able to participate in group exercises and/or work with lay ministers who need the Immanuel Approach safety net.

E. Stuck on negative content due to triggering: Sometimes the recipient will be stuck on negative content due to triggering. Even after the opening prayer, the recipient will be persistent in snapping back to negative content associated with traumatic memories that have gotten stirred up – either negative content in the present that is associated with the trigger focus, or negative content directly associated with the traumatic memories.

The intervention for this scenario is essentially the same as the choose-to-focus-on-the-positive intervention just described for positive memories contaminated with splinters:

- validate and attune to the distress;
- reassure the recipient that her concerns in the present, as well as any pain from any underlying trauma that has gotten stirred up, are important, and not being dismissed or minimized or invalidated;
- reassure her that the Lord has plans to care for the problem in the present, as well as plans to care for any underlying trauma;
- and then invite her to *choose* to cooperate with changing gears to positive memory recall.

When the person is ready to change gears, coaching will often need to be especially persistent and detailed because the recipient is starting with her Relational Circuits strongly off. Multiple memories may also be needed to build positive momentum.

F. Victim swamp:

Many of us, at some point in our lives, have fallen into the victim swamp and gotten stuck in the mire of self-pity. Sadly, when a person is mired in self-pity he will usually be much more interested in getting everyone else to agree with him regarding how horrible his life is, and this attitude is antithetical to deliberately focusing on and talking about the good things in his life. If a person is stuck in self-pity he will therefore be very resistant to deliberately recalling, describing, and connecting with positive memories. Furthermore, most of us respond pretty negatively to being told that we are wallowing in self-pity.

If your relational circuits are strongly on, you are truly feeling glad to be with the person, and you are truly feeling compassion for the person, you can sometimes get away with very gently sharing your perception that he may have wandered into the victim swamp. If you can honestly do it, sharing from your own experience with the victim swamp can be particularly helpful and disarming.

The essay, “Deadly Perils of the Victim Swamp: Bitterness, Self-Pity, Entitlement, and Embellishment,” available as a free download from www.kclehman.com, presents more of my thoughts regarding the victim swamp and how to help a person get out of it.

If the recipient eventually becomes truly willing to engage in positive memory recall and deliberate appreciation, you will be fighting against self-pity neurological habits, which I consider to be the opposite of gratitude neurological habits. Coaching will therefore usually need to be especially persistent and detailed, and you will also usually need to use multiple positive memories to build appreciation momentum.

G. Dismissive attachment and/or autistic spectrum:

Recipients on the autistic spectrum and/or with dismissive attachment will report and display minimal emotions of any kind. They can do the exercise, but they will have trouble both feeling and displaying much tangible appreciation. I have only worked with a handful of people on the autistic spectrum or with dismissive attachment, so I am not an expert, but here are a few observations and thoughts from my modest experience:

- The people I have worked with (or provided consultations for) have often (usually?) been able to perceive Jesus and establish an interactive connection, but it’s easy to doubt that it’s really Jesus because they don’t report or display the emotions one would expect in response to perceiving and interacting with Jesus. My thought so far has been: “Spending time with Jesus is always good, with or without dramatic emotions. Just put in the time helping them perceive and interact with Jesus and see what happens.”
- One person I worked with eventually went to a specific memory where he could remember making a clear choice to stop needing or wanting emotional connection – it was just too painful to need and want emotional connection that he never got. And when he went through this memory with Jesus, resolving the lie and releasing his vow/choice to stop needing or wanting emotions, his progress with respect to dismissive attachment took a big step forward.

- Footnote #14 in Chapter 4 of the big lion book lists a bunch of references for mindfulness exercises that are particularly helpful for people with dismissive attachment.

(Slide 24.0) H. Deliberate blockage from internal parts with guardian lies/blocking beliefs:

Sometimes internal parts have guardian lies/blocking beliefs that cause them to be afraid to cooperate with the Immanuel Approach process. “If we do this, then our defenses will weaken and bad memories will start coming forward,” or something of the sort. Furthermore, parts that have experience with the Immanuel Approach will sometimes block the process right at the beginning, instead of waiting until later. In these situations, you have internal parts that are deliberately blocking the recipients attempts to recall positive memories.

One of the biggest clues with this picture is that the recipient is *usually* able to remember, talk about, and connect with positive memories; but in this particular Immanuel Approach session she is strangely unable to recall or connect with any positive memories. (This picture is particularly easy to spot if you know the recipient and have worked with her before.)

The intervention for this scenario is the same as for any situation in which internal parts are deliberately blocking the process due to guardian lies/blocking beliefs: 1. Use direct eye contact to establish connection and interact directly with internal parts; 2. help them focus and get words for the guardian lies/blocking beliefs, and then; 3. negotiate to find a plan for moving forward and/or help them talk to Jesus and ask for help (in faith).³

I. For group exercise settings, just observing is always a backup option: Occasionally the participant will feel intensely triggered by trying to participate in the exercise while unable to find positive memories. It is always important to remember that for this reason, or for any other reason a participant feels uncomfortable participating, she can always just observe. Watching others remember and describe positive memories will be encouragement that there is good in the world.

Also, in settings where Immanuel Approach components are being incorporated into a larger service (for example, the pastor is coaching the congregation to try positive memory recall and appreciation during the Sunday morning service), it is always okay for people to opt out entirely – just pray and worship quietly during the time that others are engaged in the Immanuel Approach components.

³See the big lion book, Chapters 26, 32, and 33, and also index references for “direct-eye-contact technique” and “internal parts” for additional discussion of working with internal parts that are deliberately blocking the process due to guardian lies/blocking beliefs.