

Title: "Different Types of Traumatic Memory"

August 17, 2026

Greetings all,

Just a quick note to let you know about another essay that I have just updated and re-posted from our kclehman.com website: "Different Types of Traumatic Memory." (Available as free download from the "Kclehman Website Archives" section of the Resources page:

<https://www.immanuelapproach.com/kclehman-com-website-archives/>).

The key updates are the new sections providing additional discussion regarding 1.) "Normal" traumatic memories (traumatic memories with autobiographical content that is available to voluntary recall); 2.) non-dissociative traumatic memories that have lost most of their explicit autobiographical content through prolonged suppression/avoidance (included below); and 3.) traumatic memories with autobiographical content that is repressed.

I have included one of these sections (below) as an appetizer.

Blessings,

Dr. Lehman/Karl

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V. Additional discussion regarding non-dissociative traumatic memories with most explicit autobiographical content lost through prolonged suppression¹/avoidance: Most mental health professionals and emotional healing ministers know about repression and dissociation as psychological phenomena that can cause a person to "lose" memories for traumatic events. However, many do not know about prolonged suppression/avoidance as a subtle, quiet phenomena that can also cause people to lose the conscious, explicit autobiographical content for traumatic memories.

Recalling, thinking about, and talking about an experience will strengthen the neurological connections that carry the conscious, explicit autobiographical memory content. For example, the memories from my childhood that are still clear and strong even after fifty to sixty years are for specific events that occurred during family vacations, specific memories from Christmas mornings, and other specific events from childhood that I and my family have frequently remembered and talked about. In contrast, when we do *not* recall, think about, or talk about an experience, the neurological connections that carry the conscious autobiographical content are *not* activated, refreshed, and strengthened, and the memory progressively weakens and fades. For example, one of my siblings will occasionally tell a story about something that happened to all of us during a childhood family vacation – an event that was just as

¹ "Psychological suppression is the conscious, deliberate act of pushing unwanted thoughts, feelings, or impulses out of your awareness." (Google AI overview 8/5/26).

striking/interesting/entertaining as other events, *from the same vacation*, that I still remember clearly – but I have no memory of what they are describing. And it always turns out that these are experiences that they have repeatedly recalled, thought about, and talked about with their friends and kids, but that I have **not** activated, refreshed, and strengthened.²

Looking at my original session notes for thirty-to-forty-year-old case-study stories provides another example. With some of these stories, my spontaneous internal response as I start reading is, ‘Oh yes – I remember that!’ and, ‘Ah, yes, that was so amazing. It was an honor to be in the middle of that session.’ And these turn out to be stories that I have repeatedly activated, refreshed, and strengthened over the years as I have thought about, written about, and talked about emotional healing. In contrast, there are other stories that I have almost completely forgotten. With these stories, when I first find them I cannot recall *any* of the details. And even after carefully reading through my own detailed written account, I can remember only a few faint scraps. These always turn out to be stories that I have **not** activated, refreshed, and strengthened.

The most dramatic example of this forgetting caused by lack of activating, refreshing, and strengthening occurs when we deliberately, repeatedly “look away” from the painful memories for small-t traumatic experiences. With this variation of forgetting, it’s not just that we don’t recall, think about, and talk about certain memories because they are not repeatedly brought to mind for some reason, but rather that we *deliberately* avoid recalling them, thinking about them, or talking about them because reconnecting with these memories is painful and we don’t know what else to do with them. And when we continue this suppression/avoidance for a long time, most of the explicit autobiographical content from these small-t trauma experiences is permanently lost.

Initially the autobiographical content from these memories is available to our voluntary conscious recall. For example, if you talked to a person a few days after a painful experience that they were suppressing, and offered a large reward if they could describe the details, they could choose to press through their suppression/avoidance and recall all of the autobiographical details. However, under normal circumstances we subtly-but-persistently avoid recalling, thinking about, or talking about these memories, and the explicit autobiographical content increasingly fades due to straight-forward neurology.³

My perception is that most of us have a lot of small-t trauma for which most/all of the explicit autobiographical content has been lost through this “looking away,” suppression/avoidance forgetting process.

Traumatic experiential learning content remains: It is really important to note that even when almost all of the explicit autobiographical content has been permanently lost, the implicit-memory traumatic

² This is also what happens to thousands and thousands of minor autobiographical memory events and details, such as the experience of going shopping for groceries on October 23rd of 2007, or the details of what you had for lunch on May 16th of 2011.

³ The synapse connections carrying the actual autobiographical content, along with the hippocampal-librarian connections carrying the information regarding where to find the material and how to retrieve it, all progressively weaken since they are not being reinforced by repeated activation. In contrast to the autobiographical content, the implicit-memory toxic trauma content does not weaken/fade because it is reinforced every time it gets triggered.

experiential learning content, including distorted, erroneous beliefs (lies) and their associated emotions, will still remain and can be triggered.

Research demonstrating forgetting from suppression/avoidance: Research studying “motivated forgetting,” which is also sometimes referred to as intentional forgetting or directed forgetting, clearly demonstrates the existence of an *active forgetting process* that looks a lot like the suppression/avoidance that I describe in this essay. These research results show that we can *choose* to “look away” from selected memory content, and that this voluntary looking away impairs later attempts to recall the selected material.⁴

Practical considerations regarding forgetting caused by suppression/avoidance: There are a few practical benefits to knowing about this phenomenon.

Suppression/avoidance forgetting looks and feels like pre-autobiographical trauma: This kind of traumatic memory will behave a lot like pre-autobiographical (early childhood) trauma. That is, the toxic traumatic implicit-memory content can be easily activated by triggers in the present, but when the recipient focuses on the triggered content and asks God to help find the underlying trauma she will not get normal explicit autobiographical memories. Rather, she will only find faint/vague scraps and pieces of autobiographical content, mixed together more of the toxic trauma content carried in the underlying memories. Even with thorough healing work to the point that all toxic content is resolved, the recipient will only ever recover a handful of these faint/vague scraps and pieces.⁵ Another way to say this is that there is nothing wrong if the toxic content has been resolved but you still have only a few faint scraps of autobiographical content – there is no need to keep digging, or to worry that there must be an elaborate dissociative system that you need to uncover and work with.

Working with these memories is very similar to working with pre-autobiographical trauma: Working with suppression/avoidance forgetting memories is very similar to working with pre-autobiographical (early childhood) memories:

- Not being able to find underlying explicit autobiographical trauma memories makes it especially easy to conclude that the toxic content is really about the triggers, and to correspondingly get stuck fighting with the triggers instead of persisting with looking for the harder-to-recognize underlying trauma, that will present as just a mixture of toxic implicit-memory trauma content and faint/vague autobiographical fragments.
 - Recipients need to be especially deliberate and persistent with “This _____ (details re traumatic content) is memory. It really, really feels like it’s about this trigger, but this is memory.”
- Recipients need to be especially deliberate and persistent with inviting and connecting with

⁴ See, for example, Anderson, M. C., Ochsner, Kevin N., et al. “Neural Systems Underlying the Suppression of Unwanted Memories.” *Science*. January 9, 2004, Vol. 303: pages 232-235.; Baddeley, A., Michael W. Eysenck, M.W., & Anderson, M.C., *Memory. Motivated Forgetting* (New York: Psychology Press, 2009). Pages 217-244; Johnson, H.M., “Processes of successful intentional forgetting”. *Psychological Bulletin*. 1994, Vol. 116, No. 2: pages 274–292.; MacLeod C.M., “Long-term recognition and recall following directed forgetting.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Human Learning and Memory*. 1975, Vol. 1, No. 3: pages 271–279.

⁵ My kindergarten and first grade memories of not being able to read due to dyslexia provide a good example. For detailed description and discussion of this example, see “Forgetting Caused by Suppression/Avoidance: ‘Where did kindergarten and first grade go?’” (available as free download from the “Case Studies” section of the Resources page of www.immanuelapproach.com).

Jesus *inside* the toxic trauma content *as memory*. And recipients need to be especially deliberate and persistent to work with Jesus in looking at, thinking about, and re-processing the toxic trauma content *as memory*.

- Just as with pre-autobiographical memory, special access tools/resources can be very helpful.⁶

⁶ For discussion of special memory access tools/resources that can be helpful for working with both pre-autobiographical memories and memories with autobiographical content that has been lost through prolonged suppression/avoidance, see “A Case Study in Additional and Special Memory Access Tools: Working With My Own 18 Month-Old Separation Trauma,” available as free download from the Kclehman.com Website Archives section of the Resources page of www.immanuelapproach.com.