Life is traumatic: whether it’s a “big T” or a “little t” trauma. Big T traumas are life threatening events or illnesses. Little ts are disturbing life experiences, like a “pink bow moment.” The first day of the first grade all my little girlfriends and I were going to wear pink bows in our hair. When I got to school, there all 5 of them were, standing on the school steps, waiting on me, with their pink bows, and I’d forgotten mine. They laughed at me. They wouldn’t play with me, or sit by me, or eat lunch with me, or let me take a nap with them. My life was over. It wouldn’t have hurt any more if my foot had been cut off. It was the first day of the first grade and I was a social outcast. I was in tears. At the end of the day, my mother said it would be okay since tomorrow was blue bow day and we’d make sure I had my blue bow. She was right. The next day I went to school wearing my blue bow and everything was fine: I was back in the club. But driving up to school the next day, and for some time after, my gut was in knots. Now it seems silly, but back then it was every bit as big as a life threatening event.

Sometimes we experience disturbing life events for which we are emotionally and developmentally unprepared (explain developmental coping strategies). Other times we might have coping skills, but the event might be too big for us. Still other times we might have the skills and a supportive network to help, but the event is still too big to handle – even with all those coping skills and supports. At times like those, I believe that as children we’re given a gift – the ability to “stuff” the experience behind an emotional “wall.” “Cool! That worked!” Then the next time something comes along that’s too big, subconsciously we think, “Hey, it worked before, maybe it will work again.” And it does. Now we have a new coping mechanism. Unfortunately, all the “stuff” we put behind the “wall” makes little monster babies and we keep “feeding” them with more “stuff”. As a result of this, we have to put more and more energy into keeping the wall long and tall and thick and strong. The energy that goes into keeping the wall long and tall and thick and strong is not available to put into our relationships in the present, so they suffer.

Over time the pressure of the “stuff” builds up behind the wall and starts to leak out, like water from a crack in a dam. More leaks form, and we don’t have enough fingers or toes to block all the leaks, so the emotion comes out in any way it can and often at unpredicted times and in undesirable ways. (give example)

Another way to think about it is from birth. Just before we are born, we are in this cozy, though somewhat cramped space. If we want to stretch, we poke a liver or a kidney, but otherwise, there’s nothing to worry about. Lights and sounds are muted; we’re not worried about being too hot or too cold; hungry or thirsty, wet or dry. Everything is good. Then the next thing we know, we’re upside down, being squeezed through a little tube. Someone’s pulling out head off, they’re sticking something up our nose, slapping us, and poking us with needles. We just got “here” and we’ve learned things like: “The world isn’t a safe place.” “I can’t trust people.” and “I must be pretty unlovable, or they wouldn’t treat me like this!” This is what I call “rat talk.” We’ve got Jiminy Cricket on this (right) shoulder saying, “You can do it! You’re terrific!” and a pack of rats on this one (left) talking all kinds of trash, whispering in your ear... “You’re stupid. Who’d want to be with you. You don’t deserve good things.” In times of vulnerability, we tend to listen to the rats. More about that later...

Now you have a belief system started. When you believe something to be true, do you go around looking for evidence that it’s false? Of course not! You look for evidence that what you believe is true. When you look for something hard enough can you eventually find it? Sure you can! And so we do...that list of big Ts and little ts builds and builds (list 1+2+3+4+5+6+7+8+9+10 vertically on a white board with 1 on the bottom and 10 at the top) until you’re at the downtown Dog Parade at Mardi Gras (a DeLand tradition where families and their pets dress in matching costumes) , and you see your best friend across the street. You wave and shout and s/he looks straight at you and turns around and looks in a store window. Now the rats on your shoulder are having a field day whispering trash in your ear and you’re very likely listening, but it really has nothing to do with you. The dogs are barking, the kids are screaming, and the bands are playing, so she couldn’t hear you. You’re standing behind a 7’3” Stetson basketball player, looking through the crook in his arm, so she couldn’t see you. AND the person she was with said, “Look at that ring (in the store window)!“ S/he didn’t even know you were

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there; yet seeing her turn her back on you triggered all of those earlier experiences. Does any of this sound familiar?

With EMDR, we can target the “stuff” behind the wall and get rid of it. We can take out the most recent, the biggest, or the earliest. It really doesn’t matter, because it’s all dysfunctionally connected. However, if we take out the earliest (1st), then second, then third, etc. If we were talking about a tall building, what would happen if we took out the bottom floors? That’s right, the building would collapse, and that’s what will very likely happen to the “rat talk” if we take out those earliest, touchstone memories where it first took root. Another way to look at it is that those yucky memories prevented the formation of a solid foundation and the building became “wobbly.” With EMDR, we go in and do the work that forms a strong, solid foundation needed for a healthy, happy life.

With modern science, we’ve learned that those disturbing memories are stored in what we call “state” memory. All the sights, sounds, tastes, touches, smells, thoughts, beliefs, body chemistry, emotion, etc. are all stored with the memory of the experience. With EMDR, we access those stuck, misfiled memories – kinda like defragging a computer hard drive — reprocess them in a place of safety and security (my office), and then the past truly becomes the past, allowing you to realize that “that was then and this is now” in a new way.

As we go through the EMDR process, it will not be unusual for you to experiences images, physical sensations such as sounds, tastes, sensations of you skin or in your body, and/or emotions that seem to come up out of nowhere. You’re not nuts. It’s part of the process. Just notice like you’re on a ride at Disney. For some people, this can be like going through a long dark tunnel and you don’t like long dark tunnels. You can get in the car, go five feet, stop, get out, look, get back in the car, start it, go another five feet, stop, get out, look, etc and it will take you a month of Sundays to get through that tunnel. OR, you can say, “I REALLY don’t like this!” Wipe your nose on your sleeve, and floor-board it. You’ll be through the tunnel before you know it and be able to look back and notice the graffiti, the weeds, or whatever else is in the tunnel – if you choose to do that. – and it won’t bother you like it did.

We will be creating new networks in your brain. In between sessions, your brain will continue to use those connections, so processing will continue, though not likely as fast as when you’re in my office. I want you to notice anything that comes up – thoughts, emotions, body sensations – anything that triggers something in you – and write it down for me, say, “Thanks for the info” and let it go by going to your safe place and/or using your container. We will use this to track your progress and to identify any new targets to reprocess. Also, because we’re going to be opening up a lot of stuck “stuff” it’s not unusual for some people to feel like they’ve been run over by a Mack truck after a session. Some folks can feel like they’re coming down with a cold or the flu for two to three days after a session. Again, you’re not nuts. As you reprocess that stuck emotion, the chemistry associated with it is flooding your body and producing toxic by-products that have to be removed. Some people even have diarrhea or very smelly stools (use this one with discretion – but it’s true).

Before we start processing the yucky stuff, I’d like to introduce you to how your brain responds to a bilateral signal – whether it’s a sound, a touch, or moving your eyes back and forth – while you’re focusing on an image, and body sensations. It’s called “Happy Place.” I want you to think about a place, real or imagined, where you feel calm, relaxed, peaceful. It’s better if you are there alone, because how many relationships have you had where things were ALWAYS calm and pleasant, with absolutely NO conflict????? Trust me, if anything yucky is back there, it will come up. I’m going to do this for three reasons: 1) to give you an opportunity to experience the back-and-forth signal and notice how you respond, 2) to give you an adaptive coping strategy you can use in the outside world when you notice any disturbance, and 3) to give you a coping mechanism you can use in here when you are processing the yucky stuff if it becomes TOO overwhelming and you can’t tolerate it. You get to use your “time-out” signal and go to your happy place until you’re ready to pick it up again. Would that work for you? (Do Happy Place now) I also want you to practice your happy place several times during the day whether you need it or not. It’s like we’re making a path in your brain. Have you ever noticed a path being created in a lawn? It starts out with the grass getting bent down as it’s stepped on and before you know it every kid in the neighborhood it able to find the shortcut without being told, just by following the path. It’s the same way with your safe place. If you practice it when you DON’T need it, then when you DO need it, all you have to do is think the word and your body will begin to relax. Any questions, comments, or happy thoughts?