



The griefHaven Word Exercise A Powerful Exercise For Post-Traumatic Stress

by Susan Whitmore

[Excerpt from talk on “Dying Alone” at the 2020 International Day of Hope and Healing.
Read or watch this talk on the griefHaven.org website.]

Today I’m going to teach you an exercise that is very powerful. We use this exercise at griefHaven, and I’ve taught it all over the world. It has to do with those looping thoughts that cause us to keep re-living a traumatic event over and over again.

In my work as a grief expert with griefHaven, I have had the honor of working with hundreds of people who are grieving, and many of them have had their loved ones die alone. This is usually because of an unexpected event, such as unknown illness, accident, suicide or timing when someone is at the end of life. Today, we are seeing this in great numbers with the current pandemic, where people are saying goodbye to loved ones by cell phone or while standing behind a window watching their loved ones die. We also see great numbers of people who have PTS for other reasons surrounding the death of their loved one, such as the moment they received the phone call, when the paramedics came to the house and tried to revive their loved one, watching their loved one suffer, and dozens of other scenarios. Even though most studies of PTS have not included loss and grief trauma, such trauma is highly prevalent in our world today and is finally starting to receive much needed attention.

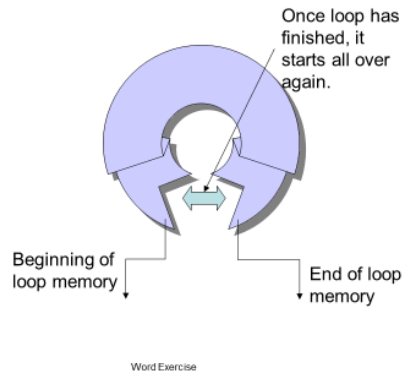
A certain percentage of those who have experienced their loved ones dying alone end up with post-traumatic stress, either because they imagine what their loved one went through while dying alone or because of what they actually experienced while their loved one was dying.

It is those traumatic moments that people ruminate over again and again, moments they just can't stop thinking about. I refer to this as "the loop," and this loop has a beginning and an end. People with PTS may get caught up in the loop and play it out from beginning to end relentlessly. They often tell me it is driving them crazy, keeping them from being able to sleep or eat or have a sense of peace.

So what do we do about it? What we want to do is *interrupt* that loop. We don't want to fight it or judge it or struggle with it, because that only makes it worse. We want to simply work *with* it by sending a message to our brain that says, "Let's not go around this loop this way—let's go out of this loop that way."



Illustration of How PTS Loop Works



How Do We Interrupt the Loop?

Several years ago, I was involved with studies being done at UCLA where the researchers were using functional MRIs (fMRI) to look into the grieving brain. At the time, two studies had been completed: one for the death of a parent, and the other for the death of a spouse. I was there to work on the third one, which was the death of a child.

During my time at UCLA, I came up with an exercise which I felt was already helping me with my own PTS, PTS that resulted from watching my daughter Erika die. I was continually re-living over and over the loop of watching her death. Over time, I worked with this exercise, tweaked it a lot, and started teaching it to others. It not only worked for me, but everyone I shared it with found it worked for them.

This exercise is so deceptively simple that it is hard to believe it is as powerful as it is. Yet, when you understand how the brain works, it makes perfect sense. That loop is your brain's way of trying to work out what has traumatized you, so you keep going over and over it. It is similar to having that imaginary conversation that you *wish* you had had when a person said something upsetting to you. You keep having the imaginary conversation with them you wish you had had because you are trying to work it out. But by interrupting the loop and sending the message to your brain that you are stepping out of the loop by doing something else, you create a new neural pathway that moves away from that traumatic memory. This process weakens the loop and will eventually stop it.

Now, I am going to explain exactly how this technique works so you also can use it. If you use it and practice it regularly, you will find that it is extremely effective.

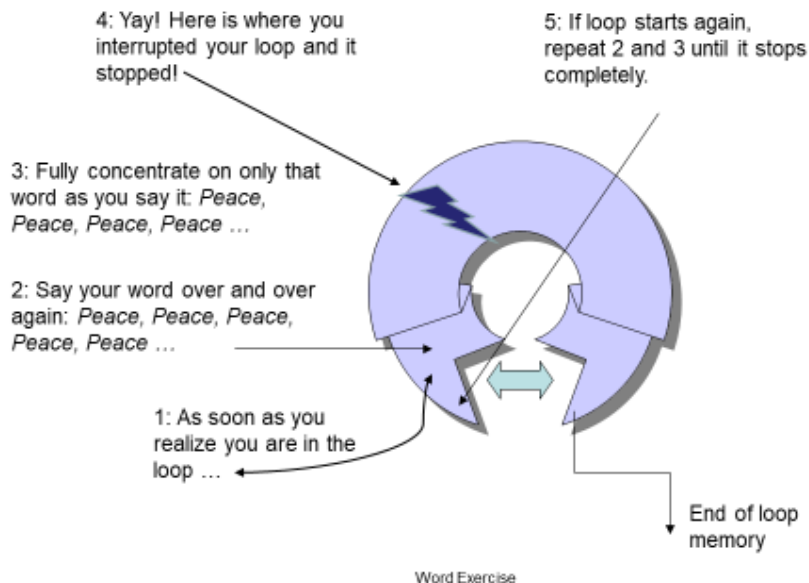
THE WORD EXERCISE

1. You pick a word. One word.
 - a. The word has to be one syllable.
 - b. The word has to be a positive or neutral word.
 - c. The word cannot be a person's name or in any way remind you of your loved one who died.
2. Some word examples: love, hope, peace, God, white, gold.
3. The minute you find yourself in that loop where you are re-living that traumatic experience, you start saying your word. Say it out loud or to yourself and keep repeating it over and over until the loop stops. (To view a physical demonstration, visit griefHaven.org, Home Page.)

MOST IMPORTANT: When you say your word, focus 100% on only that word. See it. Hear it. Focus on it. Many people see it in front of them or in their imagination, or they hear it as they think or say it. **Strong focus on your word is the main key to this exercise**, because you cannot fully focus on more than one thing at a time. So bring all of your attention to your word, and keep saying it several times over. This is what takes you out of the loop and into a different direction.



Illustration of How to Interrupt the Loop

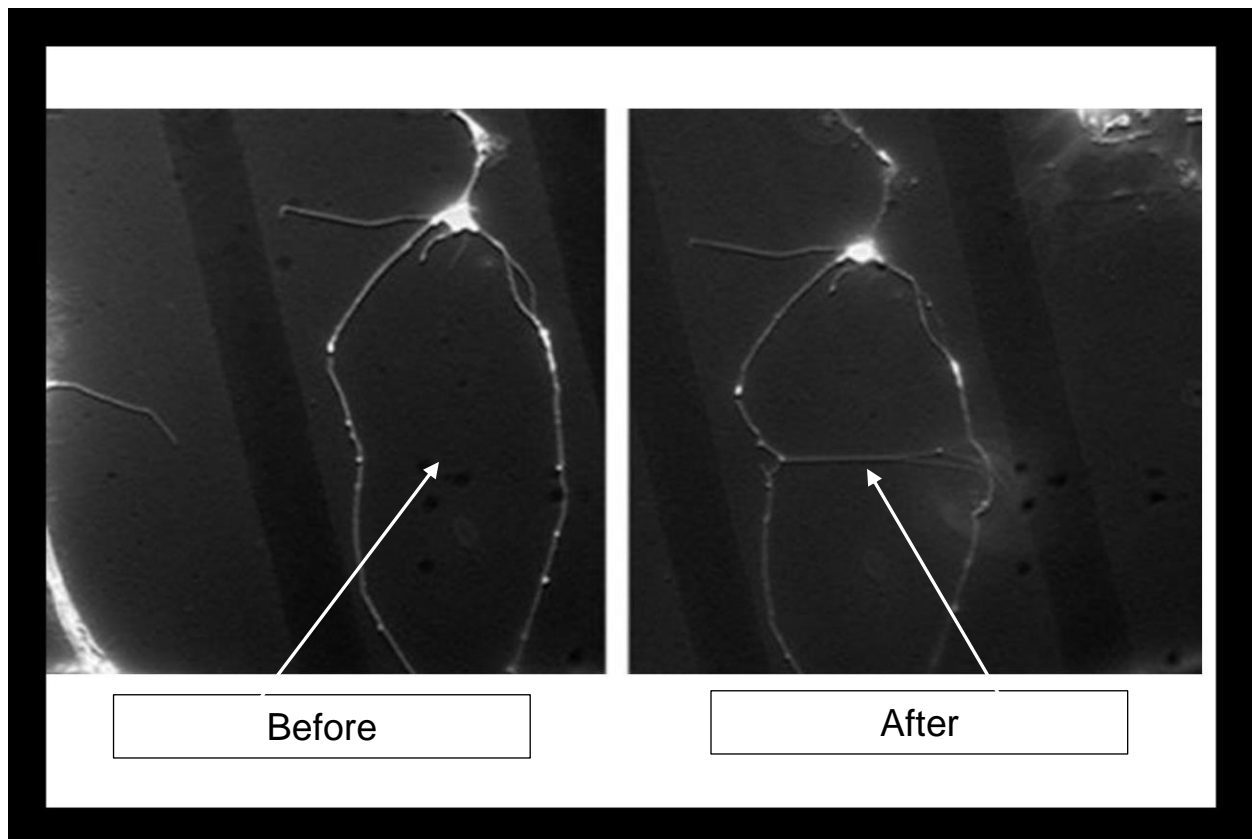


Often, as soon as you stop saying your word, your loop will start up again. Do the word again and keep doing it until the loop stops. If you are in bed at night, you may fall asleep saying your word. Some people choose to go to sleep this way at night, using their word like a meditation, prayer or mantra.

4. This exercise can work immediately, but you will need to use the practice consistently, over and over again. It is a powerful and useful tool that you can use for the rest of your life and teach to your children and friends.

Using this technique, you will stop reinforcing the traumatic circuit, the loop, and you will create a new neural pathway as seen in the remarkable photos below.

Microscopic Photo of New Neural Pathway Being Formed



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