



Triggered Traumatic Content and Verbal Logical Explainer (VLE) Confabulations

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Please note that this is an unfinished essay. We are releasing this draft version in response to persistent requests, especially for the material regarding “how to recognize when you’re triggered” (sections III, IV, & V). In addition to many places where additional material needs to be filled in, there are also many places where different parts of the essay have not yet been synchronized with each other. In spite of all this, our hope is that the benefit provided will outweigh any confusion caused.

Also, those who have read the essays and/or been to the seminar “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, & The God Who is With Us” will probably want to skim over sections I & II, since you will already be familiar with most of the content in these sections.

I. Foundational principles and definitions:

The pain processing pathway: We all encounter painful experiences. When we encounter pain, our brain/mind/spirit system tries to process the painful experience. Our attempt to process the experience starts with processing at levels 1 and 2, and then moves progressively upwards to processing at level 3, then level 4, and finally level 5. If we have adequate capacity, adequate maturity skills, and adequate community, we are able to complete the processing journey: we maintain organized attachment, we stay emotionally and cognitively connected, we are able to recover from the non-relational zone that negative emotions push us into, we are satisfied with how we navigate the situation, we are able to fit the experience into our understanding of the world, and we make accurate interpretations regarding the meaning of the experience with respect to ourselves.

Explicit memory: Explicit memory recall is what we all think of as “remembering.” Explicit memory *feels* like “normal” memory. When we recall events through the explicit memory system, it *feels, subjectively*, like “I’m remembering something from my personal past experience.” For example, if I ask you “What did you do this morning?” you will tell me about getting woken up by the paper boy throwing the newspaper through your living room window at 5:30 this morning, and how you spent the next hour picking up broken glass...etc, *and you will feel* like you are remember something from your personal past. This *conscious, autobiographical* memory about your personal experiences is explicit memory.

Implicit memory: Implicit memory is all memory phenomena that *does not* include the subjective experience of “I’m remembering something from my personal past experience.” Implicit memory content *does not* feel like “normal” memory. When the implicit memory systems are activated, our minds and brains recall memory material, but it does not *feel, subjectively* like explicit autobiographical memory. Since implicit memory does not *feel* like what we think of as memory, we usually *do not* have any awareness that we are remembering

or being affected by past experience when we recall and/or use “learned” information through one of the implicit memory systems¹. When this happens, the person perceives that the implicit memory material, such as the beliefs and emotions associated with a childhood traumatic event, *are true in the present*. We sometimes refer to implicit memory as “invisible” memory, since it usually affects us *without being “seen”* by our conscious minds.

Even if we are aware that we are being affected by some kind of memory phenomena (for example, we learn to recognize emotional triggering as an implicit memory phenomena), we still don’t have the subjective experience of “I am remembering something from my personal past experience.” By definition, implicit memory does *not* include source information.

Non-traumatic painful experiences: When we *are* able to successfully complete this processing journey, the experience may be painful but we get through it without being traumatized. We emotionally and cognitively “metabolize” the experience in a healthy way, and memory for the experience is stored as non-traumatic memory, where it contributes to knowledge, skills, wisdom, maturity, and conscious autobiographical memory for our personal history. Non-traumatic memories do *not* carry any toxic content. When these memories are activated at any point in the future they contribute valuable resources as opposed to interfering with our ability to function.

Traumatic painful experiences: However, various problems at each of the levels can block successful completion of the processing journey. If we are *not* able to complete the processing journey, then the painful experience becomes a traumatic experience. Therefore, ***our definition of trauma is a painful experience that has not been fully processed***. If the person does not get help processing the trauma at the time it occurs, the experience will be *stored* in this unprocessed state, and becomes a traumatic memory. Traumatic memories are *qualitatively* different than non-traumatic memories – traumatic memories carry toxic content from unresolved painful experiences, and they are processed, stored, and retrieved differently than memories for experiences that have been fully resolved. When these memories are activated at any point in the future, *implicit memory content from the unresolved trauma comes forward and feels true in the present*. For example, implicit memory content from unresolved traumatic events might include unprocessed physical sensations, unresolved negative emotions, feelings of inadequacy, confusion, and distorted interpretations (lies); and this implicit memory content will disrupt our ability to function as it comes forward and invisibly blends with our experience in the present.

Trauma-associated distorted interpretations (lies): My perception is that unsuccessful processing of a painful experiences can result in distorted interpretations in many ways. These distorted interpretations (lies) are then stored as part of the memories for the inadequately processed painful experiences. The memories that carry the unprocessed content from the trauma also carry the distorted interpretations (lies) that are associated with the traumatic events. My perception is that trauma-associated lies contribute to the toxic power that unprocessed trauma exert on the person’s life, and also that trauma-associated lies hinder the traumatic memories from getting resolved.

¹ You can learn to recognize the subjective experience of implicit memory being activated with a lot of deliberate practice, but most people have very little awareness or insight regarding implicit memory phenomena.

Being triggered: I am “triggered” when something in the present causes my brain/mind to open traumatic memories, so that unresolved content from these memories is activated. As mentioned above, when unresolved traumatic experiences are activated, various aspects of the experiences, such as unprocessed physical sensations, unresolved negative emotions, feelings of inadequacy, confusion, and distorted interpretations come forward and *feel true in the present*. Whenever implicit memory content from unresolved trauma is active in the present, you are triggered; and whenever you are triggered, implicit memory content from unresolved trauma is active in the present. **For example, **Fill in****

II. It is *really* important to recognize and take responsibility for our triggering: When we embrace the challenge of recognizing and taking responsibility for our triggering we provide tremendous benefits – to ourselves, to our friends, to our spouses, to our families, to our colleagues, and to our communities. And when we fail to recognize or take responsibility for our triggers there are incredibly expensive consequences that affect every sphere of our lives. For example:

Triggering = source of many “irreconcilable” conflicts: If the real problem is in the past, we can’t solve it by working in the present. This is especially true if both parties are triggered. If both parties in a conflict are triggered, it is almost impossible to even come to an acceptable compromise. It is impossible to truly resolve the conflict without resolving the triggers. For example, Charlotte and I have found that triggering has contributed to *every* marital conflict that seemed impossible to resolve – in *every* one of those conflicts that would come up over and over, and always end up in the same stuck place, one or both of us have been triggered. AND, one by one, these “stuck” conflicts – some “stuck” for 10 to 15 years of our marriage – have resolved as we have identified and resolved the triggers that were part of the conflict.

One of the clearest examples of this phenomena in our marriage was our conflict regarding...
****fill in example****

Another good example was our conflict regarding... ****fill in example****

Recognizing and resolving triggering can resolve “irreconcilable” conflicts: As illustrated in the examples just described, the flip side of the negative consequence that unrecognized triggering can cause “irreconcilable” conflicts is that recognizing and resolving triggered material can bring resolution to what had *seemed* to be irreconcilable differences.

Triggering and loss of relational connection circuits ends relationships: In my assessment, triggering is the number one cause of losing access to our relational connection circuits. If a person gets triggered to the point that he loses access to his relational connection circuits he will become non-relational, and he will come up with “solutions” that are non-relational. Many of the “solutions” that a person comes up with when he has lost access to his relational connection circuits will include ending the relationships that are triggering him. If one person is triggered and non-relational, the relationship can sometimes be salvaged if the other is very mature, has high capacity, is committed to the relationship, and is willing to keep initiating repair. If both parties consistently get triggered to the point where they lose access to their relational connection circuits the relationship will almost certainly end.

When Christians get triggered to the point of being non-relational, their VLEs will come up with elaborate justifications for why they need to end the triggering relationships. But the real reason for the cutoff is that the offending relationship consistently triggers them to the point of losing access to their relational connection circuits. When I think about the examples I am familiar with, *every* case where Christians have ended longstanding relationships has involved one or both parties losing access to their relational connection circuits due to triggering.

Recognizing and resolving triggered material can prevent relationship breakdown: The flip side of the negative consequence that unrecognized triggering and loss of access to relational connection circuits can end relationships is the positive benefit that recognizing and resolving this triggering and re-establishing access to relational connection circuits can prevent relationship breakdown.

Billing relationships in the present for things in the past: Unrecognized triggering is very expensive to relationship emotional bank accounts. For example, when your husband triggers unresolved trauma from your father, you bill your “husband trustworthiness” account as if your husband had committed your father’s behavior. And when your husband triggers unresolved trauma from your father, you bill your “husband emotional associations” account as if your husband was the source of the pain from your father wounds.

Triggered thoughts and emotions impair our discernment:

Triggered *negative* thoughts and emotions: “Triggered” negative thoughts and emotions will be produced by anything in the present that activates traumatic memories. For example: Let’s say I have memories of being frightened by bullies on the playground, I am now facilitating a ministry session, I bring up an issue that makes the person angry, and he glares at me with the same expression I saw on the bullies’ faces. The trauma-associated implicit memory thought “I had better do what he wants or he will hurt me” barely touches my conscious mind, and I suddenly feel anxious and a little confused. The most helpful response, possibly opening the way to important healing for the person receiving ministry, would be to calmly respond with something like: “I notice you’re angry. Can you let yourself feel the anger, and then try to identify what thoughts feel true when you think about the question I just asked?” Instead, I quickly change the subject to something that doesn’t make him angry. Unfortunately, this subtle triggering just impaired my discernment regarding the best leadership for this ministry session, and similar scenarios will continue to occur until I identify and resolve the memories and lies that are getting triggered.

Triggered *positive* thoughts and emotions: “Triggered” positive thoughts and emotions will be produced by anything in the *present* that comforts, covers, compensates, or counter-acts implicit memory content from traumatic memories. The triggered positive thoughts will be the opposite of the underlying lies, and the triggered positive emotions will be the opposite of the emotions from the traumatic memories. For example, various experiences in Charlotte’s childhood led to her taking in lies along the lines of “I’m not acceptable/I’m not good enough.” She also learned that she temporarily felt better when she performed well and people affirmed her performance. Temporarily “I *am* good enough, I *am* acceptable” would feel true, and she would feel confidence and security instead of the anxiety and insecurity usually associated with her “I’m not acceptable/I’m

not good enough” lies.

And these “triggered” positive thoughts and emotions will impair discernment and balance. The perceived importance of the triggering event/situation/ behavior, the perceived validity of the triggered positive thoughts, and the subjective intensity of the triggered positive emotions will all be exaggerated because they will match the importance of the underlying wounds and lies (as opposed to being appropriate for the current situation). This inflated perceived importance, perceived validity, and subjective emotional intensity will impair our discernment and interfere with appropriate balance, drawing us into making poor decisions and causing us to neglect/harm ourselves and others as we pursue the temporary relief of the triggered positive thoughts and emotions. Continuing on the example above: one time Charlotte made herself late for a trip we had planned because she was talking to some people who were highly interested and impressed with a program she designed. Pursuing the triggered positive emotions associated with their attention and affirmation made her feel like somehow she simply *had* to answer every question and tell them about *all* of it *in detail, right then*, even though doing so made her late for the previous commitment. She could easily have said: “I felt the Lord leading me to stay longer and share more with these sisters.”

Triggering mistaken for guidance from the Holy Spirit: Triggered negative emotions often result in the subjective experience of a vague, intuitive reluctance to do something – “I just get the feeling that I shouldn’t do this,” and this intuitive reluctance – subjective experience of “I feel like I shouldn’t do this” is easily mistaken for a “check in the Spirit.” Similarly, triggered positive emotions often result in the subjective experience of vague, intuitive energy or pressure to do something – “I just get the feeling that I should do this,” and this subjective experience is easily mistaken for a “prompting from the Spirit.”

This makes a lot of sense when you think about it for a minute. A true *check* from the Holy Spirit often feels subjectively like an emotional/intuitive nudge/pressure *away* from doing a certain thing, and a true *prompting* from the Holy Spirit often feels subjectively like an emotional/intuitive nudge/pressure *towards* doing a certain thing. This nudge/pressure inherently feels like more than the ordinary “I don’t want to do such and such” or “I do want to do such and such” (if it didn’t, we wouldn’t think it was a check or prompting from the Spirit). It also inherently feels somewhat mysterious – we can’t identify an adequate, logical explanation (if we could see an adequate explanation we wouldn’t think it was a check or prompting from the Spirit²).

Similarly, triggered negative emotions will often feel subjectively like an emotional/intuitive nudge/pressure away from doing certain things and triggered positive emotions will often feel subjectively like an emotional/intuitive nudge/pressure towards doing certain things. The inflated perceived importance and exaggerated emotional intensity contribute a subjective *more than the ordinary* component, and we usually can’t identify an adequate, logical explanation for our triggered emotions because of the way implicit memory is “invisible” and because our psychological defenses usually hide the connection to the underlying wounds and lies. Furthermore, the *intense subjective feeling*

² We sometimes feel a “check” before we have a logical explanation, but as we consider the matter more we think of the/a logical explanation. Our perception is that the initial feeling could be a true “check” from the Holy Spirit, and that this prompts us to think about the situation more carefully.

that our triggered emotions are real and valid – both true *with respect to the underlying trauma* – can add conviction to triggered “guidance” we mistake as a check or prompting from the Holy Spirit. Our perception is that many people, including ourselves, have mistaken triggered emotions for guidance from the Holy Spirit. The good news is that it is reasonably easy to tell the difference between triggering and guidance from the Holy Spirit once you learn to recognize both triggered negative emotions and triggered positive emotions.

Recognizing and resolving triggered material improves discernment: *fill in*****

Triggering can hinder every aspect of your relationship with the Lord: Beyond just impairing your ability to hear guidance from the Lord, triggering hinders every aspect of your relationship with the Lord. Triggering can distort your perception of the Lord’s heart and character. Triggering can hinder your ability to perceive the Lord’s presence. Triggering can hinder your ability to connect with the Lord. Triggering can hinder your ability to receive from the Lord. *****fill in more. Give examples.*****

Resolving triggers removes blockages that hinder your relationship with the Lord: Just as triggering can hinder every aspect of your relationship with the Lord, resolving traumatic memories can benefit every aspect of your relationship with the Lord.

In one emotional healing session I was facilitating, the person receiving ministry was complaining about the pain she was still experiencing from unresolved traumatic memories, and about how long it was taking to relieve her pain. She was in a memory where she could perceive Jesus’ presence at the time she made these comments, so I encouraged her to present these questions/complaints directly to the Lord. She did this, paused for a few moments, and then reported the following response: “Jesus says that He loves His children, and is glad when their suffering is relieved, but that **the most important purpose for all of this emotional healing stuff is to remove the blockages that are between our hearts and Him – the *primary* objective for emotional healing is to remove the blockages that hinder our hearts from coming to Him.**”

Recognizing and resolving triggered material reduces “friendly fire” damage to allies:

*****fill in, give examples*****

It is especially important for those in leadership to learn to recognize and take responsibility for their triggering. The more power a person has, the more damage they can do if they *don’t* take responsibility for their triggering, and the more blessings they can release if they *do* learn to recognize when they are triggered and to take responsibility for their triggering.

III. Recognizing and taking responsibility for our own triggering is hard to do:

- A. The subjective quality of implicit memory:** As mentioned above, when something in the present reminds us of an earlier experience, and we recall the earlier experience as explicit memory, we have the subjective experience of remembering – we *feel* like we are remembering; however, when some trigger in the present activates implicit memory content, we *do not* have the subjective experience of remembering – we do not feel like we are

remembering something from our past. When something in the present triggers implicit memory content, the implicit memory content that comes forward *feels, subjectively*, like it is about the present and *feels, subjectively*, like it is true and valid in the present.

Part of the challenge with recognizing and taking responsibility for our triggering is that traumatic memories always include implicit memory thoughts and emotions, and when this implicit memory content is triggered forward it *always feels* like it is about the present, and it *always feels* like it is true and valid in the present. When a person is experiencing triggered implicit memory thoughts and emotions, their spontaneous *subjective* perception will always be: “No! This isn’t from some old memory – this is about the present!”

B. Verbal logical explainer and confabulation: We have a part of our brain/mind/spirit that I call our “Verbal Logical Explainer,” or VLE. The VLE’s job is to come up with “explanations” that help us organize and make sense out of our experiences and the world around us. Most of the time this is a good thing. Our VLE is constantly coming up with explanations that help us make sense out of our lives, and it usually works so quickly and smoothly that we don’t even notice it. It also usually starts with basically adequate and accurate data, and comes up with basically valid explanations. However, if the VLE starts with distorted and/or inadequate data, it can come up with profoundly flawed explanations. For example, if the VLE starts with implicit memory thoughts and emotions from unresolved trauma (*memory content that lacks source information regarding where it is coming from*), it will “make up” explanations for how these thoughts and emotions fit in with *circumstances in the present*.

There are fascinating research studies and clinical case studies that demonstrate the sobering ability of the VLE to “make up” flawed explanations when it is given flawed and/or inadequate information. One of the most dramatic sources of information about the verbal logical explainer comes from split-brain research. When a patient has extremely severe seizure disorder that does not respond to medication, one of the last ditch treatment options is to cut the pathways that connect the right and left sides of the brain, so that seizures starting on one side will not spread to the whole brain (this is pretty drastic, but it’s better than progressive brain damage and death). When the two sides of the brain are separated in this way, the Verbal Logical Explainer on the left side no longer receives communication from the right side of the brain, and this leads to some very interesting results when the VLE tries to explain right-sided behavior.

For example, in one study the patient was shown an initial picture, and then shown a card with a number of different pictures, from which he was asked to pick the item most related to the first picture. Because of how the neurology of the visual system is designed, it is possible to simultaneously show one image to the right side of the brain and a different image to the left side of the brain, and the research team designed special equipment that could do this. The patient was then shown an initial image that presented a picture of a chicken foot to the left side of the brain and a picture of a snow storm to the right side of the brain. When he was shown the second set of pictures, his right hand (corresponding to the left side of his brain) immediately pointed to the picture of a chicken, while his left hand (corresponding to the right side of his brain) pointed the picture of a snow shovel.

This was not particularly surprising. But then the researchers thought to ask the patient to explain his choices. He first explained that he had chosen the chicken to go with the chicken

foot, which again surprised no one. However, when they asked him to explain why he had also chosen the snow shovel, instead of acknowledging “I don’t know,” or even “I’m not sure,” he promptly responded that if you had chickens, you would need something with which to clean out the chicken shed. *Aware that he had chosen the snow shovel, but completely unaware of the fact that this picture was chosen in response to the initial image of the snow storm, his left sided Verbal Logical Explainer **just made something up.*** Furthermore, the patient appeared to have no subjective awareness that his left-sided VLE had confabulated an explanation that had absolutely nothing to do with the real reason he had chosen the picture of the snow shovel.

Research with hypnosis provides another source of dramatic information regarding the verbal logical explainer. For example, a well known and often repeated demonstration, where the person is not consciously aware of a post-hypnotic suggestion as the true cause of a particular action, exposes the VLE “making something up” when the person is asked to explain his behavior. While the demonstration subject is in hypnotic trance, the hypnotist makes the post hypnotic suggestion: “When I tap three times on the table with my pencil, you will get up and open the window, and you will not remember that I gave you these instructions until I give you permission to do so.” The subject is brought out of hypnotic trance, and then several minutes later, after the demonstration appears to have been completed, the hypnotist “absent mindedly” taps his pencil on the table. The subject gets up and opens the window, and as he is returning to his seat, the hypnotist asks “why did you open the window?”

You might think the person would pause, look confused, anxious, and maybe also embarrassed, and then respond with something along the lines of: “Well, I – I don’t really know. This is actually kind of weird. I was sitting there listening to your presentation, and then I suddenly had this irrational impulse to get up and open the window. I hope I’m not going crazy or something!...etc.” However, most people respond very differently. The person might pause for the *briefest* moment, an expression of confusion might *flicker* across his face, and then he will respond with something like: “It was getting stuffy in here, so I thought I would open the window.” With most subjects, the moment of hesitation is barely discernable, and the person appears to be completely unaware of the fact that his VLE has just constructed a totally fabricated explanation.

Patients with Korsakov’s syndrome provide some of the most dramatic case study information regarding the verbal logical explainer. Korsakov’s syndrome, which produces very localized damage to the mammillary bodies, results in a form of memory impairment where the person retains memory for events prior to the illness, but is not able to form any new autobiographical memories. And in some cases of Korsakov’s syndrome, the person’s verbal logical explainer also seems to be particularly unaware of the memory impairment. This results in a dramatic situation in which the person’s verbal logical explainer has no autobiographical information regarding the months and years leading up to the immediate present, seems to be unaware of this huge lack of contextual information, and therefore constantly “makes up” explanations based only on the information immediately in front of him.

Dr. Sacks provides the following verbatim transcript from an interaction with one of his patients with Korsakov’s:

“‘What’ll it be today?’ he says, rubbing his hands. ‘Half a pound of Virginia, a nice

piece of Nova?’ (Evidently he saw me as a customer – he would often pick up the phone on the ward and say ‘Thompson’s Delicatessen’).

‘Oh Mr. Thompson!’ I exclaim. ‘And who do you think I am?’

‘Good heavens, the light’s bad – I took you for a customer. As if it isn’t my old friend Tom Pitkins...Me and Tom’ (he whispers in an aside to the nurse) ‘was always going to the races together.’

‘Mr. Thompson, you are mistaken again.’

‘So I am,’ he rejoins, not put out for a moment. ‘Why would you be wearing a white coat if you were Tom? you’re Hymie, the kosher butcher next door. No bloodstains on your coat though. Business bad today? You’ll look like a slaughterhouse by the end of the week!’

Feeling a bit swept away myself in this whirlpool of identities, I finger the stethoscope dangling from my neck.

‘A Stethoscope! He exploded. ‘And you pretending to be Hymie! You mechanics are all starting to fancy yourselves to be doctors, what with your white coats and stethoscopes – as if you need a stethoscope to listen to a car! So, you’re my old friend Manners from the Mobil station up the block, come in to get your boloney-and-rye...’

William Thompson rubbed his hands again, in his salesman-grocer’s gesture, and looked for the counter. Not finding it, he looked at me strangely again.

‘Where am I?’ he said, with a sudden scared look. ‘I thought I was in my shop, doctor. My mind must have wandered...You’ll be wanting my shirt off, to sound me as usual?’

‘No, not the usual. I’m *not* your usual doctor.’

‘Indeed you’re not. I could see that straightaway! You’re not my usual chest-thumping doctor. And, by God, you’ve a beard! You look like Sigmund Freud – have I gone bonkers, round the bend?’

‘No, Mr. Thompson. Not round the bend. Just a little trouble with your memory – difficulties remembering and recognizing people.’

‘My memory has been playing me some tricks,’ he admitted. ‘Sometimes I make mistakes – I take somebody for somebody else....What’ll it be now – Nova or Virginia?’

So it would happen, with variations, every time – with improvisations, always prompt, often funny, sometimes brilliant, and ultimately tragic. Mr. Thompson would identify me – misidentify me, pseudo-identify me – as a dozen different people in the course of five minutes. He would whirl, fluently, from one guess, one hypothesis, one belief, to the next, without any appearance of uncertainty at any point...³

As is especially clear from this example, a person’s VLE has an amazing ability to “make things up,” and this amazing ability to fabricate can be accompanied by an alarming absence of self awareness.

With respect to unresolved trauma and implicit memory, the relevant point is that the VLE will quickly and smoothly come up with an “explanation” for why and how your *current circumstances* are causing you to experience any triggered thoughts and feelings (thoughts and feelings that are actually content from unresolved traumatic memories coming forward as implicit memory). And, unfortunately, the confabulated, flawed VLE “explanations” *feel*

³ Sacks, Oliver. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. (New York: HarperCollins) 1970, pp 108&109.

very much like valid VLE explanations. Without a lot of deliberate practice, most of us don't seem to perceive any difference between valid explanations and flawed, confabulated explanations.

Having an "explanation" that accounts for the triggered thoughts and emotions as being reasonable responses to events in the present makes the implicit memory content even more difficult to recognize for what it is. When unresolved trauma, implicit memory, and VLE explanations come together in this way, you try to solve the problem by focusing your energy and attention on the triggers in the present, as if they are the true source of the implicit memory traumatic content; and if the trigger happens to be another person's behavior, you will try to solve the problem by attempting to manage her behavior. Furthermore, it will feel intensely subjectively true that she should take responsibility for causing your implicit memory pain. You will not just want her to take responsibility for the behavior that *triggered* the underlying trauma, you will want her to confess, apologize, and make restitution as if she caused the full extent of the pain in the underlying traumatic memory. And you will not feel heard, understood, validated, safe, or ready for reconciliation until this has happened.

Detective stories provide a good analogy. In the really good detective stories, the criminal doesn't just leave an unsolved crime, with a team of investigators that are still trying to find him. The smart criminal is always careful to frame someone else, so that the case is closed. The smart criminal wants to see someone else convicted for his crime, so that the detectives stop looking for clues. The combination of unresolved trauma coming forward as implicit memory and VLE explanations is similar, in that the problem is not left as an "unsolved crime," where you are still looking for clues. The implicit memory content *feels* true in the present, and your VLE comes up with an explanation for why the triggers in the present should take full responsibility for the implicit memory content that has come forward. You are no longer looking for clues because someone has already been arrested and convicted. This analogy is particularly valid, because an important part of the damage from this combination of trauma, implicit memory, and VLE explanations is that people in the present get "framed" for the content from the underlying trauma.

For example, let's say Nancy had an alcoholic father who was emotionally and physically unsafe. Whenever he got angry he would threaten, bully, and intimidate, and this frightening behavior frequently escalated to actual physical violence, so Nancy knew he was not just bluffing. This scenario occurred over and over throughout Nancy's childhood, and she has many traumatic memories of these events. Now, twenty five years later, Nancy is married to David, who occasionally gets angry *but never bullies, intimidates, threatens, or gets violent*. However, whenever David gets angry, Nancy *feels* bullied, intimidated, and threatened because his anger triggers her unresolved memories, and the toxic content comes forward as implicit memory *that feels true in the present*. Furthermore, her VLE looks at the information in front of her and comes up with an "explanation" along the lines of: "I feel bullied, intimidated, and threatened because David is bullying, intimidating, and threatening me with his anger. He *feels* dangerous when he is angry, and I know he will escalate to violence if I don't do what he wants...etc." She is vaguely aware that she has never seen David get violent, with her or anyone else, and also that she can't identify any actual specifics that would indicate bullying, intimidation, or threat; but she still accepts the combined implicit memory and VLE explanation package *because it feels so compellingly true*.

This combination of implicit memories and erroneous VLE explanations creates a point of

unresolvable conflict. Nancy will only feel heard, validated, safe, and ready for reconciliation if David takes full responsibility for intimidating and bullying her by threatening violence. This was all true *with respect to her father*, and her demands are appropriate *with respect to her father*, but the combination of her implicit memories and VLE explanations also create the compelling subjective perception⁴ that this same picture is true in the present *with respect to David*. However, since this picture is *not* actually true in the present, he cannot honestly own it. They are therefore stuck with an irreconcilable difference, where she is demanding that he acknowledge what feels compellingly true to her, and he is refusing to own what he knows is not his.

John and Sara provide another example. When John was a boy, his father spent most of his time and energy building an increasingly successful business, and ignored John's mother, who became increasingly lonely. John's mother eventually got a job outside of the home in order to have more interaction with other adults, and her beauty and intelligence did not go unnoticed. Her boss appreciated her competence, perceived her as attractive, and genuinely enjoyed her company. Initially, this friendship seemed like a good thing. John noticed that his mother's boss was very kind to her, he often noticed his mother smiling as she talked to her boss, and she was generally much happier. Unfortunately, what began as a friendship developed into an affair, and John's mother eventually left the family in order to marry her boss.

Now, twenty five years later, John is married to Sara, who is outgoing and friendly to all her acquaintances, *including men*. John has never observed her engaging in behavior that anybody else would consider even the least bit inappropriate; however, when he finds her talking to and smiling at other men, he *feels* betrayed and rejected. When he sees Sara smiling at her male friends, his unresolved memories are triggered and the toxic content comes forward as implicit memory *that feels true in the present*. It *feels true* that Sara is engaging in inappropriate intimacy that will lead to an affair (if she is not *already* having an affair), and it *feels true* that Sara will eventually abandon him to run off with another man. Furthermore, his VLE looks at the information in front of him and comes up with an "explanation" along the lines of: "I feel anxious and betrayed, and I am having these feelings *because Sara is being unfaithful*. I wouldn't feel this way if she weren't doing *something* inappropriate...., etc." He is vaguely aware of the reality that he cannot explain exactly why Sara's friendly smiles are inappropriate, and that he has never observed any other inappropriate behavior, but he still accepts the combined implicit memory and VLE explanation package *because it feels so compellingly true*.

This combination of implicit memories and erroneous VLE explanations once again creates a point of unresolvable conflict. John will only feel heard, validated, safe, and ready for reconciliation if Sara takes full responsibility for being unfaithful. He admits that he has absolutely no evidence indicating that she has had an actual physical affair, but he fears that she may be having sex with these other men, and he wants her to at least take responsibility for having an emotional affair with any male friend she frequently smiles at. At the very least, he wants her to acknowledge that her smiling at other men is inappropriate. *His mother's* friendship and smiles did become inappropriate, and *his mother* did have an affair,

⁴ It is almost impossible to overstate the intensely compelling subjective quality of the combined implicit memories and VLE explanations.

but the combination of his implicit memories and VLE explanations also create the *compelling subjective perception* that this same picture is true in the present *with respect to Sara*. However, since this picture is *not* actually true in the present, she cannot honestly own it. They are therefore stuck with an irreconcilable difference, where he is demanding that she acknowledge what feels compellingly true to him, and she is refusing to own what she knows is not hers.

C. Other levels of central nervous system extrapolation: Even with all of this information regarding implicit memory, the VLE, and confabulated explanations, it is still hard to understand the incredibly compelling subjective experience of *feeling* implicit memory content *as if it is true in the present*, and the equally compelling subjective experience of *believing* that the triggered thoughts and emotions *are being caused by events in the present*. As I studied these phenomena, I found it particularly difficult to understand why we believe our VLE explanations even when they have so many holes. For example, in the scenarios presented above, systematic evaluation by an outside observer would quickly reveal the weakness of Nancy’s VLE explanation. If I were one of her close friends, I could easily point out many flaws in her assessment:

“So you’re saying that David was bullying and intimidating you by threatening violence when he got angry about you getting another parking ticket? I was there – remember? He was angry for a minute or two, but then he cooled down, and it seemed like he had forgiven you completely by the end of dinner. Didn’t you tell me once that he has never even *hinted* that he might hurt or punish you if you didn’t do what he wanted? And didn’t you tell me that he has never made any kind of threatening gesture, like raising his hand, or even leaning toward you in a menacing way? And here’s another one I don’t understand. I’ve known you guys for twenty years, and have been around you a lot. My observation is that you get angry at David with pretty much the same frequency and intensity as he gets angry at you, but it never seems to occur to you that *you* are bullying or intimidating him..., etc.”

Similarly, systematic evaluation by an outside observer would quickly reveal the weakness of John’s VLE explanation, and if I were one of his close friends, I could point out just as many flaws in his assessment:

“So you’re saying that Sara was flirting and trying to pursue some kind of inappropriate relationship because she was being friendly and *smiling*? John – your two sisters were standing right beside her, and she was talking to your friends! I was standing in the same circle of conversation, and I don’t think she was doing anything different than the other people in the conversation – we were *all* being friendly and smiling. You told me once that you have never found the slightest shred of evidence indicating that she has been unfaithful – has that changed? You always say that her friendly behavior and smiles are inappropriate, but I have never been able to understand you when you’ve tried to explain why you came to this conclusion. And here’s another one I don’t understand. I’ve known you guys for twenty years, and have been around you a lot. My observation is that you are friendly towards other women, and frequently smile at them, but it never seems to occur to you that *you* are pursuing inappropriate relationships..., etc.”

Another piece of the puzzle that helps to explain our gullibility⁵ with respect to VLE explanations is to realize that the central nervous system extrapolates, or “fills in” at a variety of levels. VLE confabulations are what we get when the central nervous system “fills in” at the level of explanations. In the examples discussed above, such as with the split brain experiment when the research investigator asked “Why did you pick the shovel?,” there was a “hole” with respect to explanation. And instead of acknowledging “I don’t know – there is just a big hole where an explanation should be,” the central nervous system VLE tries to fill in the hole with a confabulated explanation *that is actually an extrapolation – an educated guess based on the information that is available*. Interestingly, a wide range of research reveals that our central nervous systems extrapolate, or “fill in holes” at a number of different levels. For example, central nervous system extrapolation is revealed at the level of perception when Gestalt principles (such as “closure”) produce perceptual illusions,⁶ and central nervous system extrapolation is revealed at the level of cognition when we perceive illusory correlations.⁷

One of the most dramatic examples of central nervous system extrapolation is the filling in of the retinal blind spot. The retina lives at the back of the eye, and is like the sensor in a digital camera. An image of what we are seeing is focused through the lens of the eye and lands on the retina, where the sensory receptors (rods and cones) react to the light and then send signals that correspond to the image. As illustrated in **figure ****, the nerve fibers from the rods and cones come out of the front of these sensory receptors, so that they must then penetrate through to the back of the retina in order to form the optic nerve that travels to the brain. The nerve fibers from all of the rods and cones gather together into a bundle, and then penetrate through to the back of the eye in one place, called the optic disc. In **figure ****, a photograph of the retina, the optic disc is the white/yellow circle just left of the center of the picture. The point with respect to this discussion is that the area of this optic disc *does not have any receptor cells*. This means that there is *no input* from the part of the image falling on the optic disc, and the corresponding hole in the visual field is called the retinal blind spot.

If the retinal blind spot were directly represented in our visual perception, our view of the world would include a black hole corresponding to the lack of input from the optic disc, as

⁵ Note that we only seem to be gullible with respect to *our own* VLE explanations. It is usually pretty easy to spot the irrational logic and missing evidence in the VLE explanations of others (unless we have very similar wounds and VLE explanations, in which case we seem to share their blind spots).

⁶ Most psychology text books on perception will include discussion of central nervous system extrapolation at the level of perception. See, for example, the discussions of subjective/illusory contour figures and the Gestalt laws of perceptual organization presented in Coren, Stanley; Ward, Lawrence M.; Enns, James T., *Sensation and Perception, sixth edition* (Hoboken, NJ: J. Wiley & Sons), 2004, pages 242-248.

⁷ Many research studies have demonstrated central nervous system extrapolation in the form of illusory correlations. For the original demonstration and discussion of illusory correlations, see Chapman, Loren, J., “Illusory correlation in observational report,” *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, Vol. 6, 1967, pages 151-5. For more recent, corroborating research, see Hamilton, David L. & Rose, Terrence, L., “Illusory correlation and the maintenance of stereotypic beliefs,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1980, Vol. 39, No. 5, pages 832-845; and Sanbonmatsu, David M.; Kardes, Frank R.; Herr, Paul M., “The Role of Prior Knowledge and Missing Information in Multiattribute Evaluation,” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 1992, Vol. 51, pages 76-91.

illustrated in **figure ****. However, as we all know, we *do not* perceive a black hole in our visual field, and this is because our central nervous system extrapolates to fill in the retinal blind spot. The central nervous system extrapolation in charge of this function samples the input from the edges of the hole, and then uses this information to make an educated guess regarding what should go in the hole. Charlotte touching up digital photographs on the computer provides a good analogy. If she finds a blemish, such as the unsightly brown patch to the right hand side in this otherwise attractive green lawn, **figure ****, she can sample the input from around the flaw, and then fill in the brown spot with this nearby material. The central nervous system extrapolation to fill in the retinal blind spot can be exposed by the simple exercise described in **figure **fill in figure and instructions for demonstrating retinal blind spot****.

When the small image on the right side of the figure is completely covered by the blind spot, the central nervous system extrapolation fills in the hole with input from the surrounding white background. As you have just observed, when the “hole” is filled in with input from the white background, *the image of the butterfly completely disappears!*

In light of the fact that central nervous system extrapolation “fills in the holes” at so many different levels, I am guessing that some kind of central nervous system extrapolation helps to fill in the “holes” that can sometimes make VLE confabulations appear so weak to outside observers.

- D. Good old denial and self deception:** I think the last pieces of the puzzle are good old denial and self deception. Most of us do not want to know just how dysfunctional we are (or maybe we do not yet have the *capacity* to deal with the full extent of our dysfunction?). We do not want to see just how often we are triggered, we do not want to see just how many of our perceptions, thoughts, and emotions are implicit memories coming from unresolved trauma, and we do not want to see just how many of our explanations are actually confabulations trying to justify our triggered reactions. The most generous formulation is that we just don’t know what to do with all of the data points that don’t seem to fit.

So we look away from the clues that tell us something is missing. We look away from the evidence telling us “Something is wrong with this picture.” We look away from the data points that tell us something is wrong with the way we understand ourselves and the world around us.

It’s amazing how easy it is to be fooled when we are fooling ourselves and we want to be fooled. It’s pretty easy to maintain a blind spot when we do not want to see what is hiding in the blind spot, and when we do not want to know that we have a blind spot. Gullibility is pretty easy to explain when all of the “players” are on the same team.

- E. Trauma necessarily includes inadequate resources:** Part of the definition of trauma (in our current Wilder/Lehman model) is a situation that exceeds our capacity and/or maturity skills. *An inherent part of this definition for trauma is **not having the necessary resources***. If the person who is going through a painful experience has safe adults who are with him, attuned to him, hearing him, validating him, connected to him, etc, *he will almost never be traumatized*. Therefore, most traumatic memories will include the *absence* of attunement – the *absence* of others with him who heard him, understood him, attuned to him, acknowledged his pain, and validated the difficulty of the situation he was in.

Unfortunately, this almost universal aspect of trauma causes trouble when it mixes with the subjective experience of traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulation. Since implicit memory *feels true in the present*, when trauma that includes this component gets triggered, “I’m still waiting for someone to hear me, understand me, attune to me, acknowledge my pain, and validate the difficulty of the situation I’m in” will *feel true in the present*. And here’s where we encounter the problem, because I will want them to acknowledge and validate the *full extent* of my *implicit memory pain*, and I will want them to acknowledge, validate, accept, and agree with my assessment of the situation, *including my perception that the implicit memory pain is coming from the present and my VLE confabulations based on implicit memory content transferred into the present*.

When I’m triggered, what *feels true* is that I want someone (usually Charlotte) to understand, acknowledge, validate, and agree with *my transferred implicit memory content and my VLE confabulated explanations*. When she refuses to do this, and instead suggests that I am triggered, it feels mis-attuning and resonates with the “lack of adequate resources” aspect of the original trauma. Implicit memory for *not* being understood, *not* receiving attunement, *not* having my pain acknowledged, and *not* having my assessment of the situation validated promptly comes forward into the present and is transferred onto the person who is suggesting that I might be triggered (again, usually Charlotte).⁸

F. Specific content that opposes recognizing and taking responsibility for triggering:

Many traumatic experiences include being actively blamed, accused, and invalidated, as opposed to being heard, understood, validated, attuned to, and believed. For example, when a child is molested by a close family member, the rest of the family is often unable/unwilling to deal with the many painful consequences of acknowledging this horrible reality, and so attack and blame the child instead. Sadly, we have heard many stories such as, “When I told Mom that grandpa molested me, she washed my mouth out with soap and told me I would get a good spanking if I ever said anything like that again,” or “When I told Dad that my brother forced me to have sex with him, he told me I shouldn’t have been wearing clothes that made him want me.”

This sadly common component of trauma doesn’t just cause trouble when it mixes with the subjective experience of traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulation, it explodes. As the original trauma is *feeling true in the present*, and VLE confabulated explanations are *focusing on people in the present*, suggesting the possibility that the person might be triggered usually activates the “blamed, accused, invalidated” component of the original experience. When this happens, the implicit memory perception of being blamed, accused, and invalidated immediately comes forward into the present, and associated VLE confabulations will focus on whoever is suggesting the possibility of triggering. When I am

⁸ In my experience it has been helpful to very deliberately recognize, acknowledge, validate, and attune to this aspect of the whole scenario. For example, when trying to help someone recognize that his present experience is being affected by trauma that has come forward as implicit memory, I will make comments along the lines of: “I think your pain and your perception of what’s happening will make sense as soon as we get all the pieces in place. I really want to validate your sense of what’s happening, but I think some of your thoughts and some portion of your pain may be coming from old trauma. If you’re willing to try it, I would like to ask the Lord to help us find any memories that might be contributing. I’m guessing that the full extent of your pain and your assessment regarding the situation will both make sense in the context of the original trauma.”

triggered to this kind of memory and Charlotte suggests the possibility that old trauma might be getting stirred up, it usually *feels compellingly true* that she is blaming, accusing, and invalidating me: “Oh, yeah, right! Everybody else is innocent, and the real problem is that I’m triggered – if it wasn’t for all my triggering and dysfunction everything would be just fine! If we blame Karl everybody else can just go on ignoring their stuff...etc.” (Heavy sarcasm intended).

Furthermore, many of us have had experiences where it was not safe to acknowledge doing something wrong. Even good and loving parents can get intensely triggered, and have episodes where they over-react to something their child has done. For example, a small child might disobey some household rule, and as a result break something that is especially precious to the parent. When Dad discovers the broken treasure he asks “Who did this?,” the child honestly acknowledges “I did,” and then Dad grabs the child, shakes her, and screams at her for being careless. If the person had experiences where it was not safe to honestly acknowledge her faults, then suggesting the possibility that she might be triggered (indirectly asking her to acknowledge that her woundedness is contributing to the problem) can activate this traumatic content. To the extent that this is happening, she will feel defensive and unsafe even when the suggestion is made carefully and gently.

Putting these pieces together, when someone gets triggered, the triggered implicit memory content will *feel, subjectively*, like it is about the present, true in the present, and valid in the present; his VLE will quickly and smoothly come up with an “explanation” that will fortify and defend this subjective perception; suggesting the possibility of triggering often stirs up additional pain regarding not getting adequate help; and suggesting the possibility of triggering often stirs up implicit memory content that directly reacts against recognizing and owning the triggering.

This is the challenge we face when we set out to recognize and take responsibility for our triggering.

So why attempt this difficult task? Because I think the *benefits* of recognizing and taking responsibility for our triggering are even greater than the *difficulties* of attempting this challenging endeavor.

IV: Neutralizing traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulations: At this point, the reader is hopefully asking: “So what do we do? *HOW* do we expose and neutralize our traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulations, so that they won’t continue to disrupt our lives and relationships?”

A. I need to take responsibility for MY triggered traumatic content and VLE confabulations: One of the most strategic points in this whole endeavor is for each of us to take responsibility for exposing and neutralizing *OUR OWN* triggered traumatic content and VLE confabulations.

Unfortunately, questions about triggering and confabulated explanations often trigger us, and when this happens we often respond by taking an adversarial stance from a place of infant or child maturity. We act as if it’s somebody else’s job to do most of the work, so that it will be as easy as possible for us to participate in the process. We demand that they “prove it” before we acknowledge our triggering and VLE “explanations,” and we fight them every step of the

way. When we do finally acknowledge our traumatic implicit memory and the ways it comes forward into our present lives, we expect others to provide the time, energy, and finances for the emotional healing to resolve the trauma. For a variety of reasons, taking this adversarial stance from a place of infant or child maturity usually does not turn out well.

In contrast to this “does not turn out well” approach, we can deliberately, aggressively and pro-actively *embrace the responsibility* and *take the initiative* with respect to this life-giving challenge. Instead of demanding that others “prove it” before we even acknowledge our triggering, expecting them to carry most of the load, and then fighting them every step of the way, *we* can take responsibility for *our* stuff. As described above, one of the most difficult points in this whole endeavor is the extreme difficulty of receiving truth from others regarding our triggering and VLE confabulations – our tendency to feel invalidated and react with outrage when anybody suggests the possibility that we might be triggered. One of the most valuable aspects of embracing responsibility for exposing and neutralizing our own stuff is that this side steps the complicated hornet’s nest of having to receive this difficult truth from others. Furthermore, embracing responsibility for exposing and neutralizing our own stuff helps us respond constructively when others (helpfully?) volunteer the suggestion that we might be triggered. In my own experience, I know that my repeated, deep resolutions to vigorously pursue exposing and neutralizing my triggering and VLE confabulations have helped – when Charlotte suggests that I might be triggered, and the negative reactions described above well up inside (urging a variety of non-relational responses), I can feel that my decision to take responsibility for my stuff helps me choose to consider the probability that she is right.⁹

Husbands and fathers, do you want to be courageous and heroic in serving your wives and children? Then be courageous and heroic in the battle to expose and neutralize your triggered traumatic content and VLE confabulations. Wives and mothers, do you want to be courageous and heroic in serving your husbands and children? Then be courageous and heroic in the battle to expose and neutralize your triggered traumatic content and VLE confabulations. Believers, do you want to be courageous and heroic in serving the Lord? Then be courageous and heroic in the battle to expose and neutralize your triggered traumatic content and VLE confabulations. You may think that I am being melodramatic in my use of “courageous” and “heroic,” but if you take me up on this challenge you will discover that I am not overstating my case.

B. Exposing and resolving the underlying traumatic memories: As explained earlier in the section on psychological trauma, when we encounter pain our brain-mind-spirit system tries to process the painful experience, and there is a specific pathway that this processing follows. When we are able to successfully complete this processing journey, we get through the painful experience without being traumatized – we emotionally and cognitively “metabolize” the experience in a healthy way, and instead of having any toxic power in our lives, the adequately processed painful experience contributes to our knowledge, skills, empathy, wisdom, and maturity. As also mentioned earlier, various problems and/or limitations can block successful processing; and if we are *not* able to complete the processing journey, then

⁹ Once we have gotten some practice with recognizing and acknowledging our stuff, and have strengthened our capacity for shame, we can take the especially courageous step of *inviting* others to help us in the narcissistically mortifying process of exposing our triggered traumatic content and confabulated explanations.

the painful experience becomes a traumatic experience, and the memory for this experience will then carry unresolved traumatic content.

The *good news* is that toxic content in a traumatic memory can be *permanently* resolved at any point in the future that the person is able to successfully complete the unfinished processing tasks. Once a given traumatic memory has been resolved it will no longer carry any toxic content that can cause trouble by coming forward as implicit memory. Therefore, part of taking responsibility for your traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulations is to take responsibility for the ongoing, long term endeavor of exposing and resolving the underlying memories that are the source of the traumatic implicit content that comes forward when you get triggered.

The bad news is that traumatic memories are difficult to access. However, the good news is that traumatic memories are *consistently* accessible under the right conditions. The bad news is that traumatic memories are difficult to modify. However, the good news is that traumatic memories are *consistently* open to modification under the right conditions. The bad news is that the processing tasks necessary to resolve the toxic content carried in traumatic memories cannot be successfully completed unless very specific conditions are in place and unless very specific resources are available. However, the good news is that toxic traumatic memory content can be *consistently* resolved when the right conditions *are* in place and the necessary resources *are* available.

This all leads to a very practical and very important bottom line: If you want to *strategically* design a psychotherapy or emotional healing ministry intervention that *consistently* accomplishes permanent resolution for traumatic memories, you need to:

- figure out, and then *intentionally* set up the conditions necessary for accessing traumatic memories;
- figure out, and then *intentionally* set up the conditions necessary for traumatic memories to be open to modification; and
- figure out, and then *intentionally* set up the conditions and provide the resources necessary for the person to successfully complete unfinished processing tasks.

Any time these necessary conditions are in place and these necessary resources are available, you can access, open to modification, and then permanently resolve the toxic content carried in traumatic memories. Any time a therapy session or emotional healing ministry session produces *permanent resolution* of traumatic memories, it's because these necessary conditions have been met and these necessary resources have been available.

The bad news is that we do not have space in this seminar to discuss the details of how to set up these conditions and provide these resources. The good news is that a thorough discussion of this material *is* available in the seminar and/or essays “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, & The God Who is With Us, Parts I - VI.”

C. Recognizing and acknowledging the “invisible” implicit memory and VLE confabulations, and then choosing based on truth: Each specific traumatic memory that gets resolved is a step forward, but none of us will be finished with *all* of our traumatic

memories any time soon. In the mean time, we need to embrace the challenge of at least partially neutralizing our implicit memory and VLE confabulations by recognizing and acknowledging them, and then once these previously “invisible” phenomena have been exposed, making behavioral choices based on the truth carried in our non-traumatic memory files.

Note that recognizing and acknowledging our traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulations is also a necessary prerequisite for exposing and resolving underlying trauma, since we can’t even ask the question “Should I deal with traumatic memories?” until we have recognized that we are triggered, and then also acknowledged and surrendered the VLE confabulations arguing for other explanations.

Watch for specific indicators of being triggered: Physicians learn to watch for specific signs and symptoms as the diagnostic indicators for particular diseases. In the same way, you can learn to watch for the specific “signs and symptoms” that indicate being triggered:

- 1.) **Exaggerated reaction to the specific situation:** One of the most consistent indicators that I am triggered is that I will have an exaggerated reaction to the specific situation that triggers me. When I am triggered, *the intensity of my reaction will fit the original situation from the unresolved traumatic memory*, as opposed to the situation in the present. The more dramatic this is, the easier it is to spot. An “easy to remember” way to express this is: “Small infraction, big reaction.”¹⁰ ****fill in examples****
- 2.) **Maturity level reduced from baseline:** To the extent that I am blended with the memory for an unresolved traumatic event, I will display the maturity level from the age of the triggered memory. Both Charlotte and I have observed this to be so reliable that it is now often the first clue we recognize to indicate that one or the other of us are subtly triggered. If we notice infant or child thoughts, attitudes, and reactions, we stop and ask: “Am I triggered?” And in almost all of these situations, we are eventually able to identify implicit memory content from experiences that match the age of the maturity clues we had observed. ****fill in specific examples****
- 3.) **Capacity, other resources also reduced from baseline:** If I am triggered, to the extent that I am blended with the triggered memory I will respond to problems in the present from the ego state contained in the memory. Therefore, to the extent that I am blended with the memory for an unresolved trauma *I will be working with the impaired capacity, impaired faith, impaired creativity, impaired flexibility, etc corresponding to the ego state contained in the memory*. For example, if I am deeply blended with a triggered five year old playground memory of being frightened and overwhelmed, I will respond to problems in the present with the resources of a frightened and overwhelmed five year old.¹¹ ****fill in more detailed specific**

¹⁰ Note that attachment pain can also cause you to experience exaggerated responses to difficult situations in the present. Attachment pain playing in the background will “turn up the volume” of your reactions to any other problems you encounter.

¹¹ Note that this impairment can be subtle if I am only slightly blended and/or if the underlying traumatic memory is minor.

examples?***

- 4.) **General irritability:** When I am not triggered, I have a large capacity for irritating situations, and can respond to minor annoyances with grace. When I start in a place of being untriggered, fully synchronized, and living out of my true heart it takes a lot more to get me upset – I can take a fair amount of frustration, disappointment, physical discomfort, fatigue, unpleasant behavior on the part of others, etc. without getting upset. However, when I am triggered this all changes dramatically. When I am not triggered, I would describe myself as being tolerant; but when I am triggered, I would have to describe myself as irritable. In fact, irritability has often been the clue that tips me off to the humbling fact that I am triggered (again). Irritability has been such a reliable indicator that I have learned to take a “trigger-check time out” whenever I notice that I am reacting to small things that don’t usually bother me. Whenever I notice that I am irritable, I pause and deliberately check for other indicators of triggering; and I almost always (always?) discover that I am indeed triggered, even though I had not been consciously aware of it before stopping to check.

By definition, a trauma will always be a situation I couldn’t handle, and If I am already in a (memory) situation that I can’t handle, then even the smallest additional hassle feels like a big deal. Furthermore, traumatic memories are often childhood memories, and as described above, to the extent that I am blended with traumatic memories I will respond to problems in the present from the ego state contained in the memories. It should not surprise me that I respond to minor annoyances with irritability instead of grace *when I realize that I am trying to handle these “minor” annoyances with the dramatically impaired resources of a traumatized child.*¹²

My increased emotional reactivity when triggered is similar to my increased physical reactivity when physically injured. When my physical body is completely healthy, someone can bump into me and I hardly even notice it. However, if I have a bruise or skin abrasion, even the slightest contact *on the spot where I am already injured* will produce a surprising amount of pain and a surprisingly intense reaction. Similarly, if I am triggered, so that an emotional wound is active, even the slightest emotional “bump” will produce a surprising amount of pain and a surprisingly intense reaction.

Even if I am physically ill and exhausted, I am only irritable if I am *also* triggered. I have been amazed to realize that I can be exhausted and physically ill, but still be fully synchronized, untriggered, and living out of my true heart. When this is the case, I have a surprising amount of patience even though I am exhausted and in pain. My perception is that fatigue, physical illness, and physical pain often result in irritability *because they make us much more vulnerable to triggers and/or directly activate unresolved trauma.*

- 5.) **Vocabulary:** The vocabulary of your thoughts (*before you edit them for presentation to the public*) will match the age of the memory material that has been activated. For example, in certain conflicts with Charlotte I notice that one of my spontaneous

¹² Again, attachment pain can also increase your overall reactivity and irritability.

internal thoughts is to call her a “poo-poo head,” and this consistently indicates that grade-school age implicit memory content has been triggered forward.

- 6.) Thoughts and emotions inconsistent with reference points:** When implicit memory content from unresolved trauma is triggered forward, the thoughts and emotions from the original memory will be triggered forward into the present. The thoughts and emotions that fit the unresolved trauma memory will *feel* true and reasonable in the present, but if you look at the present situation carefully (and honestly), you will realize that the triggered thoughts and emotions don’t actually fit verifiable data and reference points in the present. ****fill in examples from our experience****
- 7.) Focusing on the trigger does not resolve the problem:** Focusing on the trigger, in the present, as if it is the true problem, never results in a good *long term* solution. For example, if you have wounds about being unappreciated that are consistently triggered in the average job setting, triggered thoughts and feelings related to these wounds will eventually come forward regardless of where you are working. Your VLE will always come up with an explanation for why your job is the problem: “This job isn’t a good fit for my gifts and interests,” “My supervisor is _____ (fill in the blank),” “My co-workers are _____ (fill in the blank),” “The employer doesn’t provide adequate training,” etc. But no matter where you work – job after job after job after job – the same triggered thoughts and feelings will eventually come forward. In contrast, if the true problem really is in the present, then moving to a new job might provide a lasting solution. For example, if you experience persistent frustration and lack of satisfaction because your gifts and interests are not well suited for your current employment, you can move to a job with a better fit and the problem will go away. You will experience lasting satisfaction at the new job, as opposed to the same old problem returning as you begin to bump into triggers in the new job setting.

****include another example with a much shorter time line****

This diagnostic criteria can be misleading in short term situations because sometimes it is possible to come up with a “trigger-focused” plan that simply tries to avoid the trigger. This will provide temporary relief, and you might even tell yourself: “See! It wasn’t my stuff – I just needed to find new friends and get away from that terrible Jim Wilder. As long as I don’t have to deal with his irritating _____ (fill in the blank), I’m fine.” But it will only be a matter of time before you will start bumping into new triggers, and the old, familiar, triggered thoughts and emotions will return.

- 8.) Upset, outraged by question “Are you triggered?”:** As discussed above, an inherent part of trauma is not having the necessary resources. If the person who is going through a painful experience has an adult who is with them, attuned to them, hearing them, validating them, connected to them, etc., *they will almost never be traumatized*. Therefore, most traumatic memories will include the *absence* of being heard, validated, understood, and attuned to. If the possibility of triggering is suggested with the least bit of challenge, blame, judgment, or even just lack of perfect attunement, it can specifically activate this part of the original pain.

As also mentioned above, many traumatic experiences include being actively blamed,

invalidated, ignored, not heard, and not understood. When active blame, invalidation, mis-attunement, etc. were part of the original experience, then suggesting the possibility of triggering, *even if done in the best possible way*, will usually provide additional activation for this particular piece of the original traumatic experience.

In my own experience, I have learned to recognize several different subjective experiences:

- Not triggered, not triggered: Sometimes, I am *not* triggered to start with, and the question does not trigger me. In these situations, I do not feel any defensiveness or outrage in response to the other person suggesting that I am triggered. Instead, I feel calm and curious, and respond with something along the lines of: “I’m wondering what makes you think I’m triggered?”
- Not triggered, triggered: Sometimes, I am not triggered to start with, but the question itself triggers me. This especially happens if the other person has an attitude of judgment, blame, and accusation as he suggests that I am triggered. In these situations, I *become* reactive and defensive. I am peaceful, calm, and untriggered to start with, and then, as the other person suggests that I am triggered, I can feel old toxic content getting stirred up in response to feeling judged, blamed, and accused. I feel triggered and defensive in response to their suggestions, but it starts more slowly and is less intense.
- Triggered, with more triggering on top: If I *am already triggered to start with*, and then someone asks whether I am triggered/suggests that I am triggered, I am *immediately* reactive and *more intensely* reactive. When I look back at these situations, I realize that I was already irritable and reactive to start with, and it feels like the person’s question/suggestion about triggering rubs on skin that was already raw. No warm up is necessary. The question/suggestion regarding my being triggered results in an immediate, instantaneous negative response. The negative, defensive response is also more intense, and “outrage” would often be the right word. A piece of good news is that this defensive, outrage response has steadily decreased as I have worked to resolve the specific wounds that were being activated by this second level of triggering. Now, when I am triggered and Charlotte points out that I am triggered, I still usually feel defensive, but my negative reaction is much less intense.

Also, this negative response is much more manageable if the person asks the question/makes the suggestion in a way that is gentle, humble, non-judgmental, and recognizes that I might see the situation differently.

Note that a negative reaction to questions/suggestions regarding the possibility of being triggered does not prove that a person was triggered to start with. If the person *is* already triggered, a question/suggestion regarding the possibility that he is triggered will almost always activate additional triggers, and he will respond with varying degrees of defensiveness and outrage. However, a negative reaction does not definitively diagnose pre-existing triggering because this question, in itself, is often triggering. Even though the person is *not* triggered to start with, asking if they are triggered may trigger them.

9.) **Recognize familiar picture:** Over time, one can increasingly learn to recognize familiar packages that have been previously identified. ****fill in examples****

10.) **Not glad to be with the people I'm usually glad to be with – strongly(totally?) connected to lack of joy:** As I have been carefully observing these phenomena in my own life for the last several years, I have noticed that if I am not glad to be with Charlotte, I am almost always triggered. If I notice that I am not glad to be with Charlotte, and then stop to check all of the other indicators of triggering, I almost always discover that I am triggered. To expand on the relationship between triggering and feeling glad to be with Charlotte:

Fully synchronized, not triggered, unconditionally glad to be with Charlotte: When I am untriggered, fully synchronized, emotionally present, and living from my true heart *I am glad to be with Charlotte regardless of how she's feeling or behaving.* When I'm in this optimal place, I'm glad to be with Charlotte even if she is miserable and/or triggered and unpleasant.

If am in this optimal place *and she is also glad to be with me*, we experience mutual and increasing joy as the “glad to be with you” goes back and forth between us.

Note that this optimal scenario of feeling connected to Charlotte and being glad to be with her requires proper functioning of the relational connection circuits discussed below in section V. Feeling emotionally connected to Charlotte and being glad to be with her will not be possible if I have lost access to my relational connection circuits.

Triggered to implicit memory content where I am focused on solution, but welcome Charlotte's presence as a resource: In this scenario, “I'm glad for Charlotte to be with me” would be more accurate than “I'm glad to be with Charlotte.” I'm in receiving mode. I feel like a child who is glad to receive care from a safe, caring adult. I perceive Charlotte's presence as a valuable resource, and I'm grateful for any way in which she contributes to solving the problem (making my pain stop), but I'm not sending out positive “glad to be with you” energy in the same way as when I am untriggered, fully synchronized, emotionally present, and living out of my true heart. An important clue here is that I am only glad that Charlotte is with me if she is glad to be with me and able to care for me. If she is unable to focus on me, attend to me, and care for me (for example, if she is distracted or triggered), then I resent her not caring for me as opposed to feeling glad to be with her.

I don't feel spontaneous desire for affectionate or sexual physical intimacy. I don't feel resistance or negative energy regarding the thought of physical intimacy, but if I stop to think about it, I notice the *absence* of desire for affectionate or sexual physical touch. Even if she is glad to be with me, I don't feel the spontaneous and increasing joy that wells up when we are both glad to be with each other.

In this scenario, I have lost access to my relational connection circuits *but there is no negative implicit memory content specifically pointed at Charlotte.*

Triggered, with implicit memory content pointed at Charlotte: To whatever degree I

am blended with the triggered content, Charlotte feels like the problem/enemy. I feel like I need to defend myself from her. I feel active desire to be away from her, as opposed to feeling glad to be with her. I feel active resistance and negative energy with respect to any kind of physical intimacy – I don't want to be in the same room with her, let alone be affectionate or sexually intimate.

In this scenario, I have lost access to my relational connection circuits *and there is also negative implicit memory content specifically pointed at Charlotte.*

- 11.) Unable to perceive the Lord's presence or connect with Him:** Being triggered can hinder your ability to perceive the Lord's presence and hinder your ability to connect with Him. In my own experience, triggering does *not always* block my ability to perceive and connect with the Lord – I am *sometimes* able to perceive the Lord's presence and still feel connected to Him, even though I am triggered. However, if I am *not* able to perceive the Lord's presence, and do *not* feel connected to him, then I am almost always triggered.

As you become more and more able to perceive the Lord's presence, and perceiving the Lord's presence and feeling connected to the Lord increasingly becomes your baseline, one of the best ways to identify when you are triggered is to notice when you are *not* able to perceive the Lord's presence, and to notice when you do *not* feel connected to the Lord. This can become especially effective if you deliberately practice recognizing what it feels like when you *do* perceive the Lord's presence and feel connected to Him, deliberately practice recognizing what it feels like when you are *not* able to perceive the Lord's presence and do *not* feel connected to Him, and then also deliberately practice being aware of whether or not you are perceiving the Lord's presence and feeling connected to Him as you go through each day.

Note that feeling connected to the Lord requires proper functioning of the relational connection circuits discussed below in section V. You can perceive the Lord's presence even without these circuits, but *feeling emotionally connected* to the Lord will not be possible if you have lost access to your relational connection circuits.

- 12.) Consequences of failed processing tasks: **These comments will make sense for those who are also familiar with our teaching regarding the processing tasks at each of the five levels of the pain processing pathway**** Many of the points discussed above could fit into the larger concept of "consequences of failed processing tasks." By our definition, trauma comes from painful experiences that have not successfully completed their journey through the processing pathway, and the toxic content carried in traumatic memories is directly related to the processing tasks that have not yet been completed. For example, if the person has not been able to successfully complete level 3 processing for a given painful experience, then the traumatic content carried in the memory for this experience will include lack of access to relational connect circuits – the direct and inherent result of failed processing at level 3. If the person is not able to successfully complete the level 4 processing task of finding a satisfying way to navigate the situation, then the traumatic content carried in the memory for this experience will include feeling inadequate – the direct and inherent result of failure with respect to this level 4 task. If the person is not able to

successfully complete the level 5 processing task of making sense out of the painful experience, then the traumatic content carried in the memory for this experience will include confusion – the direct and inherent result of failure with respect to this level 5 task. And if the person is not able to successfully complete the level 5 processing task of correctly interpreting the meaning of the experience, then the traumatic content carried in the memory for this experience will include distorted interpretations and the associated distorted emotions – the direct and inherent results of failure with respect to this level 5 task.

As described above, when a traumatic memory is activated by some stimuli in the present (triggered) the unresolved toxic content comes forward into the present as implicit memory, and this toxic traumatic content will include the direct and inherent consequences of any failed processing tasks from the original experience. It is also possible that the person is in a painful situation that they are unable to process *in the present*, and that the consequences of failed processing are being generated by failed processing *in the present* painful situation, but my experience is that disruptive “fruit” associated with failed processing is usually implicit memory from unresolved trauma. Therefore, consequences of failed processing tasks, such as lack of access to relational connection circuits, feeling inadequate, confusion, distorted interpretations, and inappropriate emotions driven by distorted interpretations are clues that indicate *probable* triggering.

Practice recognizing the *subjective experience of being triggered*: One of the most effective approaches to learning to recognize your own triggering is learning to recognize the subjective experience of being triggered at a very intuitive, subjective, “This is what I *feel like* when I’m triggered” level. Note that many of the points in this section will be the “**learn to recognize *what it feels like***” version of points discussed above.

- 1.) **Not shalom and joy:** I in my personal journey I have learned to be more and more consciously aware of what I feel like when I am fully synchronized, completely free of triggering, emotionally present, and living from the heart Jesus gave me. I would summarize this overall subjective experience as a combination of *joy* and the rich Biblical concept of *shalom*. And then I have learned to be more and more aware of when I am *not* in this place, and what it *feels* like when I am not in this place. Whenever I realize that I am not experiencing this optimal baseline of shalom and joy, my immediate intuitive assumption is that I am triggered (until proven otherwise). At first this was a much more conscious, left brain process, where I would notice that I felt bad, ask the question “What’s wrong?,” and then go through the process I had developed for figuring out whether or not I was triggered. My perception is that, as I have practiced this many thousands of times over several years, it has become much more of an instantaneous, right brain, intuitive process. Now, often my first conscious awareness is “I *feel* triggered.”

One way to do this is to identify a number of specifics regarding what it is like when you are in the non-triggered place of shalom & joy. For example:

I am aware of myself and others;
I am glad to be with others, and experience joy when others are glad to be with

me;
 I have high frustration tolerance – I am not reactive or irritable;
 I have good mindsight;
 I am playful;
 I am life-giving, and being life-giving is satisfying;
 I can perceive the Lord’s presence (especially if I focus on this objective, and ask
 “Lord, help me to perceive Your presence);
 I feel connected to the Lord

...And then learn to recognize *both* when these things *are* true about yourself, and also when these things are *not* true about yourself.

Note that many of the components of “shalom & joy,” such as being glad to be with others, experiencing joy when others are glad to be with you, and feeling connected to the Lord, require proper functioning of the relational connection circuits discussed below in section V. These components of “shalom & joy” will not be possible if you have lost access to your relational connection circuits.

2.) Maturity level reduced from baseline: Reduced maturity level contributes to the overall subjective “feeling” of being triggered. For example, adult/parent/elder maturity tasks that are *satisfying* when I am at my optimum non-triggered maturity baseline are *burdensome* if I am triggered to a lower level of maturity. If I feel burdened and/or overwhelmed by tasks that are usually satisfying, this is a big clue that I am triggered.

3.) Emotional package from specific triggered memories:

****Fill in examples, specific comments regarding how to recognize this subjective experience****

4.) Outraged by question ‘Are you triggered?’: Being “outraged” by someone suggesting that you might be triggered can be part of the overall subjective “feeling” of being triggered.

****Fill in additional specific comments regarding how to recognize this subjective experience****

5.) Not glad to be with the people I’m usually glad to be with – strongly(totally?) connected to lack of joy: Loss of being glad to be with the people I am usually glad to be with, and the associated loss of joy, can be part of the overall subjective “feeling” of being triggered.

****Fill in additional specific comments regarding how to recognize this subjective experience****

6.) Irritable: Being irritable contributes to the overall subjective “feeling” of being triggered.

****Fill in additional specific comments regarding how to recognize this subjective experience****

- 7.) **Unable to perceive the Lord's presence or connect with Him:** Being unable to perceive the Lord's presence and/or unable to connect with Him can be part of the overall subjective "feeling" of being triggered. You can deliberately practice recognizing what it *feels like* when you *are* able to perceive the Lord's presence and/or *do* feel connected to Him, and you can also deliberately practice recognizing what it *feels like* when you are *not* able to perceive the Lord's presence and/or do *not* feel connected to Him.

****Additional specific comments regarding how to recognize this subjective experience****

8.) Body sensations of being triggered:

General – your personal profile: ****fill in more here****

Associated with specific triggers: ****fill in more here****

- 9.) **Consequences of failed processing tasks: **These comments will make sense for those who are also familiar with our teaching regarding the processing tasks at each of the five levels of the pain processing pathway**** As described above, trauma comes from painful experiences that have not successfully completed their journey through the processing pathway, and the toxic content carried in traumatic memories is directly related to the processing tasks that have not yet been completed. When a traumatic memory gets triggered the unresolved toxic content comes forward into the present as implicit memory, and this toxic traumatic content will include the direct and inherent consequences of any failed processing tasks from the original experience. Therefore, the consequences of failed processing tasks, such as lack of access to relational connection circuits, feeling inadequate, confusion, distorted interpretations, and inappropriate emotions driven by distorted interpretations, will be part of the "bad" subjective experience of being triggered.

Watch for loss of access to relational connection circuits: We have been created to be relational beings – we have been created to be in relationship with God and with each other. Our minds and spirits have been created to *desire* relationship and to *function best* in relationship, and the Lord has actually designed specific circuits in our biological brains to serve this longing and need for connection. When these brain circuits are functioning as designed, our spontaneous experience will be to feel relationally connected and to feel the desire for connection. We will experience others as relational beings, we will be aware of other's true hearts, we will be concerned about what others are thinking and feeling, we will perceive the presence of others as an emotional resource, and we will experience joy in being together.

Unfortunately, there are several problems that can cause us to lose access to these brain circuits. When this happens, our spontaneous experience will include the *absence* of feeling relationally connected, and we won't even *want* to be connected. We will *not* experience

others as relational beings, we will *not* be aware of other's true hearts, we will *not* feel concern (compassion) regarding what others are thinking and feeling, and we will *not* experience joy in being together. Furthermore, when we lose access to our relational connection circuits *in the context of being upset with a specific friend or family member*, instead of perceiving that person's presence as an emotional resource we will perceive him as the problem and as an adversary.

One of the problems that can cause us to lose access to our relational connection brain circuits is dismissive attachment. A large part of dismissive attachment is learning to live without access to one's relational connection circuits, and to the extent that a person has dismissive attachment he will be going through life with these circuits "off line." Experiencing painful emotions that directly overwhelm our emotional maturity skills is another problem that can cause us to lose access to our relational connection circuits. However, the most common problem causing us to lose access to our relational connection circuits is traumatic memories being activated – if the unresolved content carried in a particular traumatic memory includes loss of access to your relational connection circuits, then these circuits will go off line every time this particular memory gets activated. Furthermore, I have found it to be surprisingly easy to recognize and acknowledge when my relational connection circuits go off line. Even after years of practice, I still find it especially difficult to *acknowledge* that I am triggered – even when I am just talking to myself, I still experience intense internal resistance to *acknowledging* my triggering and VLE confabulations. However, I have been pleasantly surprised to discover that this resistance has been almost entirely absent when it comes to recognizing and acknowledging that I have lost access to my relational connection circuits.

Not every traumatic memory carries this problem, so being triggered does not *always* cause this temporary loss of relational connection circuits; and, as just mentioned, there are other causes for loss of access to these circuits, so loss of access to your relational connection circuits does not *always* mean you are triggered. However, in my personal experience the overlap is about 95% – in the vast majority of cases, if I'm triggered my relational circuits are off line, and if I've lost access to my relational connection circuits, I'm triggered. I would encourage you to evaluate this overlap for yourself, and if you are one of the people with a very strong correspondence (like myself), then learning to recognize when your relational connection circuits go off line can be one of your most valuable tools in recognizing when you're triggered.

Relational connection circuit check-list: Whenever you are upset, ask yourself the following questions:

Do I feel connected to _____ (fill in names of the people involved in the problem)?

Do I feel desire to be connected to _____ (again, fill in names of the people involved)?

Do I experience them as relational beings?

Am I aware of their true hearts?

Do I feel concern/compassion regarding what they are thinking and feeling?

Do I perceive their presence as an emotional resource?

Am I experiencing joy in being with them?

If the answers to these questions are “no,” then your relational connection circuits are off; and if these circuits are off, you are probably triggered. At the very least, noticing that you have lost access to your relational connection circuits should prompt you to ask: “Am I triggered?” *with the assumed answer being “Yes” until proven otherwise.*

Note that loss of access to your relational connection circuits contributes to many of the phenomena described above in sections III & IV.

D. Re-establishing access to your relational connection circuits: One of the most damaging effects of getting triggered is loss of your relational connection circuits, and then the ways in which this loss affects how you relate to all those around you. Conversely, if you are in any kind of difficult situation and triggered traumatic memories have caused you to lose access to your relational connection circuits, one of the most helpful things you can do to limit the negative impact of your triggering is get them back on line. *Reestablishing access to these circuits will actually enable your brain to function more effectively.* Especially with respect to *relational conflicts*, EVERYTHING will turn out better and flow more easily once you get them back on line. There is even icing on the cake. In my experience, *acknowledging* my triggering and confabulated explanations – one of the steps that can be especially difficult – gets much easier if my relational connection circuits are on line and functioning properly.

Furthermore, it is possible to reestablish access to your relational connection circuits even if you do *not* have the time, emotional space, or other resources necessary for finding and permanently resolving any underlying trauma contributing to the problem. Therefore, part of taking responsibility for our traumatic implicit memory and VLE confabulations is taking responsibility for deliberately reestablishing access to our relational connection circuits.

Fortunately, the Lord knows that we often lose access to these circuits, and He has provided a plan for getting them back on line. He has designed our brains so that perceiving someone *with us* in our pain, perceiving that this person is glad to be with us, and feeling that this person hears and understands us in our pain *will bring our relational connection circuits back on line.* If there are people in our community who know how to hear us, attune to us, and be *with us* in this way, then sharing our upset thoughts and emotions with one of these friends can do the job. For those of us who experience the Lord as a personal presence, we can also do this with Him; and this is especially good news, since He is always available and able to do this. In fact, there are times when it seems like the Lord is the only one who can hear us, understand us, and be with us in this way.

Sometimes it can be difficult to do this, and the complete discussion regarding all the possible difficulties would make a nice week long seminar. However, there’s a simple intervention that’s often effective.

- 1.) Think about a past positive experience with the Lord – an experience where you felt connected to Him and glad to be with Him. This is good brain science, and it’s also very Biblical – for example, think of all the scriptures along the lines of “Remember

what I have done for you this day,” or “Make a pile of stones in this place to remind yourselves of how I provided for you in this place,” or “Have a feast at this time each year, and tell your children about how I delivered you from your enemies.”

- 2.) Deliberately focus on appreciating His presence and the way He cared for you in this past experience. Deliberately appreciating the Lord’s goodness and how He has cared for you will actually change your brain as part of preparing your brain, mind, and spirit for connecting with Him. This is good brain science, and it’s also very Biblical – for example, about half the psalms are various forms of deliberately appreciating the Lord’s presence and goodness.
- 3.) After deliberate appreciation has prepared your brain, mind, and spirit for connecting with the Lord, invite Him to be with you, especially *in* any negative thoughts and emotions that still remain, and ask Him to help you perceive His presence.
- 4.) Open your heart to Him. Look into your heart and identify the thoughts and emotions you find there. NOT the thoughts and emotions you know you *ought* to have, but the thoughts and emotions that are actually there. Once you identify what’s in your heart, describe it directly to Jesus as clearly, honestly, vulnerably, and humbly as possible. This is also very Biblical – the other half of the psalms are examples of this type of prayer.

To the extent you perceive that the Lord is *with* you in your negative thoughts and emotions, and to the extent it feels true that He hears you, understands you, and is glad to be with you, this will bring your relational connection circuits back on line.

And when you *feel* connected to any other people involved in the situation, when you *want* to be connected, when you experience others as relational beings, when you’re aware of others’ true hearts, when you’re concerned about what others are thinking and feeling, when you perceive others as emotional resources, and when you experience joy from being with others *I guarantee that you will be more able to deal with any relational conflict contributing to the problem, and that the damaging effects of your triggering will be greatly reduced.*

Practical thoughts/tips regarding the exercises to get relational circuits back on line:

- When talking to the Lord about your pain, it is important to focus on *yourself*, especially focusing on the painful thoughts that feel true and the negative emotions you are experiencing. Focusing on the person(s) you are upset with, and describing to the Lord all the reasons why they are bad and wrong, tends to be much less productive.**
- When I do this, I also find it helpful to keep reminding myself that my goal in this exercise is to perceive the Lord’s presence, tell Him about my pain, and to feel that He hears me, understands me, and is with me. My goal is *not* to fix the problem that is upsetting (triggering?) me, or even to find and resolve the underlying trauma. My goal is to perceive the Lord’s presence, tell Him about my pain, and receive His attunement so that I can get my relational connection circuits back on line.
- Even though my goal is not to do the whole job of working through underlying memories, my perception is that it's helpful to be aware of the possibility that triggered underlying

trauma may be contributing to the upset. In my experience, this understanding helps with finding the right words to express myself to the Lord. If I am trying to make my words make sense/fit into the present situation, but some portion of the upset is coming from old memories, I will resist the words that most accurately express the painful thoughts and emotions that are *feeling* true. And my experience is that I am most likely to *feel* that the Lord hears me, understands me, and is with me when I get the words that most accurately express my pain. If I am insisting on words that make sense in the present, and therefore also resisting the words that actually feel true, this seems to hinder my ability to receive the Lord's attunement. Even when I'm not trying to do the whole job of working through the underlying trauma, if I am aware that the upset could be coming from old memories then I seem to be much more able to recognize and accept words even when they don't seem to fit/make sense in my present situation.

This point especially makes sense if I formulate the situation as "I need to feel and receive the Lord's attunement from *inside* any memories that are being triggered." If some significant portion of the upset is coming from old memories, but I am resisting the words that feel true from inside the memories, then to the extent that I am blended with the experience of being inside the memories I will not feel heard or understood, *and this will directly interfere with feeling and receiving the Lord's attunement.*

- When I actually do this myself, I often jump right to inviting the Lord to be with me in my pain, asking Him to help me perceive His presence, and then talking to Him about my thoughts and emotions. My experience is that I usually perceive His presence immediately, and it feels like He's listening, but I don't feel emotionally connected to Him until my relational circuits come back on line. I think maybe I have had enough practice with inviting Him to be with me in my pain and perceiving His presence that I can jump right to this without needing the positive memory and appreciation first. When I'm in distress it certainly feels easier to go right to telling Him about my pain (and feeling heard and understood), than to try to do positive memory and appreciation exercises when I'm upset (and not feeling at all positive or appreciative).

Also, when I do the positive memory and appreciation exercises I am usually calmed down, with my relational circuits already back on line, by the time I *feel* appreciation and *feel* reconnected with the Lord. As I'm thinking more about this now, to some extent it's like two alternative tools as opposed to two parts of the same tool. And at least some of the time, especially when I'm really upset and there's no one with me to coach me through the appreciation exercises, I find it much easier to go right to inviting Him to be with me and telling Him about my pain. In these situations, it feels like the experience of perceiving His presence with me and feeling like He is hearing me and understanding me is immediately satisfying (even before I feel emotionally connected to Him), as opposed to the positive memory & appreciation intervention that requires a transition that can be hard to make when I'm especially upset.

- Finally, in situations where I am having an especially difficult time getting my relational circuits back on line, I put both of these tools together. This can take a significant amount of time and energy, especially if I am in a foul mood and the appreciation exercise is particularly challenging; but there are situations when taking the time and energy to do both, even though it's difficult, is really worth it.

Additional reading: For a greatly expanded discussion of several of the points included in this brief message, see the series of essays titled “Brain Science, Emotional Trauma, and the God Who is With Us,” Parts I through V, in the “Immanuel Series” section on the “About our Theophostic-based ministry/therapy” page of www.kclehman.com. For those of you who do not want to go through the whole 250 pages:

- For discussion of relational connection circuits, and how you can help a person bring them back on by being with him in his pain, hearing him, understanding him, and attuning to him: see especially Part II, the discussions of synchronization, interpersonal attunement, and mutual mind (pages 23-26), the discussions of relational connection joy and “returning to joy” (pages 31- 38), and the discussions of staying with negative emotions and maintaining/re-establishing relational connection joy (pages 46-52).
- For discussion of the value of deliberately recalling past positive experiences with the Lord: see especially Part V, pages 39-45.
- For discussion of the value of deliberately appreciating the Lord’s goodness and how He has cared for you: see especially Part V, pages 37-39.
- For discussion of inviting the Lord to be with you in your pain, and asking the Lord to help you perceive His presence: see especially Part V, page 7.
- For discussion of “opening your heart to Jesus:” see especially Part V, pages 24-26.

V. Attachment pain, differential diagnosis between attachment pain and triggering:

Attachment pain is the unique pain we feel when separated (either temporarily or permanently) from key attachment figures, such as family members and close friends. The unresolved content in traumatic memories can include attachment pain, so that attachment pain in the present can be caused by triggering, but attachment pain can also be caused by separation or loss in the present, such as when a spouse dies.

For this discussion, the main point with respect to attachment pain is that it can cause some of the same observable effects as triggering, such as generalized irritability and exaggerated negative reactions in response to relatively minor provocation. This is practically relevant because the most important care for a person with present-based attachment pain is to help them build stable, healthy, emotionally connected relationships, and this is not the case for situations where the distress is primarily coming from triggered traumatic memories. Therefore, when asking “Am I triggered?” one should also ask “Could this be attachment pain as opposed to triggering?”

Pending a much more detailed discussion, I will offer several quick thoughts:

- 1.) My observation is that most (all?) of us still have some traumatic memories that include attachment pain. Due to the phenomena of resonance activation in our memory association networks, any significant attachment pain in the present will also trigger these attachment pain memories. Therefore, any time we are experiencing marked attachment pain, even when initiated by truth-based losses in the present, it will include at least a component of pain from underlying traumatic memories. Practically, this means that even when a person is experiencing attachment pain from separation and/or loss in the

present, *some* of their distress can usually be relieved by helping them identify and resolve any memory-based pain.

- 2.) We should spend a lot more time thinking about where attachment pain might fit in when there has been separation and/or loss that would be expected to cause attachment pain.
- 3.) The real short summary regarding “differential diagnosis” between implicit memory content coming forward from traumatic memories and present-based attachment pain is: “Look for clues that would be present for triggering but not for present-based attachment pain.” For example, grade school vocabulary is often noticed when childhood memories are activated, but this is not something you would expect to see with present-based attachment pain.
- 4.) Connecting and synchronizing with Jesus is one of the most helpful interventions for both unresolved traumatic memories and present-based attachment pain, so it is always a good idea to deliberately include this in the “treatment plan” (for those who are able to perceive the Lord’s presence and connect with Him).

VI. Miscellaneous comments, related issues:

Triggering *can be* the beginning of healing: The good news is that many of us have grown since the original traumatic events. Our adult selves in the present often *do* have adequate capacity and maturity skills to stay connected and process through the traumatic memories, especially if we are with others who can help us with this. When triggering opens a memory of an unresolved traumatic experience, the person who now has adequate resources can embrace this as an opportunity for growth and healing. Triggering *can be* the beginning of appropriate processing and healing. Instead of letting the triggered content disrupt our lives and destroy our relationships, we can get healing.

Two significant patterns regarding traumatic implicit memory content and VLE confabulations: As I have carefully studied triggered implicit memory content and the VLE confabulations we come up with to explain them, I have observed two significant patterns:

- 1.) **It’s easy to spot the big ones, but most of us miss the little ones:** It’s easy to spot the most glaring examples, but most of us don’t even stop to ask the question with respect to the many, many less dramatic cases of triggered implicit memory and VLE confabulation.
- 2.) **It’s easy to spot if you know about it and look for it:** It’s easy to spot if you look for it, know how to recognize it when you see it, and think systematically and logically about your VLE explanations; however, most of us don’t even know these phenomena exist. We don’t see what we don’t know exists, don’t look for, and don’t recognize.

Helpful thoughts regarding the triggered response to the possibility of being triggered:

Person receiving “Could triggering be contributing to this situation?”: It helps to know about the memory-anchored negative responses described above. For example, I have often felt blamed, accused, and invalidated when Charlotte has suggested that I might be triggered, but I recognized and understood this second layer of triggering as it welled up

inside of me, and I could feel that this understanding helped me choose to respond constructively *even though my subjective experience was an intense implicit memory perception of being blamed, accused, and invalidated, and an equally intense impulse towards angry, defensiveness retaliation.*

****fill in more here****

Person bringing “Could triggering be contributing to this situation?”:

Not helpful: Repeatedly insist that you know what I am thinking and feeling better than I do. Don’t acknowledge that there are two people in the conversation. Keep insisting that you are right and I am wrong with respect to my thoughts and emotions.

Much more helpful: Attune first. It is much easier for me to hear your thoughts regarding my being triggered if you attune to me first. Also, make sure your relational connection circuits are on line. If your relational connection circuits are on line and functioning properly, you will feel concern/compassion regarding my thoughts and emotions, and your true heart will provide good guidance with respect to gentle ways to talk about the possibility that I am triggered. In contrast, if you have lost access to your relational connection circuits, you will be much more likely to fall into the behavior described above under “not helpful.”