

Memory Reconsolidation Vignettes

**The following vignettes are oversimplifications for the point of illustration.*

Vignette #1

Jane's therapy session demonstrates the memory reconsolidation process in an Internal Family Systems (IFS) session.

Client: Jane, a 30-year-old female recovering from childhood sexual abuse

Therapist: Dr. Anderson, an Internal Family Systems (IFS) therapist

Session 6

Dr. Anderson: Good morning, Jane. How have you been feeling since our last session?

Jane: (Takes a deep breath) I've been experiencing some anxiety and distressing memories, but I know it's part of the healing process. I want to continue working on it.

Dr. Anderson: I appreciate your courage and commitment to your healing journey. Let's start by doing a quick grounding exercise to help you feel centered and safe. (They both do the grounding exercise.) Now, I want you to focus on the memory that's been causing you distress. As you connect with it, try to identify any parts of yourself that may be present in the memory.

Jane: (Tears up) I can see the memory of when I was abused by my uncle. I can feel the fear and shame. There's a part of me that feels so vulnerable and scared.

Dr. Anderson: Thank you for sharing that, Jane. It sounds like there are a few parts present here: the Vulnerable Child, the Fearful Protector, and possibly a Shameful part. Let's start by acknowledging the presence of these parts (befriending) and asking them to step back (relax) so we can engage with the memory.

Jane: (Breathes deeply) I can sense them stepping back, and I feel more grounded.

Dr. Anderson: That's good. Now, let's connect with the Vulnerable Child part. Ask this part if it would be willing to share its experience with you and if there's anything it needs from you.

Jane: (Pauses) She's telling me she felt so alone and scared. She just wanted to be safe and protected. She needs reassurance that I'm here for her now.

Dr. Anderson: Who can do that for her?

Jane: (Pauses) I think I can.

Dr. Anderson: Offer her that reassurance. Let her (Vulnerable Child) know that you are here for her, that you will protect her, and that she is safe now. As you do this, pay attention to any shifts in your body.

Jane: (Smiles softly) I feel a warmth and a sense of relief. She feels heard and safer now.

Dr. Anderson: That's wonderful, Jane. Now, let's turn our attention to the Fearful Protector part. Ask this part what its role was in that memory and what it needs from you.

Jane: It was trying to protect me by making me feel scared and on guard. It needs to know that I can handle things now and that it can relax.

Dr. Anderson: Acknowledge its protective intention, and let it know that you appreciate its efforts. Assure this part that you are now capable of handling difficult situations, and invite it to release its fear and embrace trust in your abilities.

Jane: I can feel the fear dissipating, and it's starting to trust me more.

Dr. Anderson: Excellent. Lastly, let's connect with the Shameful part. Ask it about its role in that memory and what it needs from you.

Jane: It was trying to protect me by making me feel unworthy, so I wouldn't draw attention to myself. It needs to know that I'm not to blame for what happened and that I deserve love and respect.

The key steps in the therapy vignette are as follows:

1. **Activation of the target emotional memory:** Jane shares the distressing memory of her childhood sexual abuse, bringing the emotional memory to the forefront of her consciousness.
2. **Identification of parts involved in the memory:** Dr. Anderson helps Jane identify the parts present in the memory: the Vulnerable Child, the Fearful Protector, and the Shameful part.
3. **Differentiation and unblending of parts:** Jane is guided to acknowledge the presence of these parts and ask them to step back so that she can engage with the memory without being overwhelmed by the emotions associated with each part.
4. **Accessing the emotional learning of the parts:** Jane connects with each part and asks what its role was in the memory and what it needs from her. She discovers their intentions and the emotional learning behind their actions.

5. **Mismatch experience or disconfirming experience:** Jane offers each part the reassurance, understanding, and support it needs, leading to a new emotional experience that is different from the original memory. This creates a mismatch between the old and new experiences.

6. **Integration and transformation:** Jane feels a shift in her emotional state as the parts begin to release their fear, shame, and vulnerability. This indicates (verifies) that the memory reconsolidation process is helping her integrate and transform her emotional responses to the traumatic memory.

Vignette #2

In this therapy vignette, the therapist is working with a client named Sarah, who has experienced a traumatic car accident and now has an overwhelming fear of driving. Here's how the four steps of memory reconsolidation might unfold:

1. **Symptom identification and activation** (*Start Here: Feelings Work, Defensive Phase*):

Therapist: "Sarah, what happens inside when you think about driving?"

Sarah: "I get extremely anxious whenever I think about getting behind the wheel. I've been avoiding driving ever since the accident, and it's really affecting my ability to go to work and socialize."

At this stage, the therapist has helped Sarah identify her fear of driving and the symptoms associated with it. The emotional learning underlying these reactions has been activated.

2. **Reactivation of the emotional memory** (*Openhearted Phase*):

Therapist: "Can we try to explore the emotions and memories related to the accident? Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Can you recall what happened during the accident?"

Sarah: "I remember the sound of the crash, the airbags deploying, and feeling completely out of control. I was terrified."

Now, Sarah has accessed the emotional memory associated with the traumatic experience, which is crucial for the reconsolidation process.

3. **Mismatch or disconfirmation experience** (*Openhearted Phase*):

Therapist: "While remembering the accident, let's also focus on the present moment. Notice the safety of this room, and the fact that you're here talking to me. Try to recognize that the danger you felt in the past is not present now."

Sarah: "I can see that I'm safe here, and the accident is not happening right now."

In this step, the therapist has helped Sarah create a mismatch between her old emotional learning (fear and danger associated with driving) and her present reality (safety and absence of danger in the therapy room).

4. Integration and memory reconsolidation (*Replay Phase*):

Therapist: "How is it to have this new experience of your safety?"

Sarah: "I feel encouraged. I have a confidence I can overcome my fear and drive again."

Vignette #3

In this therapy vignette, the therapist is working with a client named James, who has experienced childhood sexual trauma and now struggles with insecure attachment in his relationships. Here's how the four steps of memory reconsolidation might unfold:

2. Symptom identification and activation (*Start Here: Feelings Work, Defensive Phase*):

Therapist: "James, can you tell me about your difficulties in forming close relationships and how it impacts your life?"

James: "I find it hard to trust people and often push them away. I'm afraid they'll hurt me like I was hurt as a child. It's really affecting my ability to have fulfilling relationships."

At this stage, the therapist has helped James identify his difficulties with connection and the symptoms associated with it. The emotional learning underlying these reactions has been activated.

2. Reactivation of the emotional memory (*Openhearted Phase*):

Therapist: "Let's explore the emotions and memories related to your childhood experiences. Take a few deep breaths and try to recall what happened back then."

James: "I remember feeling helpless, scared, and betrayed by someone who was supposed to protect me."

Now, James has accessed the emotional memory associated with the traumatic experience, which is crucial for the reconsolidation process.

3. Mismatch or disconfirmation experience (*Openhearted Phase*):

Therapist: "While remembering your childhood experience, let's also focus on your present situation. You're now an adult who has control over his life and relationships. Try to recognize that the danger and betrayal you experienced in the past are not present in your current relationships."

James: "I can see that I'm in a different place now, and not everyone is like the person who hurt me."

In this step, the therapist has helped James create a mismatch between his old emotional learning (fear of betrayal and mistrust in relationships) and his present reality (his ability to control his relationships and choose trustworthy partners).

4. Integration and memory reconsolidation (*Replay Phase*):

Therapist: "What is it like, this new understanding of your safety and control in relationships?"

James: "I feel hopeful. I can trust others and build meaningful connections."

Over the following therapy sessions, the therapist continues to help James integrate the new adaptive information (safety, control, and trust in relationships) with the reactivated emotional memory. Through this process, James's internal working models of connection change as his brain reconsolidates the traumatic memory with the updated information, allowing him to build healthier relationships.