

5 Minute Read – a new idea to explore

Why can't I change? "Invisible" barriers

by Isabel dos Santos, Counsellor (MBACP)



Lisa is looking at her "Inspirational photo" on the fridge. A picture of a happy girl that she found in a magazine, enjoying an exotic holiday. "This is my Future Self", she declared to her girlfriends, all laughing and cheering. Lisa felt hopeful and light. "I have a plan and a goal. I can do this" she quietly told herself.

So, why, a few weeks later, looking at the same photo, is she angry and ashamed? "Why can't I lose weight? What's wrong with me?" If you can relate to Lisa, this article might be for you.

Many of my clients come to therapy with complaints of feeling "stuck" which can manifest as a set of symptoms, e.g. depression. My approach is to look beyond their presentation and try to identify its deeper causes, which can be related to their defence mechanisms¹. These might be unconscious, and preventing the person to move towards a more fulfilling, authentic life.

Those defences may have played an important role in the past, in protecting the person from emotional or physical pain, but these days they are obsolete, as the person has evolved and is in a different environment.

Neuroscience show us that our bodies hold past memories². This means that we need to access our bodily experiences which our defences were trying to protect for healing to take place.

My work as a Counsellor is to support the person through this process, in a gentle and safe way.

Having this awareness helps my clients to understand their resistance to change and let go of feelings of shame and guilt.

1- Psychological strategies used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings.

2- Van der Kolk, Bessel (2014) 'The body keeps the score'. Penguin Books, 21.

A client of mine remembered being shamed by his father when he didn't get top grades at school. Making the connection to these past events, he now understands why he self-sabotaged every time he embarked on a new work project. Unconsciously he was avoiding the feelings that he experienced when growing up. I was able to help him identify and process³ the emotional pain from the past and build up the confidence to take risks.

When Lisa kept looking at the "Inspirational photo" on the fridge, after a while rather than being beneficial, the photo triggered feelings of fear and rejection. She connected it to memories of being bullied at school when

she was 8 years old and constantly criticised by a boyfriend for her weight as a teenager.

Suddenly, it all started to make sense: her weight had been an "invisible coat", to "protect" her from emotional pain. Then, she knew that she was ready to do the "deeper" work and move forward.

3- Revisit past memories that, at the time, we were unable to fully respond (too painful/dangerous). By connecting to the feelings and bodily sensations that we consciously or unconsciously avoided, we can integrate and let go of the experience.

For more information about my work, please visit website:
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