Then and now worksheet

Use with your therapist. Brief labels are enough; do not recount the event. Attend to actual present risks.

Editable PDF: replace or delete the fictional examples. Blank PDF: print and write. Guidance follows.

Reminder / agreed task / real risks now

What the reminder resembles

What is different now

Then: place, time and people

Now: place, time and people

Then: choices, control and support

Now: choices, control and support

What makes the reminder seem familiar?

Signs I am in the present

What helped me feel present / questions for therapy

No traumatic detail is needed. Use agreed support; pause if you become disoriented or overwhelmed.

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Using this resource

Then and now worksheet

What this helps with

A sound, smell or place can resemble part of a traumatic experience and trigger a strong sense of present threat. Trigger discrimination is a cognitive therapy technique for recognising the reminder while noticing concrete differences in the current situation. It is usually learnt with a therapist before home practice. The task is not to argue with the feeling or repeat that you are safe until convinced; it is to look for actual present-day information.

How to use it

1. Use only a reminder and practice method already agreed with your therapist.
2. Name the reminder briefly, without describing the trauma in detail.
3. Check the current situation for real risk before drawing comparisons.
4. Notice specific differences in place, people, time, choices or available support.
5. Record what helped you reconnect and what needs discussion before another practice.

A fictional worked example

Chris noticed that the smell of a cleaning product brought a sudden sense of being back in an earlier frightening situation. In therapy, he learnt to distinguish the reminder from the present. At home he used a brief label for the smell and looked around: this was his own kitchen, daylight was coming through the window and he could decide to leave the room. He did not deliberately intensify the smell or recreate the event. Some distress remained, but the present became clearer. He noted the differences and brought back a question about why one particular cue was still difficult to recognise.

Keep in mind

Introduce this with a trauma-trained therapist. Do not deliberately recreate the trauma or use overwhelming reminders on your own. A current threat must not be dismissed as a memory. Pause if you become detached or disoriented and use the agreed support plan.

Sources and attribution

Ehlers, A., & Clark, D. M. (2000). A cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder. Behaviour Research and Therapy, 38(4), 319-345.

Oxford Centre for Anxiety Disorders and Trauma. PTSD therapy materials: clinical guidance on trigger discrimination and rebuilding life.

Original material informed by the sources above. No outside organisation endorses this worksheet.

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