

Chapter 3.13 Evaluation of Changes and What Problems Still Exist

This chapter summarizes the therapy and makes use of Billy's comments about the changes in himself. He is no longer preoccupied with Dahmer and is considering the options about how he wants to spend his time and energy. Although he is continuing in therapy, the issues are not about posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD); they concern problems that many people have, such as quitting smoking and improving his relationships with his family, particularly his adolescent son.

The American Psychiatric Association notes that PTSD includes distressing symptoms of: (a) re-experiencing a trauma through nightmares and intrusive thoughts; (b) numbing by avoiding reminders of the trauma, or feeling aloof or unable to express loving feelings for others, and; (c) persistent symptoms of two or more of the following problems: Sleep problems, irritability and angry outbursts, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance, and exaggerated startle response. Billy had all of the symptoms mentioned by the APA, and now the symptoms are gone or minimal.

Perhaps this is best expressed in Billy's own words. The following are some of the verbatim comments that Billy made regarding the changes he's made in therapy with me. "I woke up this morning free of pain. That is the first time in twenty five years I can remember not having pain when I wake up. I felt good. I wanted to get up and do things. I don't sleep as late as I used to."

Other comments Billy made were, "There have been a lot of changes. I am going to blues and purples. I have a black truck and that is kind of depressing now. I feel good waking up in the morning even on a crappy, crappy day. I know there is always a way to fix something. I never give up. Depression is when you feel there is no reason to wake up, no other option. I now have ten different ways of doing things. I just feel a lot better physically. I don't have as many complaints. I still have an anxiety attack occasionally. I have nightmares but they are more bland."

Two months later he said, "I realized that I am not afraid of having panic attacks any more. When I had panic attacks, I was afraid all the time of having the next one. Each panic attack was different. It is curious how the mind does that." After about six months of therapy, Billy still had a few nightmares, but the content of the nightmares had changed. He said, "In one nightmare Jeff (Dahmer) dressed up as a clown. It was hilarious in the dream. He was so out of character. He was using somebody else's identity and it was not working. The walls in the dream were blue and purple. I remember his having this big red nose like clowns have. I felt like squeezing it. It was kind of okay in the dream."

I asked him what thoughts he had about the dream in which Dahmer was a clown. He said, "I think he is trying to tell me that everything is okay, and you can

laugh at him. He did have a comedic side. He had a lot of charisma. He was able to manipulate and make people laugh. He handled people. It was a job for him. His job was to manipulate people, so that he could kill them. I do exactly the opposite. I try to help people. When I get mad I still talk with a northern accent. My family can tell when I am getting mad because I start talking with a northern accent.

“Thank God he is dead. For a long time I felt he might come back. I thought any minute that that sucker was going to knock on the door.”

I asked Billy the difference between a nightmare and a dream. He said, “A nightmare is something you can’t get out of. It is not joyful; it is not relaxing. It is kind of like flashbacks of the past, but now there is some new stuff in it. Dreams are not painful, normally. They are sort of nice. There is a story line. There are no surprises.”

Billy said, “My air conditioner went out, and I went to this air conditioner repair place. I met this man, and was very comfortable around him. I could feel the goodness in him, whereas before I could not feel that in people. I would think it was a façade. Before, my extreme ability to read people was only to look out for negative things, and now I can use that ability to see positive things in people.

As a therapist I have experienced a client making changes but then reverting back to the old symptomatic behavior. I have listed below the criteria I use to evaluate whether a change has become permanent.

1. Friends and family who don’t know the details of the therapy tell the client that he/she is different. Often they can’t say exactly how.
2. I have suggested the possibility of the client going back in time and reverting to the old behavior, and the client has a midline negative body response like a sick feeling in the middle of the chest.
3. The client describes doing a behavior, which has been reprogrammed in therapy, and the client does not remember that it was ever discussed in therapy; this means the new behavior has been integrated at an unconscious level.
4. There is a mild reaction to both praise and criticism.
5. Client sees humor in situations which were formerly dead serious.
6. At my suggestion the client tries to relive old anxieties, fears, guilt, or resentment and cannot get the old feeling back.
7. The client’s intense negative feelings toward family members soften, accompanied by an increased confidence and ability to relate to those persons and to the memories.
8. Relationships are no longer initiated or maintained as a need to be with someone. “I don’t have to have a man/woman in my life now. It would be nice, but I don’t have to have it.”

These criteria were read to Billy and he agreed with each one as being true about himself.