

## ***How to talk usefully about the past***

When people visit a therapist or counsellor, they often WANT to tell the story of their past - or feel they OUGHT to in order to get better. The same can be true for people doing the Mind and Soul course. For some this can be helpful: "leaving it all behind, closing the door, turning the page". For other, however, it can be unhelpful: "going over old ground, spilling the beans, airing dirty linen in public, starting a wild goose chase, reveal the skeletons in the cupboard"...

When is it right to talk, and when is it not? Re-telling at the wrong time can even be harmful, as it can reinforce past traumas. For some, the past can be too difficult to ever talk about, even if they feel they ought to, so it is never told - or if it is, huge gaps are discovered that can cause more problems than the remembered events.

You should not talk about the past until you have a 'strong sense of self'. People say things like, "I could not have done this any earlier," or "you can only look backwards from a position of strength." A strong sense of self means you can talk about the past without getting totally caught up in it - you are able to remember to some degree that that was then and this is now.

*A sense of self is when:*

- You are able to talk about the past in a more objective way.
- You are able to reflect on thoughts, feelings and actions separately.
- You are able to separate out specific events and experiences, and share and name reactions to them.
- You are able to see the past as the past and not as the unhappy present or the likely future.

If this is NOT you at the moment, we would suggest NOT talking about the past too much, but doing some things to increase your sense of self first. These are some things you can try, however please be aware that this is not going to happen overnight. A minimum of six months is more likely.

1. We believe that being a Christian is a great key to developing a strong sense of self. Week 3 of the course is all about who we ARE - something that we believe is unrelated to what we have done or what has been done to us. Who we ARE flows from our identity as a son or daughter of God. Psalm 139 might be a good part of the Bible to read. Listening to worship music can also help.
2. Related to this, you may want to consider seeing a Christian Counsellor to help you understand what it means to be a son or daughter of God. However, please do not start talking about the past to them. You may want to take along this article to show them. Your Course Leader will know local Christian Counsellors. Talking to a strong Christian can also help you mould your 'sense of self' around them.
3. Instead of talking about the actual events of the past, try considering questions like: "what would it be like to tell a story of your childhood?" or "what effect did it have the last time you told the story?" This will help you separate yourself from the past and stay in the present more.
4. Think about the things you have learnt during your life that are positive. For example, the values you have built up. Consider questions like, "how would you like people to remember you?" or "what would you teach your kids?"
5. Discuss this with a friend: "God understands what is going on and is watching over the world and will not ultimately let the bad guys get away with it". We can get so caught up in guilt, revenge and sorrow, that we can forget to stand back and see this important truth. It can seem an empty promise or pie-in-the-sky; but faith can hold it to be true. It can often seem that if the bad guys are getting away with it, then we must be worth punishing - but the Bible says this is not true. Psalm 73 starts with this very question. Read it, and see what is going to happen instead.

### **Questions to consider:**

1. What are the most important things to teach children?
2. How would you like to be remembered?
3. What qualities do you value in other people?