



The Therapeutic “Aha!”: 10 Strategies for Getting Your Clients Unstuck

Presented by Courtney Armstrong,
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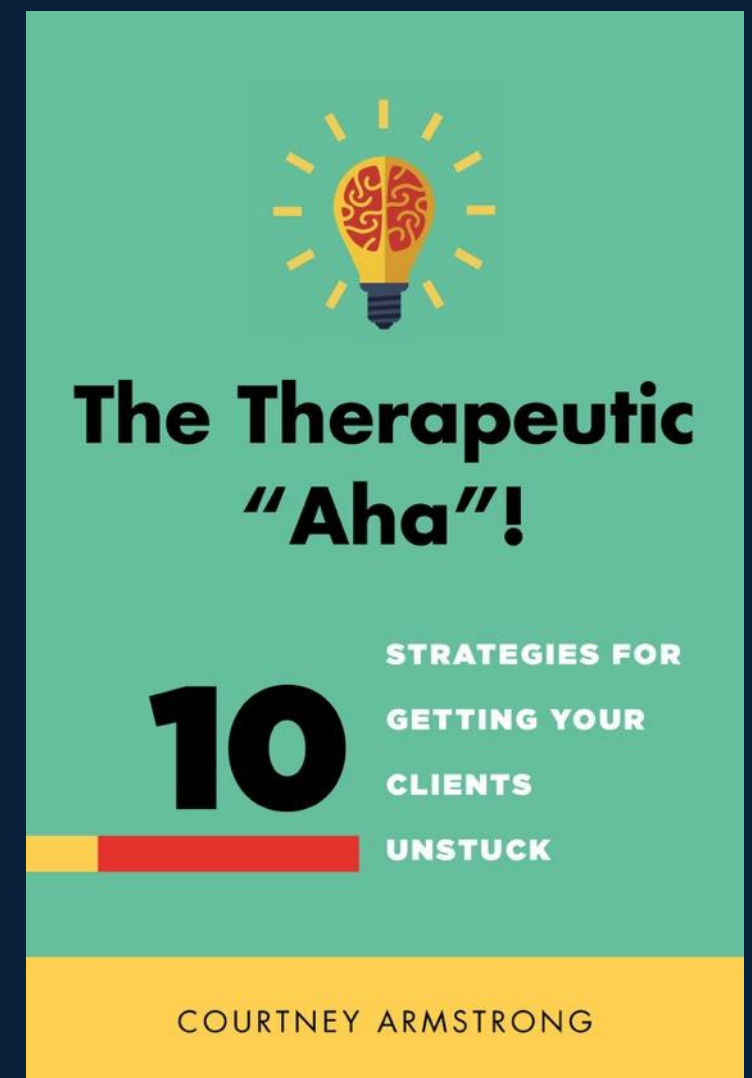
Inner City New Orleans

- CBT not appropriate
- Living in a “war zone”
- Responded better to creative, experiential interventions focused on realistic goals.



The Therapeutic “Aha!” book

- How to evoke transformational change with your clients.
- Experiential interventions that engage both rational and experiential systems of brain.



The Amygdala Made Me Do It

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The Amygdala Made Me Do It - NYTimes.com

www.nytimes.com/2012/05/13/opinion/sunday/the-amygdala-made-me-do-it.html?pagewanted=all

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OPINION

The Amygdala Made Me Do It

By JAMES ATLAS
Published: May 12, 2012

WHY are we thinking so much about thinking these days? Near the top of best-seller lists around the country, you'll find Jonah Lehrer's "Imagine: How Creativity Works," followed by Charles Duhigg's book "The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business," and somewhere in the middle, where it's held its ground for several months, Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking, Fast and Slow." Recently arrived is "Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior," by Leonard Mlodinow.

Enlarge This Image



It's the invasion of the Can't-Help-Yourself books.

Unlike most pop self-help books, these are about life as we know it — the one you can change, but only a little, and with a ton of work. Professor Kahneman, who won the Nobel Prize in economic science a decade ago, has

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Retrace the greatest moments from the last 34 years.

Explore now

Emotion overrides logic!

(# 1 reason clients get stuck)



Rational Brain vs. Emotional Brain

Rational = 5%

Emotional = 95%

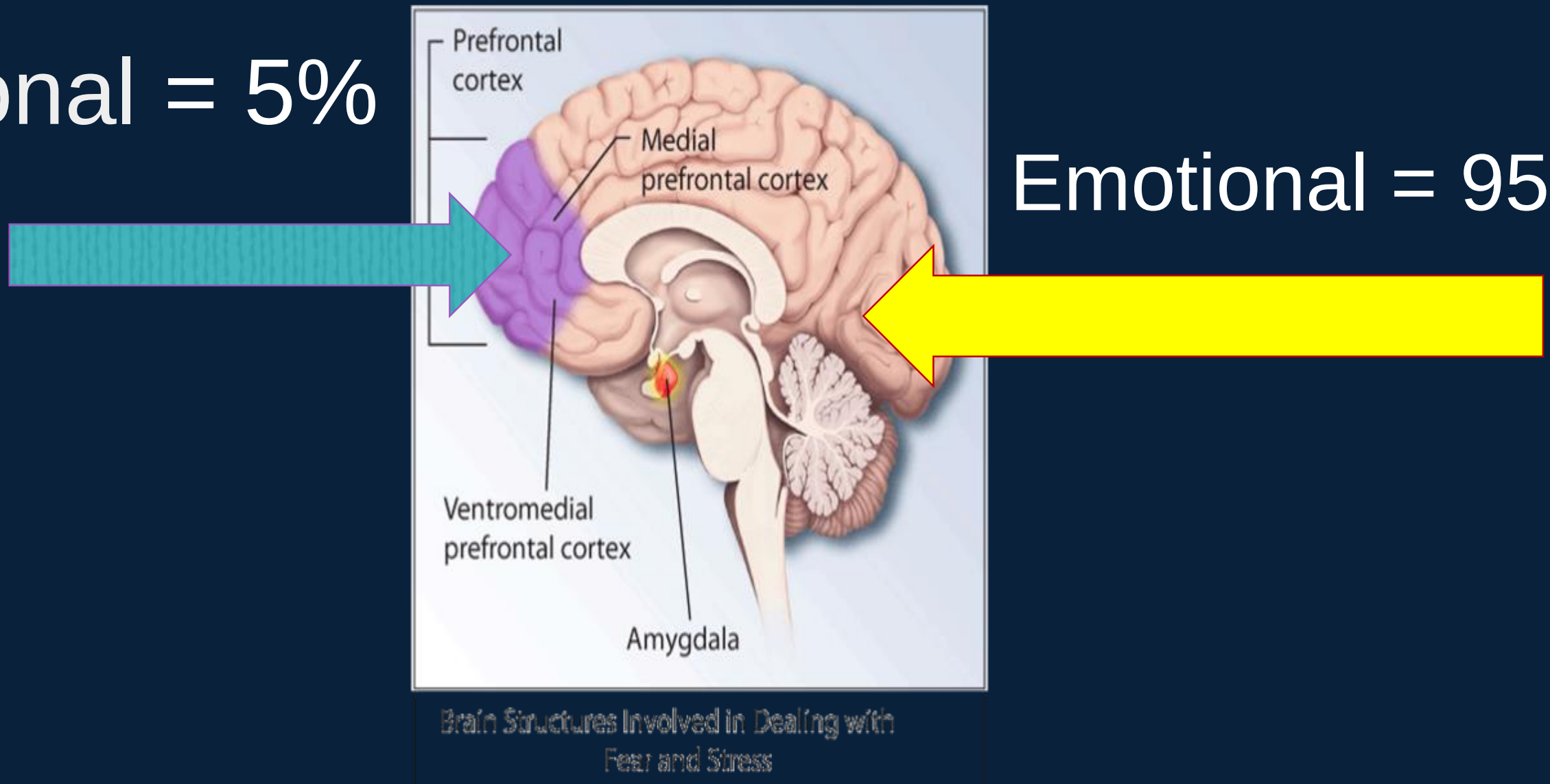
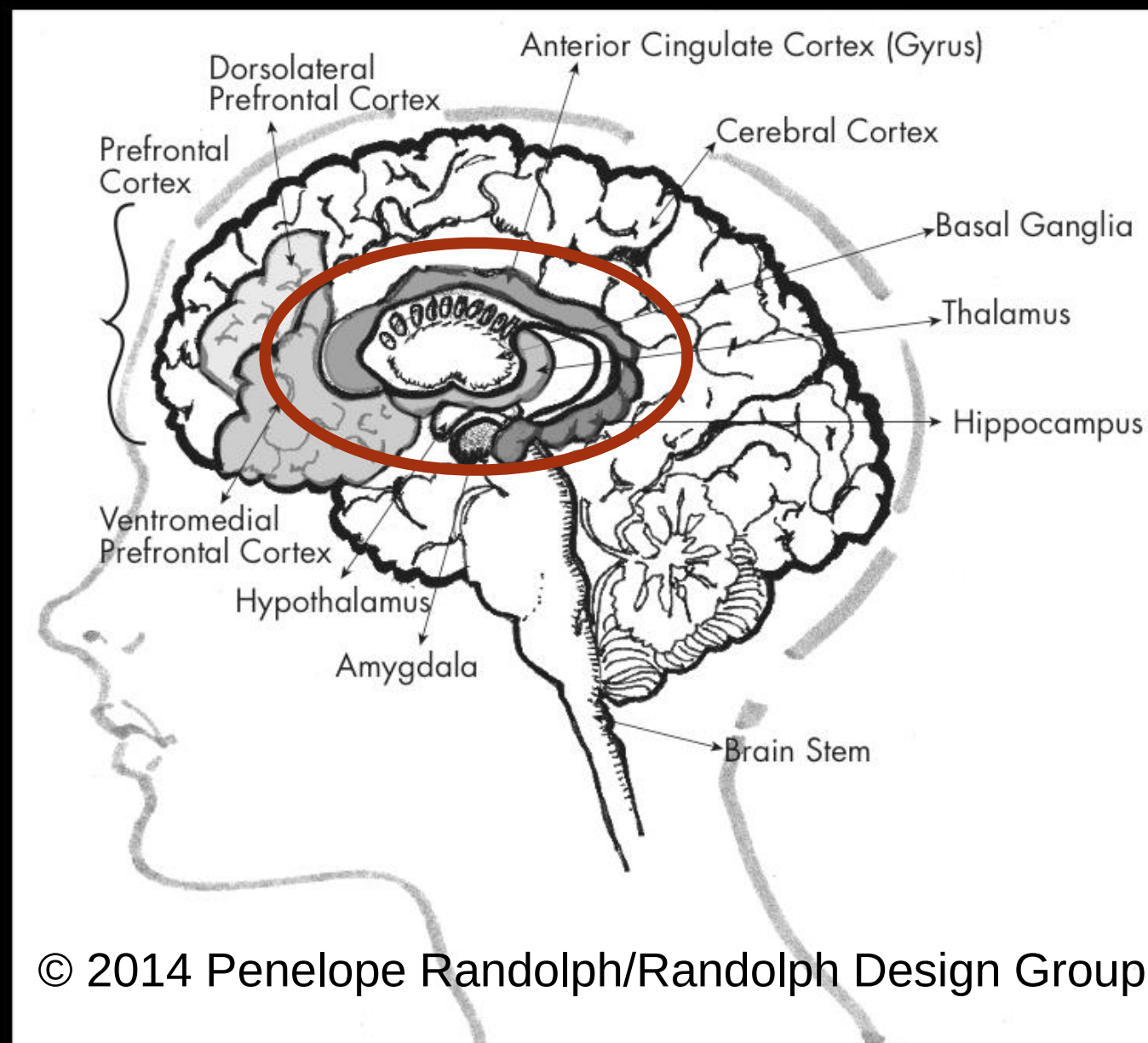


Illustration courtesy of NIMH

Aha! Strategy #1: Engage the Emotional Brain



Emotional Brain is an Experiential Processor

- Learns from experience, association and repetition.
- Intelligent, but thinks like an animal or small child.
- Implicit, procedural memory.



Rational System

Experiential System

1. Solves problems by conscious reasoning.

2. Verbal: Encodes information in words and numbers.

3. Motivated by what is perceived as logical and accurate.

4. Cause & effect relationship among stimuli, responses, and outcomes.

5. Behavior mediated by conscious appraisal of events.

6. Slower processing and capable of long-delayed action.

7. Requires validation by logic and evidence.

1. Solves problems by what has been learned from life experiences.

2. Nonverbal: Encodes information through senses, images, feelings, sounds, smells, and taste.

3. Motivated by survival—pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain.

4. Associative connections between stimuli, responses, and outcomes.

5. Behavior mediated by automatic representations of events and feelings.

6. Rapid processing: oriented toward immediate action, impulsive.

7. Self-evidently valid: experiencing is believing.

7-Primary Emotional Systems

1. SEEKING/Desire
2. FEAR/Anxiety
3. RAGE/Anger
4. LUST/Sex
5. CARE/Nurturance
6. PANIC/GRIEF/Distress
7. PLAY/Social Joy



Dr. Jaak Panksepp,
Washington State University

A black and white photograph of a young boy with dark hair, smiling and peeking over a woman's shoulder. The woman has long, light-colored hair. The boy is wearing a light-colored shirt. The text is overlaid on the image in a white serif font.

All emotion
is a
request
for an action

SEEKING/Desire System

- *“Get up and go get it!”*
- Drive & motivation system
- Overactive (addiction/OCD)
- Underactive (depression)



FEAR/Anxiety System

- *“Hide or get away from that thing, it seems dangerous!”*
- To FEAR turn off, you must:

Eliminate perception of a threat.



RAGE/Anger System

- *“Make it stop!”*
- *“Get out of my way!”*
- To turn RAGE off—

Eliminate perception of a threat.



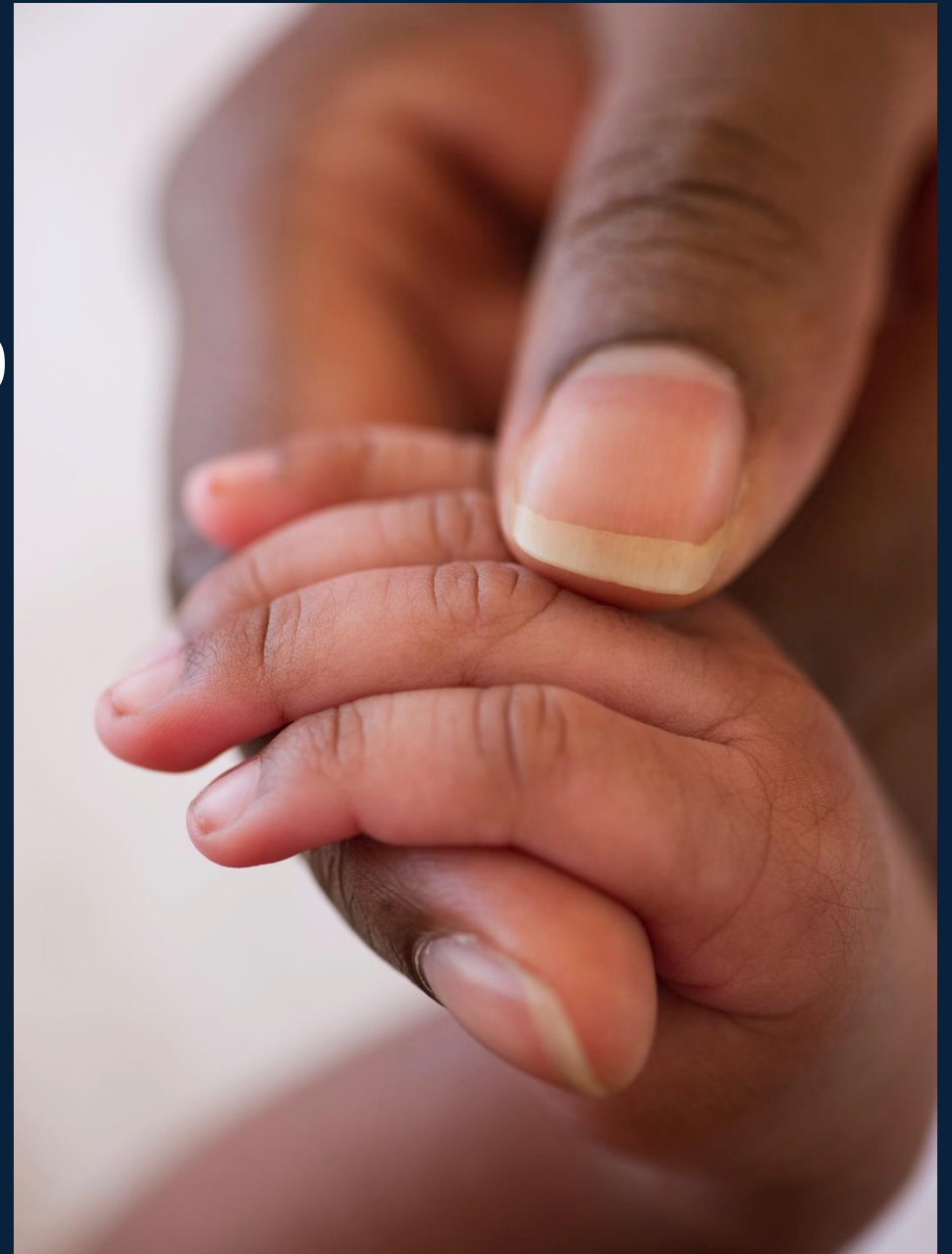
LUST/Sex System

- *“Let’s connect & pro-create!”*
- Male lust system has more connections to visual centers.
- Female lust systems have more connections with CARE system.



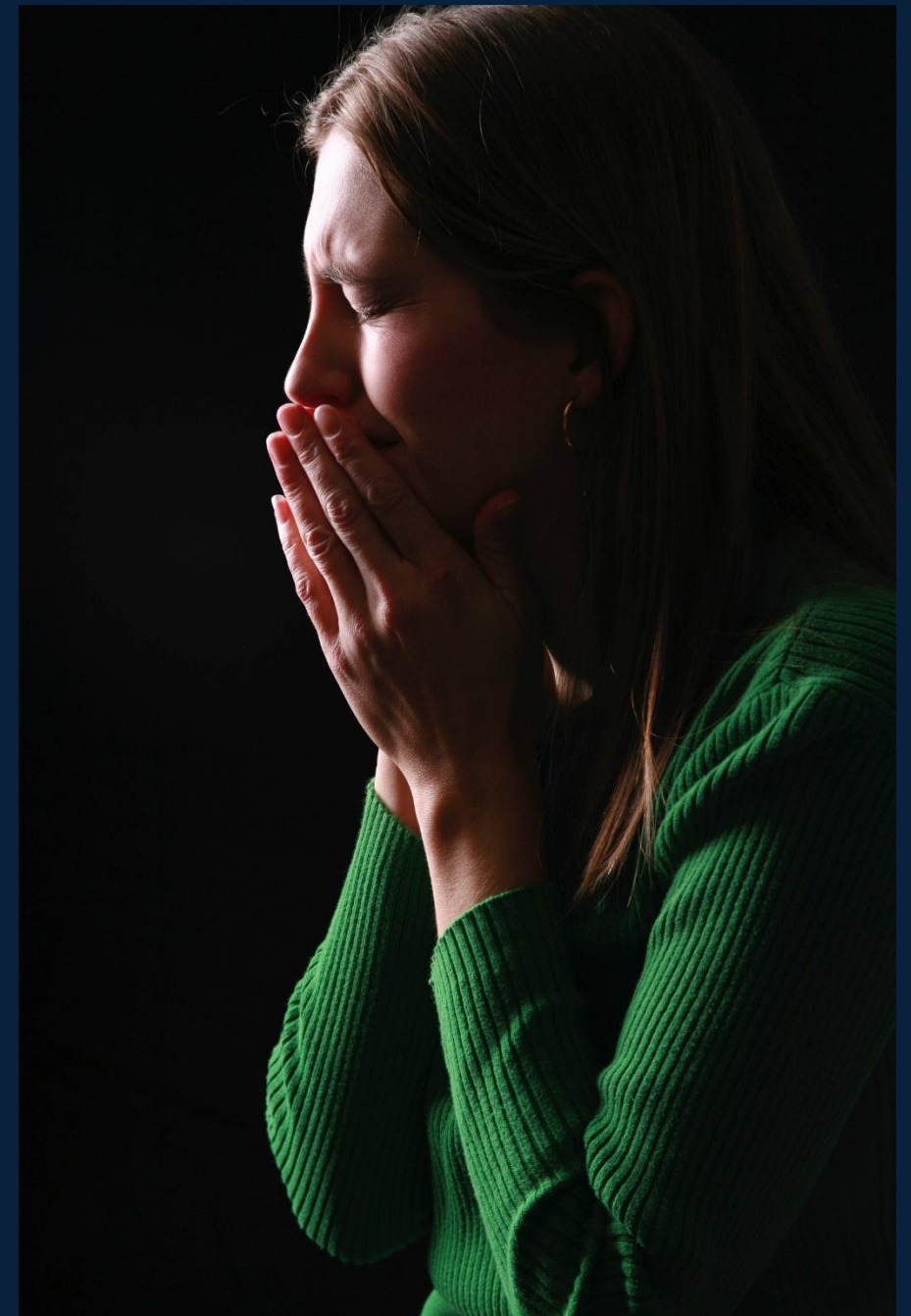
CARE/Nurturance System

- *“Comfort and support him/her.”*
- Vital for therapeutic relationship and creating secure attachment.
- First step when healing trauma, grief, and panic disorder.



PANIC/GRIEF/ Distress System

- *“Call the loved one(s) home.”*
- Panic is a form of separation distress.
- Care and connection are primary antidotes.
- Eliminate perceived separation.



PLAY/Social Joy System

- *“Let’s connect, have fun, share express, learn something new.”*
- A powerful therapeutic tool
- Diffuses anxiety & anger
- Can strengthen therapeutic alliance.



Aha! Strategy #2: Enliven the Therapeutic Alliance



This!



Not this...

Emotional brain communicates nonverbally

- Only 7% communicated through words
 - 38% through vocal elements like tone, inflection, cadence
 - 55% through body language



Mehrabian (1981) *Silent Messages*

Attunement, Misattunement & Reattunement

- Look for nonverbal signs of agreement vs. disagreement.
- Ask: “What else do I need to understand?”
- “What have I missed?”



Follow Your Client's Energy

- Increased animation
- What topic elicits most emotion?
- What topic elicits most excitement?
- Autonomy, mastery, purpose



Aha! Strategy #3: Align, Lift, and Lead



Problem to possibility language strategy

1. **ALIGN:** Reflect understanding using the “has-been” tense change.
2. **LIFT:** Acknowledge client’s strengths.
3. **LEAD:** Suggest where the client wants to be with the issue.



Client Statement Example

- **Client:** *I'm having problems at work. It's really stressful and I've been losing my temper quite a bit there.*
- *I love my job as a surgeon, but I just hate this new mgt. team. They're making us work longer hours and it seems like nothing is ever good enough for them.*

Align, Lift, and Lead Example

- Align: So you've been feeling really frustrated and pressured by this new management team at work.
- Lift: You obviously care about your job and I'm glad you're here.
- Lead: It sounds like you'd like to find a way to maintain your composure as you deal with this difficult situation, recognizing it's to your advantage to be less reactive, and more focused and strategic.

Lead with a sensory representation of a goal



Aha! Strategy #4: Explore the Emotional Conflict

- People are usually stuck because of an inner conflict.
- “It’s not okay to be okay.”
- Learned pattern that was adaptive in the past.
- App needs to be updated!



What's the downside?

- What's the downside of maintaining your composure?
- What's adaptive about losing your temper?
- Was there another time in your life when you felt similar?



Memory of mother

“The only way to get her to listen to me or get her off my back was to lose my temper!”



Aha! Strategy #5: Memory Reconsolidation

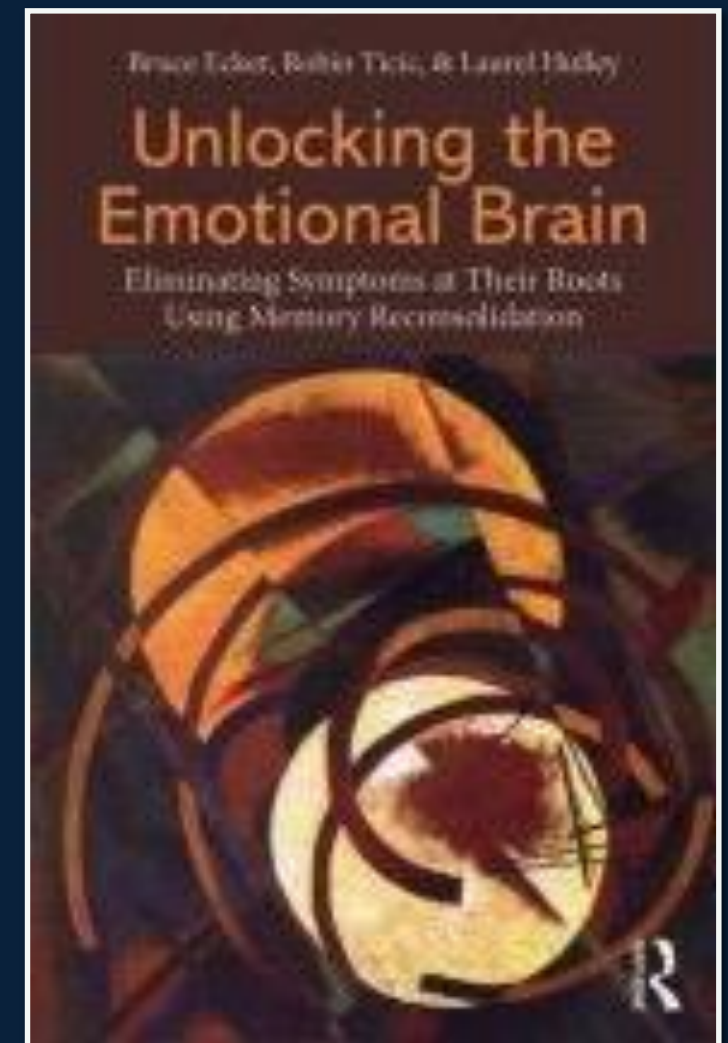
When we recall a memory, it can be updated when:

1. Mind has an experience that contrasts prior learning.
2. New outcome occurs after more than one trial.
3. New learning experienced within 10 minutes to 5 hours of recalling original memory.



Juxtapose a Mismatch Experience

- Assist client in finding an experience that contradicts prior learning or beliefs.
- She must *experience* that both things can't be true at the same time.
- Coherence Therapy, EMDR, AEDP, IPN, RRT & others



RECON Mission



1. Recall undesired response briefly.
2. Explore sensations for similar earlier memories/beliefs.
3. Create calming experience of what is desired for at least 10 minutes. (Memory recon time window)
4. Observational retelling of story.
5. Neutralize meanings w/contrasting experiences.
(Imagery, role-play, stories/metaphor, music/movement)

Step 1: Recall undesired response or memory

- She recalled the intense frustration she had been feeling at work.
- I asked where she felt it in her body.
- She said, “My jaw & head.”



Step 2: Explore for similar earlier memories & beliefs

Trace the sensations back to 1st time you remember having that feeling.

Briefly describe memory.

What did it feel it meant about you, others, the world?



Aha! moment

“The only way I could get her to stop or to listen to me was to yell back at her.”

“I had to shame & guilt her!”



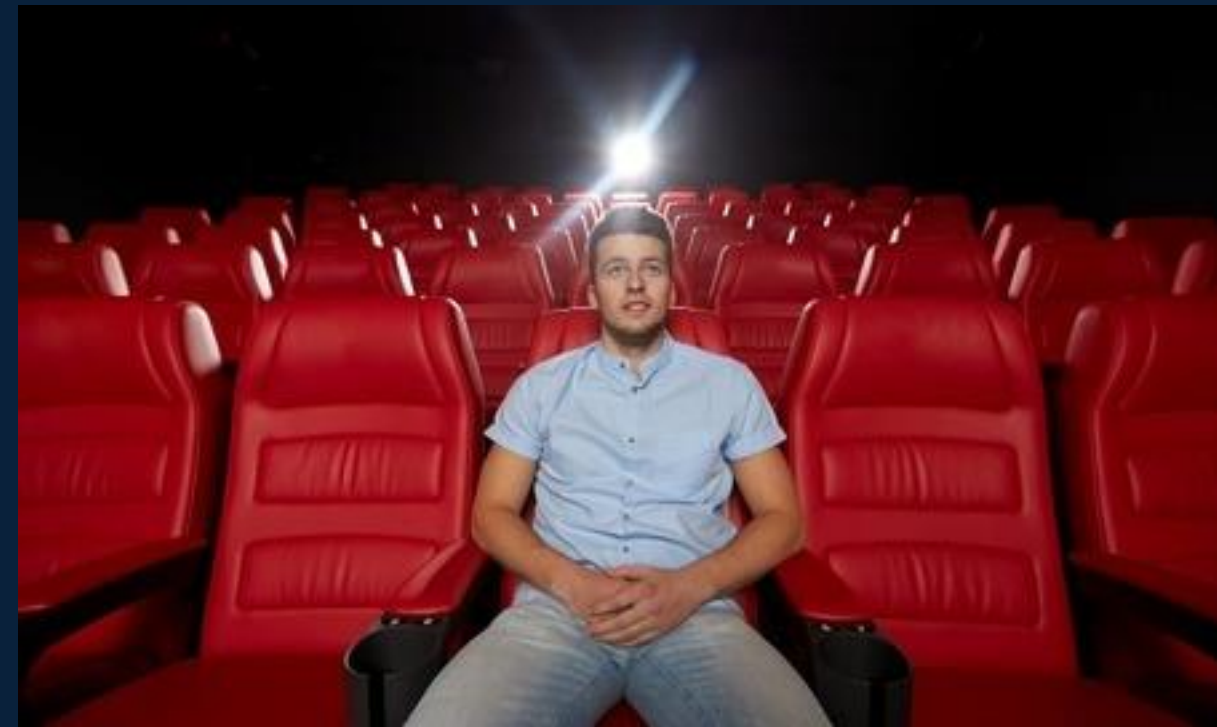
Step 3: Create experience of what's desired

- Create calming experience of what is desired for 10 minutes.
- Calms nervous system before reprocessing memory.
- Creates 1st mismatch experience
- Gets you into memory reconsolidation time window.



Step 4: Observationally describe trauma memory

- Have client describe memory while remaining emotionally present.
- If you see signs of dissociation or hyperarousal, help them get back into present moment.
- Creates another mismatch experience.



Step 5: Neutralize meanings with new contrasting experiences

- Neutralize negative meanings w/contrasting experiences that invalidate & update beliefs.
- Finish story with later event that disconfirms prior meanings.
- Imagery, role-play, stories, metaphors, music, movement.



Aha! Strategy #6: Invoke Inspirational Imagery

- Recalled images activate 2/3 of same brain areas as actual visual stimuli.
- Imagery can work as well as live experience to learn new skill.
- Imagery can change immune system, pain perception, cortisol levels, blood pressure, etc.



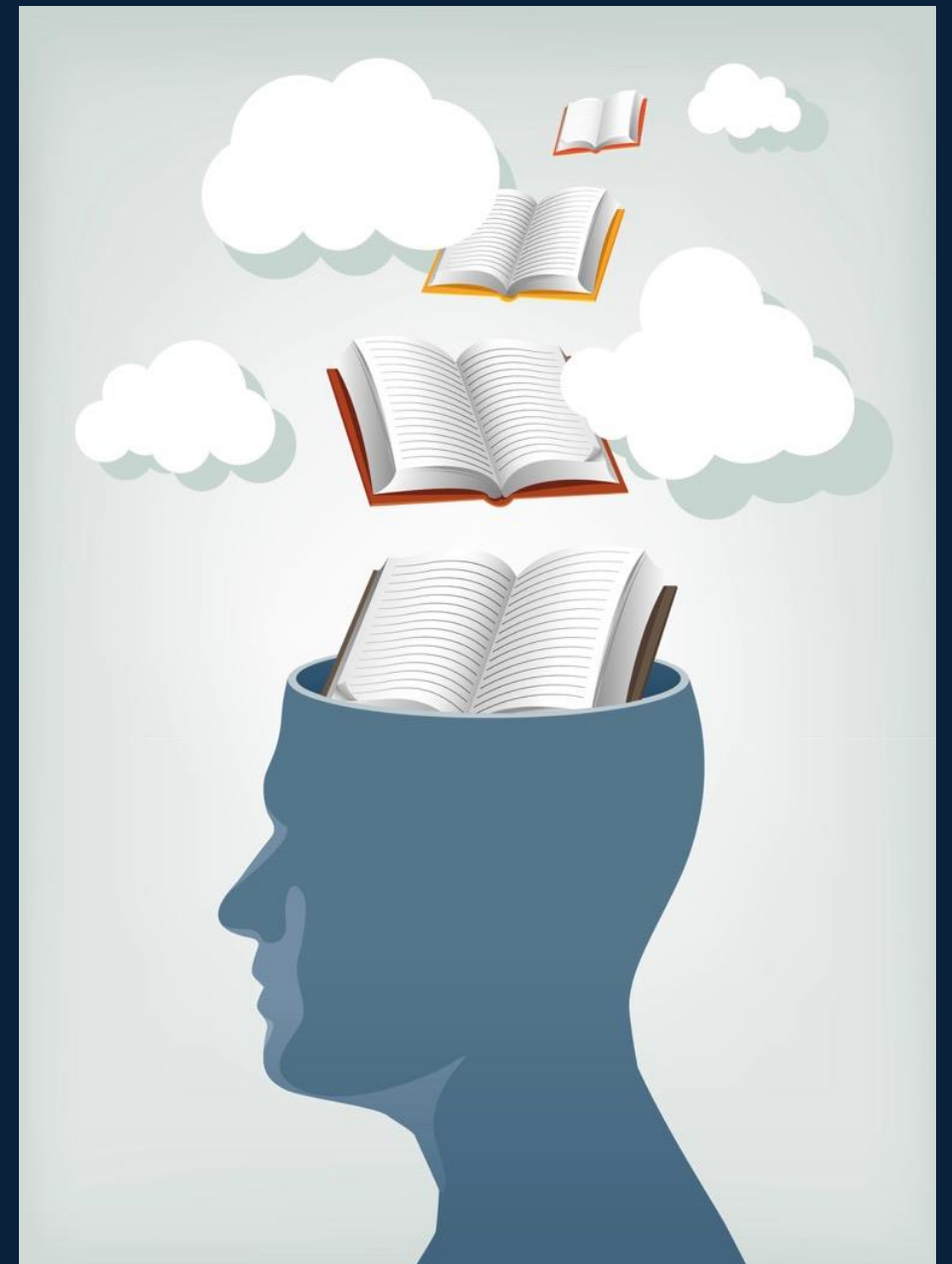
Mismatch with Imagery

- Rescript the trauma scene with compassionate guide imagery.
- Reconstruct nightmares.
- Use client's symbolic image from step 3 of RECON process.
- Anchor desired responses.



Aha! Strategy #7: Conjure up Compelling Stories

- Left hemisphere's way of ordering details of all incoming sensory data.
- Makes info 22x more memorable.
- Lights up sensory and motor cortexes as if we're having the experience.
- Connects you and client.



The Wind and the Sun



Aha! Strategy #7: Priming with Play and Humor

- *“...any therapist who can capture the therapeutic moment in mutually shared play episodes will have brought the client to the gateway of happy living.”*
- — Dr. Jaak Panksepp,
Washington State University



Play promotes creativity, flexibility, & resiliency

- Breaks us out of routines
- Triggers “Aha!” moments
- Learn & master new skills
- “Safe” way to be vulnerable
- Reduces perceived threat



Schwarz & Braff (2012); Subramanian, et al (2009)

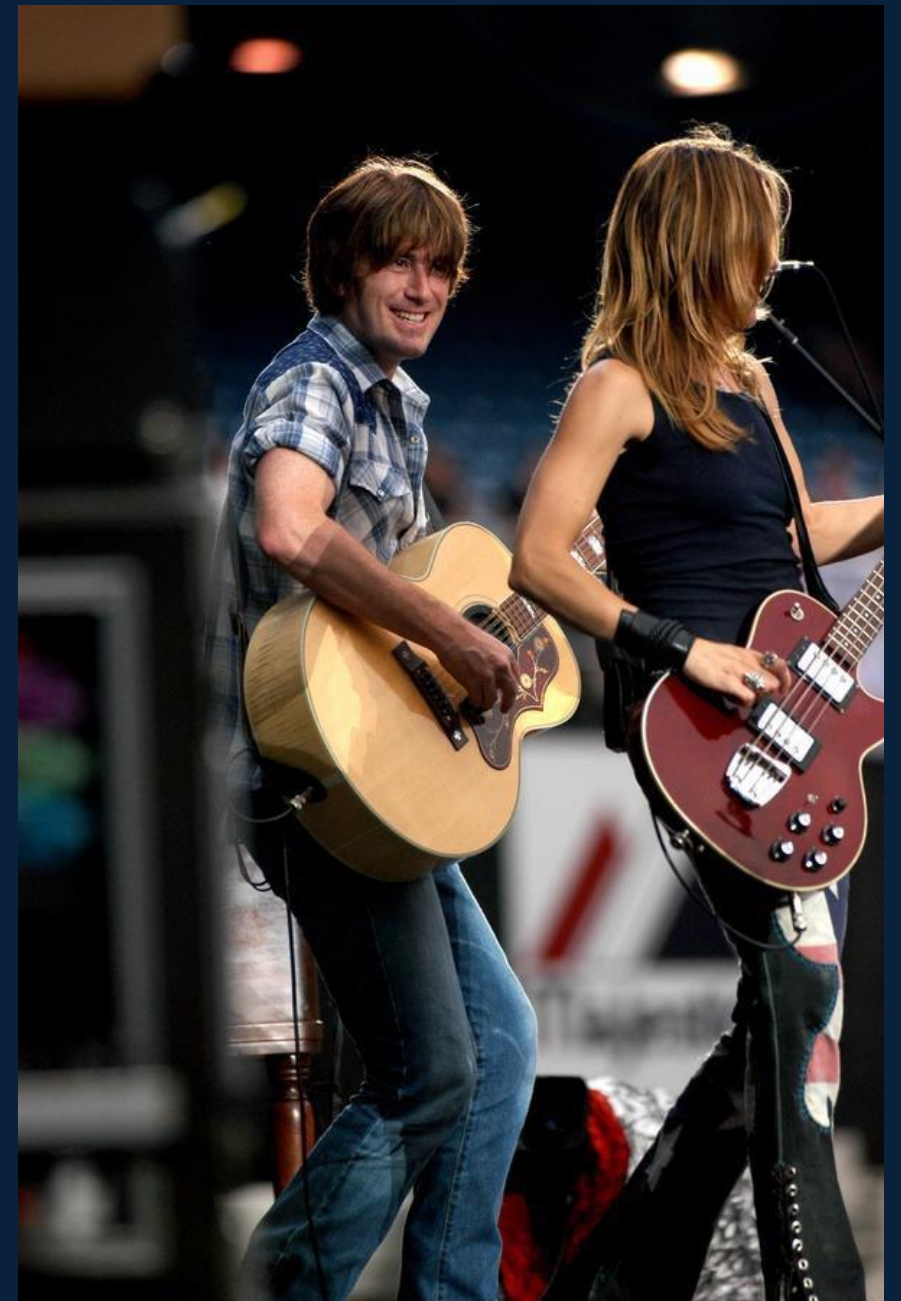
Aha! Strategy #9: Rhythm, Rhyme, & Music

- Auditory cortex projects directly to emotional and associative learning centers of the brain.
- Stimulates reward centers.
- Releases endogenous opioids.
- Decreases stress hormones.



Entrainment Playlists

- Select 5 or 6 songs.
- Begin with tempo that matches current mood.
- Gradually progress to music that matches desired state.
- 60 BPM good for relaxation.



Tony's Grief Playlist

- “My Immortal,” by Evanescence
- “My Boy,” by Philip Phillips
- “I’m Alive” by Kenny Chesney
- Aha! Spotify Playlist:
- <http://spoti.fi/1y1acwa>



Aha! Strategy #10: Integrating Mindful Movement

- Perls Gestalt Therapy
- Somatic Psychotherapies
- Yoga/Tai Chi/Qi Gong
- Walking, dance
- Strength training



Power Postures



Increases testosterone
Decreases cortisol



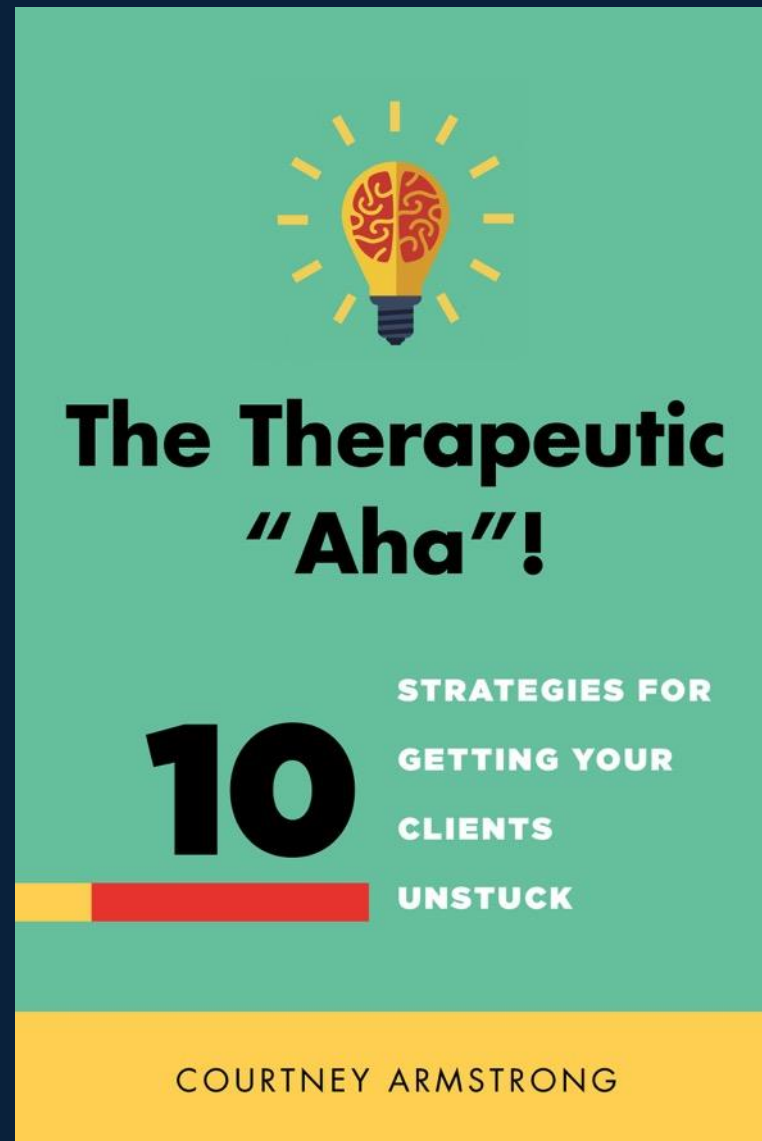
It's about Cognitive- Experiential Integration

- Cognitive in that we are still addressing maladaptive beliefs.
- But we are replacing those beliefs through an experience.
- They have to feel it to believe it!

We know truth not only by reason but also by the heart.
- Pascal



Therapeutic “Aha!” Book



Available from W. W. Norton, Amazon, B&N, iBooks

Thank you!



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