

Remembering: responding to commonly asked questions

co-ordinated by

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Re-membering is a therapeutic practice commonly engaged with by those interested in narrative therapy. This accessible paper offers an introduction to, and clarification of, some of the intricacies of this practice. This paper was created through a collaborative process involving well-respected therapists from North America, Australia, Austria and England. For ease of reading, it is structured in a question and answer format.

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1. What is the practice of re-membering about, and how is it different from ordinary remembering?

The term ‘re-membering’, was originally coined by Barbara Myerhoff (1982, 1986), an anthropologist who worked in a number of different contexts, including with elderly Jewish communities of Southern California. Myerhoff used the term re-membering to describe a ‘special type of recollection’:

To signify (a) special type of recollection, the term ‘Re-membering’ may be used, calling attention to the reaggregation of members, the figures who belong to one’s life story ... (Myerhoff 1982, p.111)

Michael White (1997) then introduced the term 're-membering' into narrative therapy by developing the idea that people's identities are shaped by what can be referred to as a 'club of life'. This 'club of life' metaphor introduced the idea that for all of us there are members to our club of life who have had particular parts to play in how we have come to experience ourselves. These members of our 'club of life' have often had different ranks or status within the 'club'. For instance, we pay more attention or give more credibility to what one person thinks about us than another. The person or persons whose views matter most to us, who influence our identities the most significantly, can be seen to have highly regarded and respected membership status within our 'club of life'. Those to whom we don't give so much credibility can be seen to have low or less significant membership status.

Thinking about one's life as a 'club with members' offers new possibilities for therapeutic conversations. Re-membering practices provide a context for people to revise or re-organise the 'membership' of their 'club of life'. The hyphen is all important in thinking about the distinctions between re-membering and remembering, as it draws our attention to this notion of membership rather than to a simple recalling of history.

Re-membering conversations open up options for people to revise the membership of their club of life. For example, maybe Virginia has been having a tough time of late. She has been struggling with a view of herself as a worthless person and as stupid. In a series of conversations with her therapist, Virginia has traced the histories of these views of herself and has come to realise that they stem from the abusive ways in which her step-father had treated her and related to her throughout the younger years of her life. She has worked out that actually these views of herself that she is currently struggling with are really the views demonstrated by her step-father. While Virginia has not had any contact with her step-father for many years, his views of her are still profoundly influencing how she sees herself. In a re-membering conversation it might be decided by Virginia that she wishes to downgrade the membership rights of her step-father in her 'club of life'. With the assistance of her therapist she may also determine whose views she wishes to elevate. For instance, she may decide that she wishes to upgrade and honour specific relationships that have contributed to a positive sense of her identity. Virginia's younger sister is someone who has always thought highly of her and who has always recognised Virginia's kindness and what she stands for in life. It might be that Virginia wishes to create special honorary life membership for her younger sister in her 'club of life'. Together with her therapist, Virginia might develop some rituals, perhaps even write some letters that will formalise the suspension of her step-father's membership (and the conditions that might apply for this suspension to be lifted) and the honouring of her sister's life membership.

In these ways, re-membering involves more than just recollection, it involves a deliberate re-organising of the memberships of one's 'club of life'.

2. How do re-membering conversations relate to other narrative practices?

Our intention in narrative work is to contribute to the thickening of preferred stories of identity, with the understanding that when a person has a chance to stand in this preferred story or territory, they will more easily be able to see what action they wish to take in their lives. Re-membering has the person standing with significant others in this preferred territory of their identity, and these connections provide a great deal of support for the preferred actions they may wish to take.

3. What's the thinking behind re-membering? What understanding of the self is associated with re-membering conversations?

Re-membering practices are based on the poststructuralist understanding that our identities are forged through our relationships with other people. Our lives have membership and this membership influences our experience of ourselves. How others see us, how we experience ourselves with others, how we participate with others, all influence who we are becoming as people. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has described this succinctly, 'people become people through other people' (Morrison 2002, p. 5).

This is a view of life that sees our identities as being made up of 'many voices' (multi-voiced) and is quite different from other highly individualised accounts of identity that focus only on a single-voiced self. It is also distinct from contemporary structuralist understandings of identity that construct a 'self' at the centre of one's being, comprised of various properties and essences of the person's nature. The poststructuralist perspective that underpins re-membering conversations does not assume an individual 'self' but rather an interconnected web of relationships. As Gergen has described: Our relationships create our selves, rather than our selves create relationships (1994). For more information about the distinctions between structuralist and poststructuralist understandings and their different implications for therapy see Thomas (2002).

4. When are you likely to engage in re-membering conversations? How do you begin a re-membering conversation?

While there are a variety of ways to engage in re-membering conversations, there are three particular circumstances in which we initiate these sorts of explorations. The first is when someone mentions an important person of their past in a positive light.

In this instance we might ask a question like: 'And if Aunty Mary was sitting here now and I asked her to tell me just one thing she appreciated about what you have done in dealing with this, what do you think she would say?' This sort of question elevates the

membership of Aunty Mary – a person who has been identified as a positive figure in the person’s life.

A second instance might be when the person consulting us is talking about a skill or knowledge that they are utilising in addressing a particular problematic situation in their life. When the person first becomes aware of this skill or knowledge it might be quite thinly described – they may not be very confident about this skill. In this instance, we might inquire into the history of this skill or knowledge that they value. In these sorts of instances a re-remembering inquiry might begin with the question: ‘And how do you think you came to think like that (or act like that)? What is the history of this particular skill? Was there anyone in particular that introduced you to this way of being/thinking/acting?’ These sorts of re-remembering questions link the life of the person consulting us with the life of another person around a particular shared value, commitment, skill or understanding.

A third situation in which we are highly likely to engage in re-remembering conversations is when the person consulting us presents with a relatively negative conclusion about their identity: that they are hopeless, worthless, stupid, hateful, etc. When a person speaks as if these descriptions sum up everything about them, re-remembering conversations can provide an antidote. For instance, when Peter came to therapy he described how he was feeling a complete failure in his life, but early on in the conversation he also mentioned that his friend Rob had dropped him off for the appointment and was waiting for him. A series of re-remembering questions could then seek to draw out what Rob contributes to Peter’s life and how he is contributing in a positive sense to Peter’s identity. Further questions could then explore what Peter has contributed to his friend Rob’s life and to Rob’s sense of identity. A re-remembering conversation like this could seek to provide more of an opportunity for Peter to view his life through Rob’s eyes rather than through the eyes of others who are currently judging him in negative ways. Perhaps in the next session Rob might be invited into the therapy room to play a part as a compassionate witness to some of the steps that Peter is taking to reclaim his life from the sense of failure that has been haunting him.

These sorts of re-remembering inquiries deliberately gather supportive figures around a person who is currently struggling and elevate these ‘memberships’ in the person’s ‘club of life’.

5. Once you have identified a significant figure, what do you do then?

Once a significant figure has been identified, re-remembering conversations are often characterised by two different sets of inquiry¹. The first sort of inquiry involves questions like:

- ‘What is it that Aunty Mary contributed to your life? What did she do that made a difference to your life?’

- ‘How did these actions of Aunty Mary’s make a difference in how you understood yourself and your life? How did they make you feel and think about yourself?’

The second sort of inquiry involves questions like:

- ‘Why do you think Aunty Mary showed this interest in you? What was it that you did that contributed to her life?’
- ‘What do you think your relationship with Aunty Mary meant to her? What difference do you think you may have made to how she thought about herself and her life?’

Often re-membering questions build upon the beginnings of an alternative story. When people begin to glimpse an alternative way of thinking about themselves, we can assume that there are traces of these preferred identity claims that reach into the person’s history, and that there will be some person or figure who will have contributed to these preferred claims. We are therefore interested in asking questions such as:

- ‘Who in your past would be least surprised to hear you speaking in this way about what is important to you?’
- ‘What is it that they know about you, or that they may have witnessed you doing, that would have told them that this value/belief/commitment was important to you?’
- ‘What would it have meant to them to notice it?’
- ‘What might it have contributed to their life?’

In this way, re-membering questions are also about linking people’s lives together around particular themes. It may be that Juan identifies ‘generosity’ as a value that he treasures. When the history of Juan’s commitment to ‘generosity’ is traced there may be a particular person, or a number of people for whom generosity was also important who have been significant to Juan. When these people’s presence is then evoked in the conversation, or perhaps when these people are contacted and invited into the therapy process, then their lives become linked around the theme of ‘generosity’.

This linking of lives across shared themes is a key aspect of re-membering conversations. Once people’s lives are linked around a particular theme, this often reduces a sense of isolation and contributes to a richer description of the alternative story of a person’s life.

6. What if the person we’re having the re-membering conversation with doesn’t have anyone that they want to re-member. Won’t that just make them feel worse?

One of the great things about re-membering conversations is that although they usually identify particular figures of a person’s history, it is not necessary that these actually be

people with whom they are in direct relationship. For example, people reading a book by a particular author might believe that this author would understand and appreciate them. That author may then become the focus of a very meaningful re-membering conversation. We are interested in tracing the life of the person's commitments, values and purposes through history, and what we find is that significant contributors to the lives and livelihoods of these commitments, values and purposes may be mythical, imaginary or fictional characters, figures from history, animals, even cuddly toys. Generally speaking, if we ask questions well and do not race ahead of the person concerned, they will be able to identify some figure that has contributed to the developments that are being described in the conversation. This is because people's abilities, commitments, values and purposes are not created in a vacuum – they have been shaped by the person's history and relationships with others and with the world. It is simply a matter of us finding ways to unearth these connections and histories.

What's more, since we only enter into any part of a narrative conversation one question at a time, people don't have the experience of not coming up with someone they would like to re-member. For example, if we have been developing a story of something unusual they did in their lives and we ask: 'Who might have predicted that you would do this?', if the person answers by naming someone, this might then be the beginning of a re-membering conversation. On the other hand, if the person cannot think of anyone, some practitioners might offer some further scaffolding questions to make it easier for the person concerned to identify someone. They might ask, for instance: 'Who do you think would be least surprised?' or 'Is there anyone you can imagine who might have suspected that you might take this step?' If the person can't think of anyone, then a different direction can be taken such as: 'This step really was quite something then, that other people may not have predicted ... can you tell me what steps led up to taking it? What skills did you have to develop in order to do this?' In this the focus might move away from re-membering for a moment but may then be returned to later on. Once the person has further described the skills they have recently demonstrated they may then be invited into a re-membering conversation about how they learnt these skills. Whether the skills involve imagination, courage, intellect, patience, creativity, rigour or something else, there will be history to the development of these skills, and a re-membering conversation about who introduced them to these skills may be relevant and helpful.

It is worth mentioning that re-membering conversations do not only involve considering those who are alive. One of the most well known areas in which re-membering conversations are used is in situations of loss and grief, as Lorraine Hedtke describes:

In my work with dying persons and families experiencing grief, re-membering is an ever-present guide. I ask people who are dying directly about how they want their stories carried forward. How do they want to have their membership in other people's clubs of life honoured and kept alive? I am also interested in talking with families about this after a loved one has died. How is it that they are keeping alive the memory and legacy of their deceased loved one? What rituals do they use or could they evoke to honour their connection? How is the significance of the life of the deceased loved one being introduced to new members in their 'clubs of life'?

When working with those who are dying there are other considerations. One gentleman I was working with had outlived his friends and his family. Re-membering in this context took on a different responsibility, as I needed to then look to other mediums to carry on this person's story, his legacy. For this particular gentleman, we spoke together about his decision to donate his considerable collection of art. I spoke with him about what he might want others in the future to know about him and his decisions and his life, and how these were linked to his donation of these artworks. Through these conversations the membership of his club of life grew to include this future audience to his act of generosity. This was an audience with whom he had not met and would never meet, and yet the conversations were significant.

7. Are re-membering conversations only about positive figures in a person's life? What about those people who have had a negative influence on the person's life?

As mentioned earlier, there are sometimes circumstances in people's lives (particularly in situations where significant abuses have taken place) when reducing the influence of certain people's opinion on one's identity can be significant. If life is understood as a club with members, then at times it may be necessary to renegotiate, downgrade, or in extreme circumstances even revoke particular memberships in someone's club. There are various ways to do this. Documents can be created and ceremonies organised so that a person can reclaim the right to determine whose voices will inform their opinion of themselves. These documents and ceremonies often detail the terms on which they will accept people as members of their club of life – these terms are likely to insist that members display respect, kindness and friendship or similar descriptions.

Whenever certain memberships are suspended or downgraded, the opportunity is usually taken to upgrade and honour other memberships of people who have been supportive during the difficult times. Documents and ceremonies are also used for these purposes.

It is relevant to mention that sometimes re-membering conversations involve a reconstruction of the identities of people who may initially be understood as having made negative contributions as members of a person's club of life. Perhaps the easiest way to explain this is through an example.

Jonathan had grown up with his mother, Janice, who had struggled throughout Jonathan's childhood with alcoholism. When Jonathan first came to therapy he believed that Janice, who had died some years earlier, had let him down and was to blame for many of the difficulties he was currently experiencing. In exploring the history of his mother's drinking, however, Jonathan began to think more about the significant violence that his mother had experienced in her own family and then again from Jonathan's father (who had left their family when Jonathan was ten). Janice had never replicated this violence towards Jonathan, and through careful re-membering conversations it was possible for Jonathan to consider in a

different light the values and commitments that had been important in Janice's life. In fact, when the therapist asked Jonathan where he thought he had learnt his kind and thoughtful ways, it was his mother that he mentioned. Discovering the ways in which his life and his mother's were linked in positive ways made a significant difference to Jonathan and the ways in which he understood his life and family.

This sort of re-membering conversation requires care and thoughtfulness on the part of the therapist and yet, where relevant, can be very significant for the person concerned.

8. I've heard that people often really enjoy re-membering practices – what do you think this has to do with?

Re-membering conversations provide opportunities for people to re-engage with experiences of their life which would otherwise remain neglected. Experiencing your life as linked to the lives of others around shared values and themes can be an antidote to isolation. It can also be invigorating, as Jill Freedman describes:

Holding particular people in one's heart and mind as a personal team, and owning their experiences of oneself, allows people to know themselves in a community of choice, rather than one of chance. This can make all the difference.

9. How does re-membering differ from family of origin work?

Some practitioners have made links and distinctions between family of origin work (a form of family therapy) and re-membering practices. If you are interested in this matter we'd recommend you read Ann Hartman's interview 'Reconnecting with family of origin work' (2001).

One key similarity between family of origin work and re-membering practices seems to be that both are concerned with acknowledging the influence of past relationships on one's sense of identity, and both try to create opportunities for the re-negotiation of these relationships.

One of the key differences is that family of origin work is based upon particular structuralist understandings of the family and of identity. These understandings involve certain assumptions about what constitutes 'healthy' family relations. In contrast, re-membering practices do not privilege a person's relationships with their biological family of origin over relationships with one's family of choice. Re-membering practices do not involve only looking towards one's biological club of life. The focus of the re-membering conversation is determined by the particular person's experience and values and the ways that any significant other has contributed to the fashioning and refashioning of their identity. Another key difference is that re-membering conversations are not based on any template for what constitutes 'healthy relationships'. Instead, explorations about the real effects of certain

relationships, and people's preferences in relation to these effects, is what determines their value.

10. Are there any things to watch out for in using this practice?

As with any therapeutic practice, it takes time and practice to develop confidence and skill in re-membering practices. Here are some of the things that other therapists have said that have been helpful for them to consider along the way:

- When I'm consulting with parents and children together, at times I've let embarrassment and a desire to remain 'professional' get in the way of me asking the children appropriate re-membering questions. It has taken me some practice to be able to ask questions like: 'And what do you think teddy would say about you being able to do this?' or 'Can I ask what your imaginary friend thinks about that?' But I've learnt that often these are really helpful questions, that they enable the child to talk about their skills in rich and imaginative ways, so I have persisted. And parents generally really relate to these questions too!
- I have learnt to always take care when inviting a person to revise the memberships of their 'club of life' – particularly if it is a situation in which someone may wish to revoke a membership. I always take these conversations very seriously. I am not interested in being divisive or taking the side of one person against another and yet, in situations where there has been significant abuse, someone may make a decision to revoke or suspend the membership of someone who has been abusive, and this decision may be very significant and indeed healing for the person concerned. I take great care with these situations. I do not lead the person concerned. We take time deciding what steps to take. When someone is considering revoking a membership, usually this is a figure with whom there is no current relationship anyway and we are exploring the idea of revoking the membership in a sense of reducing the influence that the memory of this figure is continuing to have on the identity of the person concerned. Whatever the case, the person may decide to include some sort of clause in relation to how the figure may be able to take steps of redress and be re-introduced into the club of life somewhere down the track. Or they may decide that they wish to revoke the membership of the person permanently. Whatever the case, I take a lot of care in these circumstances, revoking the membership of someone is not something to take lightly, but it can be important sometimes.
- I've found it helpful to think carefully about the timing of introducing re-membering conversations. I used to rush into them a little. Now I try to ensure that we have fully explored and described the real effects of the problem before seeking any unique outcomes,

and before then asking re-remembering questions about these unique outcomes. This helps to ensure that the person doesn't feel like the effects of the problems are diminished in anyway.

- When people struggle to identify someone in response to a re-remembering question, I used to give up and turn to some other sort of question. But now I try to keep exploring possibilities. I just remind myself that it's a pretty sure bet that there are connections there to be re-remembered – if not with family or friends, then perhaps an old school teacher, or a younger person, or an elderly neighbour, or with characters in books or films, with a teddy bear that's been treasured for many years, or even with a particular place. I keep a really open mind as to what territory the re-remembering conversation might explore. I just keep looking for ways to connect the alternative story that is developing to a sense of history and to honour the contributions of others within this history. I guess I'm more persistent than I used to be.

- I always used to get stuck in therapeutic conversations just when we were beginning to develop an alternative story. The person consulting me would say something like 'that's because I've got good self-esteem' or 'that's because of my inner strength' and then I wouldn't know what to do. The conversation would just stop. Re-remembering conversations have helped with this. I can start to enquire about this 'self-esteem' or this 'inner strength'. I can learn about its history and who contributed to it, who made it possible. The significant characters of people's lives then come into the conversation and I find it easier to ask further questions.

I ask about the contributions these people have made to the person's life and what they'd say about the steps the person is currently taking. And I ask about the contributions that the person made to these characters' lives. These conversations are often very moving – much more so than conversations about inner strength or self-esteem. And people seem to come up with new ideas about how they will stay more connected to these significant people in their lives. They might decide to call them up. We might ask them to join us in the next therapy session. Or if they are no longer alive we might just think of ways in which they can be more treasured in the person's daily life. People seem to find these sorts of conversations very helpful. And I enjoy them too.

11. In what ways do remembering practices have relevance to the work and lives of therapists?

Re-remembering practices have a great deal of relevance to our work as therapists, and to our lives. Many of the skills and knowledges that are relevant to our therapeutic practice have been generated in the history of the significant relationships of our own lives. Re-remembering conversations make it possible for these skills and knowledges to be much more richly

experienced and described, and this means they then become more available to be taken up for further development of our therapeutic practice.

For instance, as a therapist, one of Jane's treasured abilities is her sensitivity to the situations of others, particularly in times of hardship. Through re-remembering conversations with her supervisor, Jane came to realise that this sensitivity was actually a skill that Jane had learnt, and practised over time. She came to see that it was her great-aunt who had introduced Jane to the skills of sensitivity when she had demonstrated great kindness and support to Jane's family in a time of considerable hardship during Jane's childhood. In richly describing this history and in re-remembering this great-aunt, Jane was able to further value and appreciate the skill of her sensitivity. By considering what it would mean to her great-aunt that these skills were now being engaged with in Jane's professional life, and by thinking what her great-aunt would say about this, Jane also came up with further ideas to improve her practise, to more fully develop what she refers to as a 'sensitive counselling practice'. She came to describe the importance of being sensitive not only to people's feelings but also to the context of their lives and to the histories that have shaped their experiences. These sort of explorations in relation to therapeutic skills and the commitments that therapists bring to their practice can contribute significantly to our work and lives.

Here are some of the things that other therapists have said in response to this question:

- Re-remembering practices have made a significant difference for me, professionally and personally. This has been particularly true in re-remembering some of those people who have consulted me in therapy. Over the years, I have been privileged as a therapist to have witnessed and to be a part of some very meaningful conversations with those who have consulted me and these conversations shared have transformed my work. They've also changed in many ways how I understand my own life. Some of the people with whom I have worked continue to populate my office through photographs and other representations. Part of my work ethic now has to do with living up to what they expect of me and I value this. By re-remembering these people and their influence in my life and work I experience feeling supported and appreciated through what is sometimes difficult work. Being linked in my work to others makes me feel part of something much bigger than me, and I treasure this.
- Personally, I use re-remembering practices all the time. They have brought me great comfort through grieving my father's death without ending our conversations. They guide me in what I write on notes I stick in my daughter's lunchbox on days she doesn't want to go to school, and they have changed the way I feel about the world and my relatedness in it.
- I have found re-remembering practices to be extremely relevant in teaching contexts as they enable students to reconnect with some of the important influences in their lives. Re-

remembering practices often bring forth a history of important values that have led to them choosing a career as a counsellor and enable them to become clearer about how they wish to work and why.

- I have found the concept of re-membering very helpful in enabling me to step back from discourses of ‘private property’ and discourses of ‘commerce’ that are sometimes taken up in the therapy world. When I consider the histories of relationships that have contributed to the skills that people bring with them into the therapy room, and when I consider the histories of relationships that have shaped my own therapeutic skills, I am much less likely to ‘own’ the developments in my own work and am less likely to get into considerations whether I, or the person consulting me, ‘deserves credit’ for positive developments in our conversations. This is a bit of a relief really. It frees me up for much more interesting explorations of history.

- Re-membering conversations help me not to privilege my own position as a therapist in the life of the person consulting me. I may only see them for one hour in a fortnight of their life. Re-membering conversations remind me that the ongoing business of living happens outside of therapy. This is not to say that therapy is not influential in people’s lives, or that I want to step away from that influence, but re-membering practices help me to keep noticing the importance of others in the lives of those who consult me in therapy. It keeps my role de-centred in a way, and I value this.

- Thinking about my life as a therapist as a ‘club with members’ has helped to reduce the sense of isolation and burden that I was sometimes prone to. It has offered me a sense of being ‘in it together’ with others. This is true not only in relation to colleagues and friends who are treasured members of my ‘club of life’, but I am also more conscious of the contributions of previous clients to my ongoing work. And when I think about what is important to me as a therapist, I am now able to trace a history in my own life of those people who have encouraged me to develop the values and commitments that I now cherish. All of this helps to keep me connected to what is important to me in my life and work. It’s refreshing in a way.

About these questions and answers

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Further reading

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