

From the Inside Out

David Florian, Palo Alto, California

To look at me, no one would ever guess that I almost died twice before I was 8 years old, or that I was once paralyzed and had to learn to walk again. I was diagnosed with bulbar polio in 1947 at age 6. Two months in the hospital, four more in bed at home, close monitoring for a year or two, and I recovered completely. Or, that's what I thought. As I grew up, it never occurred to me that there might be physical limitations, much less psychological ones.

Over the years I have come to realize that the trauma I experienced as a child in that hospital so long ago has permeated nearly every facet of my life to such an extent that it is difficult to wrap my mind around it all. Even now, at age 63, I still discover new ways that it has "crippled" me, colored my thinking, or affected my attitudes and relationships with people and the world. It's not that I am unhappy with the person I have become, because I'm not. But surely the path my life has taken would be significantly different had it not been for having had polio.

The first real inkling of trouble came when I met the woman I wanted to marry. I was 29, and my problems manifested themselves very quickly in terms of sexual dysfunction. We were living in Los Angeles and I remember driving to the university to teach an evening class. I was distraught, crying, barely able to see the road. I had an overwhelming desire to pull over and curl up in a ball in the back seat of my car. It was the closest I ever came to feeling as though I was "going crazy."

The sexual problems had come to the fore in the months preceding our wed-

After Post-Polio Health International published a series of articles about healing polio memories in 2002-03, a member sent us an account of how psychotherapy helped him discover that early polio experiences had impacted his sexuality, self-esteem and ability to express his true feelings.

His story is valuable because it provides evidence that our early life experiences can have long-lasting effects on how we think, feel and physically react to present-day situations. His story reveals how our minds, emotions and bodies affect each other. These insights are important for finding solutions to problems such as anxiety attacks, or an inability to concentrate, complete tasks or follow up with medical recommendations.

Determined to resolve his difficulties, Florian worked with a therapist to guide him through a process of discovery. Uncovering memories safely requires a trusting relationship with a therapist who has vast experience, an enormous range of skills, and deep sensitivity to how past experiences affect a client's responses in therapy. A competent professional will teach clients important skills for managing their intense reactions to situations stemming from their past as well as strong feelings that may surface.

Regardless of the depth of a person's pain or of a person's age, making positive change is possible, and David Florian's story is about powerful possibilities. What is most important is that we know we have choices and that we find ways to address our needs. With David's permission, we publish his story.

ding. It had nothing to do with any physical cause, nor was it a question of impotence. The machinery clearly worked just fine, but it would just turn off at the very last, possible moment. Vanish, in an instant! Stretched over a period of time, that sort of recurring event tends to wreak havoc with one's self-esteem and self-worth.

I went to a psychiatrist who told me that therapy would help. After surviving our honeymoon, I began to see him regularly and continued for the next six years. The therapy sessions came back again and again to childhood images of hospitals, nurses, doctors and procedures. But the years of therapy didn't result in a "cure" for my problem; that goal proved more elusive and more time-consuming than expected. The therapy provided valuable tools and an understanding of the situation that allowed me to put it all into perspective and to lead a normal life in every respect but that one.

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It would be wonderful if the story ended there, or perhaps, more appropriately, started there. But, unfortunately that was not the case.

It's EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) that I credit with finally curing my sexual problems 22 years after I started seeing a psychiatrist. Over a period of maybe two months – a period that straddled the winter holidays, so there was some down time included – something of a miracle happened and in a rush of bewildering speed, all of the inhibitions, the self-doubts, the inability to fully experience sexual release, all vanished! For the first time in my life, at age 52, I was able to experience what most of the rest of the world takes pretty much for granted.

My feeling, all my life, was that the real David Florian, the *feeling* David Florian, was locked away in a little black box at the core of my being. To me, that image was very real and very powerful. Through EMDR, the doors to that little black box flung open and released feelings and emotions that I never had before.

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Because an irregularity was detected during a physical examination, my primary care physician, a short eight months after my “release,” suggested I have a sonogram of my prostate. While being examined, an the intern said that he needed to take a biopsy and gave me a choice to do it right then or to come back at a later time. Foolishly, I decided to do it on the spot to get it over with. There was no anesthetic. They generally take six samples, and by the third puncture, I was sweating ... shaking ... and trying to tell myself that this was going to be OK. It wasn't.

While on the table, I saw – and I mean “saw” in a very literal way – the doors of that little black box I envisioned inside of me slamming shut with each jolt of the needle. I was trying frantically to tell myself that all of this was *not* related to the pain I experienced in my childhood, but my argument apparently was not very convincing. And that's where I am today.

My wife and I recently celebrated our 33rd anniversary. We have a happy marriage that we never take for granted. When we met, it was love at first sight and after these many years we're still in love today. We prefer to spend our free time together; we actively enjoy each other's company. And our “problem?” Yes, it remains unresolved. But, there was that brief interlude.

And yet, perhaps surprisingly, my story is not about negativity and gloom. With the love and support of my wife, I've grown into a generally upbeat, productive adult who is happy, and relatively satisfied with my life as it is. Because this difficulty manifested itself so early in our life together, and because we both felt that our love for each other was worth rescuing, instead of driving us apart, it drove us closer to each other. We bonded early on in a way that might not have been possible if the circumstances were otherwise.

Was it always easy? Of course not. But, ultimately, it turns out that my story is really about a lifetime of continuing, positive discovery and learning ... and it seems that we have more learning yet to do. ●

To link to articles about polio memories and to see the extensive “Treatment Approach Options Chart” log on to www.post-polio.org/ipn/pnn18-4A.html or call 314-534-0475 and request a copy.