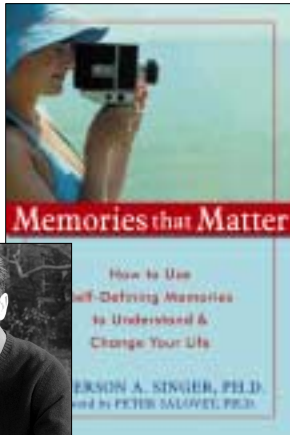


## HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO UNDERSTAND PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THEMES FROM YOUR PAST?



*Being falsely accused of cheating in front of your entire class.*

*The overwhelming sense of pride and achievement of winning a prestigious academic award.*

*Making your high school cheerleading squad.*

*Your first day of college.*

*Meeting your future spouse.*

Everyone has them. Those memories of events that are so significant that just recalling them quickens your heart rate, makes you smile, or makes you angry all over again years later. These are *self-defining memories*, and their role in shaping our lives is explained in *Memories That Matter*, a new book by psychologist Jefferson Singer (New Harbinger Publications).

*Memories That Matter* discusses our memories and how they work to define our personalities. Based on research that suggests that self-defining memories (SDMs) have a profound impact on larger issues pertaining to our identity and mental health, this book offers an approach readers can use to tap into SDMs and analyze them for their specificity, meaning, content, and affect. Once understood, these SDMs reveal clues to the reader that they can use to maximize the helping aspects of these memories over the residual hurt that they may contain.

Readers of this book first learn how to identify SDMs and how to uncover the life lessons they contain. Doing so will allow readers to better understand their actions and let go of harmful patterns in their lives. Readers also discover how their memories affect their moods, and how to use SDMs to enhance sensuality and manage stress. Ultimately, the book guides readers through exploring deeper issues of their life through self-defining memories, offering them a memory-based legacy they can share with the important people in their lives.

“For memories to matter in our lives, we must see how they relate to each other and to the larger goals, plans, or wishes of our lives.”

— Jefferson Singer

### HOW IMPORTANT ARE MEMORIES?

Research shows a direct link between ‘self-defining memories’ and:

- Repetitive relationship patterns
- Life goals
- Personal meaning
- Loss
- Creativity
- Intimacy

MEMORIES THAT MATTER

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo by Nina Lentini

**Jefferson A. Singer, Ph.D.**, is professor of psychology at Connecticut College in New London, CT. Dr. Singer has spent the past two decades researching emotionally significant memories and their role in personality. He has served as associate editor of *Contemporary Psychology*, *Journal of Personality*, and on the editorial board of *The Review of General Psychology*. His website is [www.jeffersonsinger.com](http://www.jeffersonsinger.com).

## SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- In chapter one you begin by explaining what “personal memory” is and is not. Please explain why remembering that your grandparents were married in 1930 is *not* a “personal memory.”
- How is personal memory organized?
- You mention early in the book effective personal memory requires us to forget certain events as well as remember others: could you explain this idea?
- How do you define “self-defining memories?” Are they happy memories, or sad ones?
- How do we discover which of our memories are self-defining?
- How can identifying and understanding our self-defining memories help us in our present lives, or in the future?

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Excerpt from *Memories That Matter*  
**HOW TO BE D.O.N.E. WITH NEGATIVE MEMORIES**

Having emphasized that you can draw on the reality of positive self-defining memories in your life, of course we need to ask what to do about those negative memories—the memories of disappointment, of falling short or not making the grade. These memories are primary obstacles that block your positive momentum toward achieving the reach strivings in your life. If you dwell on them and let them dominate your thoughts, you will never make progress toward realizing your dreams. Yet they are also real experiences from your life and cannot be easily dismissed.

The presence of these negative memories requires a candid assessment of whether your hopes for the future have some actual possibility or not. By definition, reach strivings mean that the road ahead is difficult, so you must accept the reality of falling short at times, but you also must see the possibility of eventual success. Asking friends, relatives, coworkers, mentors, coaches, teachers, and so on, for honest feedback can help you know if continued pursuit is reasonable, but ultimately you alone must make this call.

I can recall the years that one of my brothers struggled at trying to make a success as a screenwriter in Los Angeles. Many times, my parents and I strongly questioned whether it was time for him to let go of this ambition and try to find some more reliable income. After a number of years, he finally sold a script and then went on to have a very successful career writing for film and television. There were times, I am sure, that he was the only one holding on to the firm conviction that this difficult reach striving could be attained. So there is no easy answer about when to let go or when to hold on to the strivings that matter most. Still, if you do hope to persist in pursuit of a reach striving, you will have to learn how to defuse the power of negative memories that are linked to this particular striving.

The goal of the following exercise is to assist you in this process. It teaches you how to tame some of the emotional impact of negative memories in your life and to counteract them with more positive experiences. In order to perform this exercise, you will need to look over your reach strivings and self-defining memories. Try to identify a self-defining memory that reflects a disappointment or setback with regard to one of your reach

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strivings. It is also possible that as you are searching through your existing set of memories, you may recall an additional memory that fits these criteria. Once you have the memory in mind, you will be ready for the Defusing of Negative Events (D.O.N.E.) imagery exercise. The goal of this exercise is indeed to help you feel that you are done returning to and brooding over the negative images and emotions associated with this memory.

**D.O.N.E. IMAGERY EXERCISE**

First, picture the negative memory of disappointment and/or failure in relationship to your reach striving. For example, imagine that your reach striving is to keep a strong positive view of yourself. Your self-defining memory is of a moment as a child when you broke your sister's favorite porcelain doll during an argument and your mother called you a "wicked child." When you have this memory in mind, you must put it aside for a moment. Now look for a second self-defining memory that expresses a more successful outcome with regard to your goal. Perhaps you can recall a memory when a teacher praised your work or a time you felt particularly pleased with the way you looked before a social occasion. Once you have this memory in mind, follow these steps:

1. You will use the same relaxation technique from the S.O.S. exercise, allowing tension to build up and let go, working up your body from your toes to your head.
2. Once you are relaxed, you will need to recall the negative memory in which you failed to achieve the goal that you desire. Once you have the memory in mind, try to bring forward the images and emotions associated with the memory. Try to notice if you are becoming more anxious and less relaxed as you think about the memory.
3. Once you notice any change in your mood or state of relaxation, you should immediately switch your thoughts to the positive memory. Concentrate on that memory until you feel yourself regaining some of your relaxed sense.

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4. When you are ready, return your thoughts to your negative memory and contemplate it until you feel less relaxed again.
5. Now switch back to your positive memory until you calm down again.
6. As you gain more and more control over the negative memory, you might want to add the affirmation, “This is in the past and not who I am anymore. I am done with this memory!”
7. Repeat this process until you can think about the negative memory for long stretches without any change in the level of relaxation that you experience. It should also now be almost impossible for you to think about the negative memory without immediately invoking the images and feelings of the positive memory, as well as the healthy affirmation of your freedom from this memory’s clutches.

If you work diligently at this imagery exercise, you will be able to defuse the harmful effects of negative self-defining memories in obstructing your progress toward the important reach strivings in your life. Still, it is important to acknowledge that we cannot dismiss these events from our life and pretend that they never occurred. To do so would be to live in denial of the real pain and difficulty we have faced in our life. Even more, these negative self-defining memories may have much to teach us about what we don’t want, what not to do in pursuit of our goals. Yet using these memories as a source of self-knowledge and wisdom does not preclude neutralizing some of the negative emotion and second-guessing they engender. These memories can serve as catalysts for growth, not impediments to change. By defusing the negative emotion of certain memories, the D.O.N.E. exercise allows these memories to retain their value as cautionary tales to inform us rather than to linger as reminders of why we cannot succeed or reach our most desired strivings.