

Recovered memory therapy

'Recovered memories' are memories of traumatic events that are now remembered but had previously been 'forgotten' or unknown. The recovery of traumatic memories has often been associated with past experience of childhood abuse, often sexual in nature. Recovered memories have also been reported by people who have experienced other types of trauma such as war, natural disasters or genocide.

There has been considerable debate about the reliability of these memories, but a key point of agreement is that recovered memories may not always be accurate.

Memory explained

Memory is an internal record of the experiences and information you have built up over a lifetime. Memory involves at least a three-step process of recording, storing and recalling information. Inaccuracies can occur at each stage of this process. Information may:

- Be inaccurately stored
- Not be stored at all
- Fade or change over time
- Be distorted when it is remembered.

Research into how memory works suggests that a recalled memory is a reconstruction of various elements rather than a photographic record of what actually happened. A memory may not always be accurate and it may change over time. Circumstances can also influence how the memory is reconstructed.

Various factors can influence the accuracy of memories. They can be affected by:

- Time
- The degree of trauma involved
- The impact of new experiences, new information and suggestions
- A person's changing feelings and views about the event.

Memory and childhood sexual abuse

Childhood sexual abuse is, unfortunately, not uncommon. When abuse of children occurs, it is often by someone they know and trust. When children are sexually abused they may also experience psychological and physical abuse. The impact of abuse is often made worse when children are urged to keep it secret or if they are not believed when they seek help.

Child sexual abuse can affect:

- Self-confidence and self-esteem
- The ability to trust others
- The potential to experience intimacy
- An understanding of appropriate sexual behaviour.

However, it is important to acknowledge that such difficulties do not necessarily indicate a history of child sexual abuse.

About false memory

A false memory is when a person reports an apparently true memory of an event that did not occur. It can also refer to situations where the current understanding of the event is very different from what actually happened.

False memories can be created by imagining situations and then associating strong feelings with those situations. If the 'memory' seems to explain why we are the way we are, this can satisfy a deeply felt human need for meaning and reinforce the feel of the memory as real.

False memories of child sexual abuse can have serious consequences as they can lead to false accusations. If the false memory is acted upon, it can have devastating effects on the person, the family unit and the lives of individual family members.

Recovering memories in therapy

Some therapy techniques, if used inappropriately, may increase the risk of recovering false memories. These techniques should only be used by therapists who are qualified in these methods. Techniques that may use the power of suggestion include:

- Hypnosis
- Guided imagery
- Visualisation
- Dream interpretation
- Interpretation of body sensations.

Most professional bodies have now developed detailed guidelines for therapists who treat people who report memories of trauma and abuse. Good practice should not:

- Set out to recover memories of abuse
- Interpret or endorse recovered memories as accurate memories
- Suggest that a particular set of symptoms means that a person was likely to have been sexually abused.

What to expect from counselling or therapy

The therapist's role is to help you explore and understand the meaning of the recovered memory. They should do this by respecting your feelings and memories and by exploring ways to understand the memory, including the fact that it may not be true.

A therapist should not form premature conclusions about your memories. The therapist's role is not to try to work out whether your memory is true or false. Rather, they should understand and accept that recovered memories may be true or false, or partially true.

Therapists should not use any techniques designed to uncover possible memories of abuse about which the person has no current knowledge. They should not suggest ideas or interpretations that may influence memory of events. The person's needs and wellbeing should always come first in therapy.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychiatrist – your GP can refer you
- Psychologist – find a psychologist through the Australian Psychological Society Tel. 1800 333 497
- Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia Tel. (03) 9486 3077
- Australian Counselling Association Tel. 1300 784 333
- Better Health Channel Services Directory - to find a counsellor, therapist or other health practitioner
- Centres Against Sexual Assault Tel. 1800 806 292 - for support and counselling

Things to remember

- Memories are reconstructions of events and are shaped by the person's view of the world, the state of their emotions and external influences both current and in the past.
- Memory, especially a memory that has appeared after an extended period of time, may not be accurate. It may also continue to change over time.
- Therapists can sensitively and respectfully help explore memories of abuse – true, false, recovered or continually remembered.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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