

Remembering Childhood Trauma



International Society
for Traumatic Stress Studies

The popular press has reported many stories about adults who suddenly remember having been abused as children. Some media reports have emphasized the unusual circumstances or content of such *recovered memories* while other reports have declared that the recovery of memories of abuse is false for a variety of reasons. Little in the press, however, has dealt with the science relating to memories of childhood trauma.

Is it Possible to Forget Childhood Trauma?

People forget names, dates, faces and even entire events all the time. But is it possible to forget terrible experiences such as being raped? Or beaten? The answer is yes - under certain circumstances. For more than a hundred years, doctors, scientists and other observers have reported the connection between trauma and forgetting. But only in the past 10 years have scientific studies demonstrated a connection between childhood trauma and amnesia.

Most scientists agree that memories from infancy and early childhood - under the age of two or three - are unlikely to be remembered. Research shows that many adults who remember being sexually abused as children experienced a period when they did not remember the abuse. Scientists also have studied child victims at the time of a documented traumatic event, such as sexual abuse, and then measured how often the victims forget these events as they become adults. They discovered that some people do forget the traumatic experiences they had in childhood, even though it was established fact that the traumatic events occurred.

What Makes People Remember a Traumatic Event after Such a Long Delay?

At the time of a traumatic event, the mind makes many associations with the feelings, sights, sounds, smells, taste and touch connected with the trauma. Later, similar sensations may trigger a memory of the event. While some people first remember past traumatic events during therapy, most people begin having traumatic memories outside therapy.

A variety of experiences can trigger the recall. Reading stories about other people's trauma, watching television programs that depict traumatic events similar to the viewer's past experience, experiencing a disturbing event in the present, or sitting down with family and reminiscing about a terrible shared episode - for some people, these kinds of experiences can open the floodgates of frightful and horrible memories.

Are Recovered Memories Always Accurate?

Scientists believe that recovered memories - including recovered memories of childhood trauma - are not always accurate. When people remember childhood trauma and later say their memory was wrong, there is no way to know which memory was accurate - the one that claims the trauma happened or the one that claims it did not.

How Might False Memories Develop?

A great deal of laboratory research involving normal people in everyday situations demonstrates that memory is not perfect. Evidence shows that memory can be influenced by other people and situations; that people can make up stories to fill in memory gaps, and that people can be persuaded to believe they heard, saw or experienced events that did not really happen. Studies also reveal that people who have inaccurate memories can strongly believe they are true.

What Kind of treatment is Helpful for Problems Associated with Early Trauma?

Trauma - focused treatments do work, though not all the time and not for every person. It is important for doctors, psychotherapists, and other health - care providers to begin a treatment plan by taking a complete medical and psychiatric history, including a history of physical and psychological trauma. Knowledge about details of traumatic experiences and some of their possible effects can help professional caregivers formulate a treatment approach that might reduce symptoms and improve daily functioning.

How does Trauma-focused Therapy Work?

The point of trauma - focused therapy is not to make people remember all the disturbing things that ever happened to them. People do not need to remember every detail in order to heal. Rather, the goal of psychotherapy is to help people gain authority over their trauma - related memories and feelings so that they can get on with their lives. To do this, people often have to talk in detail about their past experiences. Through talking, they are able to acknowledge the trauma - remember it, feel it, think about it, share it, and put it in perspective. At the same time, to prevent the past from continuing to influence the present negatively, it is vital to focus on the present, since the goal of treatment is to help individuals live healthier, more functional lives in the here and now.

What is the Therapist's Role in Uncovering Traumatic Memories?

Just as it is harmful for people to believe that something horrible happened to them when nothing did, it is equally harmful for people to believe that nothing happened when something bad did occur. Ultimately, the individual involved - not the therapist - must reach a conclusion about what happened in the past. Good therapy shouldn't create or reinforce false beliefs, whether the beliefs are of having been abused or of not having been abused. Competent therapists realize their job is not to convince someone about a certain set of beliefs, but to let reality unfold for each person according to the individual's own experience, interpretation, and understanding. Helpful psychotherapy provides a neutral, supportive environment for understanding oneself and one's past.

Are there Things a Therapist Should Not Do?

Every profession has specific standards of conduct for its practitioners. Based on the current state of knowledge, it is safe to say that some practices are risky. First, a therapist should not automatically assume that certain symptoms mean a person has been abused. Since the same symptoms can often point to a variety of causes, symptoms alone can't provide a proper indication of childhood trauma. Encouraging people to imagine they were traumatized when they have no memory of a traumatic event may promote inaccurate memories. Encouraging such memories under the influence of hypnosis or sodium amytal - 'truth serum' - can further increase the risk of inaccuracies. It also is not appropriate for a therapist to instruct patients to pursue a particular course of action, such as suing or confronting the alleged perpetrator or severing all family ties.

What Should I Do if I Think I may Have Been Abused?

People sometimes suspect they may have been abused as a child, but they can't clearly remember events or are told things that contradict their memories. Trained therapists can provide individuals with the opportunity to look objectively at their suspicions, consider alternative explanations for their feelings, and become informed about the way memory works or can become distorted.

Thus the goal of therapy is to address client - generated concerns about possible childhood sexual abuse, to help clarify the issues related to such concerns, to resolve leftover feelings or ways of behaving that may be due to such traumatic experiences or concerns, and to help each client shift his or her focus from the past to the present and beyond.

Why is it Important to Get Help for Problems Related to Traumatic Childhood Events?

Traumas and adversities in childhood may leave scars that last into adulthood and put a person at risk for a variety of difficulties. This is true for all kinds of early traumas, including accidents, disasters, and witnessing violence directed at others, but it is especially true for child abuse and neglect, the victims of which have been studied extensively. Not all childhood trauma survivors experience difficulties in adulthood. However, for many people, it may be important to come to terms with past traumatic events. People who have been in treatment can gain relief from anxiety and depression and are able to stop focusing on the disturbing memories and feelings associated with traumatic childhood events.

For more information, contact your state mental health or social work association, psychological or psychiatric association, or victims' service or sexual assault crisis agency.

This information is based on a document entitled, *Childhood Trauma Remembered: A Report on the Current Scientific Knowledge Base and its Applications*, prepared by ISTSS.



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