



Precious Memories

Andrew Newton

Precious Memories

Our memories are not as reliable as we believe them to be. New research has uncovered disturbing evidence that offers a damning indictment of a theory so flawed, it should never have been taken seriously in the first place. At long last, scientists have proved beyond any reasonable doubt that 'Repressed Memory Syndrome' is not only unsafe, it has resulted in one of the great injustices of our time.

Maybe it was because Freud was a serial cocaine addict that his thinking was muddled. He believed cocaine cured respiratory illnesses (it doesn't). But it's unfair to say Freud claimed that some memories were so traumatic, they were buried deep in the unconscious mind and thus 'forgotten'. What Freud actually said was that the emotions associated with trauma would in time, be forgotten. In other words, the memory of the event would remain, it just won't hurt so much, making credible the old adage 'time is a great healer'.

When called to examine United States President Woodrow Wilson, who had suddenly and inexplicably become paralysed down one side, Freud declared it was because he had been dominated by his father at a young age and the paralysis was the physical manifestation of mind and body rebelling against domineering dad. No... it was a stroke.

Freud wasn't nearly the genius as is popularly believed. In fact most of Freud's theories have been debunked to the extent that they are deemed laughable. In particular, the idea that an event traumatic enough can be buried deep enough that it can never resurface without expert intervention, has mercifully had its day. The difficulty however, is that many hypnotherapists still embrace the idea.

Conventional wisdom, based on sound research, suggests that traumatic events are rarely forgotten, never mind repressed. It was only after several high profile (and expensive) law suits that the American Medical Association has issued warnings to patients regarding the unreliability of 'recovered' memories. The American Psychiatric Association is in agreement. There is a very real danger that the brain's emotional circuitry could be damaged by such careless whispers, with lasting effects on memory and mental health.

Emotional arousal tends to make memories stronger, especially if the emotion in question is part of a peak experience. For example, even when patients know that they didn't experience ritual or satanic abuse they may, in extreme cases, be tormented by recurring visions of such events. More recent research goes so far as to suggest that people who have been exposed to traumatic events will be damaged even further by being encouraged to relive disturbing memories. The process can diminish resilience and impede recovery. For the record, this is a view that I embrace.

According to a 1996 report of the Crime Victims Compensation Program in Washington State, a survey of 183 claims of repressed memories of childhood abuse uncovered:

- 100% of the patients reported torture or mutilation, yet no medical examinations were able to corroborate these claims
- 97% recovered memories of satanic abuse
- 76% claimed they remembered infant cannibalism
- 69% said they remembered being tortured with spiders

Even more distressing is the news that:

- 100% remained in therapy for at least three years after the so-called memories were 'uncovered'
- More than 50% remained in therapy five years after the event
- 10% reported that they had thoughts of suicide prior to therapy
- This level increased to 70% after therapy!
- Hospitalisations increased from 7% before memory recovery to 37% after memory recovery therapy
- The instances of self-mutilation increased from 3% to 27%
- 83% of patients were employed prior to memory recovery whereas only 10% remained in employment three years into therapy
- 77% were married prior to therapy but 48% of these divorced after three years of therapy
- 23% of patients who had children prior to therapy lost custody of their children

And worse

- *ALL of them* became estranged from their extended families.

These numbers raise disturbing questions about the validity of the increasingly widespread use of this sort of therapy. Remember, the vast majority of hypnotherapists, hypnoanalysts and NLP practitioners have no recognisable academic qualifications!!! But traditional, tried and tested psychological approaches can work wonders. Recovered memory therapy, albeit unintentionally, can make things go from bad to worse — a prime example of fools rushing in where angels fear to tread!

Repressed memory has become part of psycho-culture. In the United States, prior to 1973, barely 50 cases were reported. By 1994, due to the increased popularity (and fuelled by increased publicity surrounding the therapy) the number had soared to over 40,000. Time to call in the experts...

Neuroscientist Bruce McEwen, working at Rockefeller University in the US believes that chronic stress alters neural complexity. His research suggests that compromised functioning of the prefrontal cortex may be associated with a patient's ability to adequately distinguish reality from fiction: growth of neurons in the amygdale may lead to hyper-vigilance and suspiciousness and compromised prefrontal cortex functioning may diminish the patient's ability in the future to inhibit fearful or distressing memories.

At Harvard University, Psychologist Stephen Kosslyn has turned up a good deal of evidence that shows that the same areas of the brain are activated when we see an object and when we close our eyes and imagine that object. All this evidence supports the power and effectiveness of guided imagery/imagining during hypnosis, but it must also serve as a health warning.

No psychiatrist goes along with the idea of demonic possession or ritual satanic abuse. No papers have been published by psychologists or psychiatrists who have uncovered any such thing. On the contrary, these traumas have one thing in common — they were uncovered by unqualified amateurs, that is, overenthusiastic social workers, lay therapists and individuals who are out to prove a point. There are very few places a patient can go for deprogramming after a traumatic encounter with an incompetent or careless therapist!

Harvard psychologist Richard McNally suggests that the malleability of memories is merely a by-product of human imagination, inference and prediction, and again, I agree. I am more comfortable with real scientific research than the dubious pronouncements of amateurs, especially if it confirms my own common-sense and understanding. The bottom line here is that recovered memory therapy needs to be thoroughly re-examined before it's consigned to the dustbin of history, which it inevitably will be. There is already a growing majority of professionals who are of this view.

The brain is sometimes not a very discriminating processor of information. Research carried out by Elizabeth F. Loftus at the University of Washington and later at the University of California-Irvine has proved beyond doubt that it can be nigh on impossible for some people to distinguish between real and falsely implanted memories.

In 1995, Professor Loftus and her associate, Jacqueline Pickrell, interviewed family members of 24 volunteers in an information gathering exercise about their lives. Profiles were constructed using real events, but a false story was also added about being lost in a shopping mall at the age of five. A staggering 29% of the subjects remembered the false event and went on to provide details of it. This is exactly what happens under hypnosis — the beautifully relaxed feelings of calm and well-being of hypnosis allows the imagination to freewheel. What is one moment purely imaginary may in the next, become very real.

Stage hypnotists are very much aware of this phenomenon and play with it on a nightly basis. But in Stage hypnosis, there is an implicit understanding between the hypnotists and the volunteer that whatever occurs during the course of a hypnosis show will have no relevance after that performance is over. But in the therapeutic situation, where there is expectation from both the patient and the therapist, things can take a more serious turn when the dangers of an overactive imagination can override fact.

We should also note that too often, witness testimony has led to guilty verdicts later overturned when more reliable DNA evidence became available. Witnesses are often unreliable, their ability recall of events accurately shaken by clever cross-questioning. Of course, real events and real memories of traumatic events often serve as reminders to avoid potentially threatening or dangerous situations. The danger is that guided tours of imaginary events, particularly those with strong emotional connotations, become fixed in the mind.

Therapy depends on trust. When a patient is confronted with a therapist with lots of apparently solid credentials, the suggestions given by that therapist can be interpreted as 'prestige' or 'valuable', thus increasing the possibility of contamination of existing memory and/or the retention of false memories.

At the very cutting edge of research into brain function, bio-psychologists think that a great deal of the brain's activity is governed by a process called Modulation. This has only recently been discovered and measured. Modulation is particularly important when it comes to memory because it is basically a matter of increasing or decreasing the chances that anything from a single cell, to a network of tens of thousands of cells, will fire. This depends to a large extent on what else is going on, but the brain has the ability to decide what is important and what is not, and allocates attention by either enhancing or inhibiting activity accordingly. This ability of the brain to do this is almost certainly part of the human survival strategy, and it's the way the brain associates events — If two things happen one after another, the circuits of cells that store the memory of those two events form interconnections that will affect behaviour. Once these connections are in place, the brain will always remind you that once the first event has happened, the second will surely follow. Here, again, we are in familiar Pavlovian territory, but on a human level. It should be

clear by now that there is a correlation with all sorts of human behaviour — fears and phobias immediately spring to mind. Remember, a phobia is literally a fear of a fear. The first event, for example, going to the airport, triggers the second event — the conditioned fear responses (nervous tummy, sweating, sudden dread fear etc.) associated with flying.

When long term associations are laid down, the genetic machinery in the nucleus of the cell is activated to produce new proteins – the building blocks of most living tissue! The cells use these proteins to build extensions of themselves, forming new sites where connections can form. Networks of cells that are activated either frequently, or in emotionally charged situations, become permanent. In future, they will all react together. This is partly how memories are created, and special memory, like behaviour, can be modified.

Let's take as an example a memory of a particular image. The more the brain sees that image, the more likely it is that the brain will remember and recognise it. Repeated sightings of a particular person will reinforce patterns that activate other mental triggers. *'This woman is attractive, I would like to get to know her better'* or *'this man is a nuisance, I need to avoid him.'* The mere sight of a person triggers different emotional responses. These [predictable] emotional responses make it more likely that the image of the person will be retained in the long term memory. Memory patterns overlap, so a single stimulus can trigger a flood of different memories and emotions.

Obviously, damage to the brain can result in damage to memory. A much studied patient (known as HM) lost part of his hippocampus as a result of surgery designed to relieve severe epilepsy. The result was that he could remember everything that happened in his life before the surgery but was then unable to form new memories... and the result was that he remained stuck in the 1950s.

Emotional trauma, even shock, can also distort memory. For instance, everyone can remember where they were and what they were doing when the news of the World Trade Centre attacks broke on 11th September, but that is a rare instance. In a popular experiment, oft repeated for the entertainment of psychology students, volunteers are asked to view a five minute film, part of which involves a car accident. Even straight after the film, the student 'witnesses' disagree about even the most basic facts, particularly when questions relating to the events portrayed in the drama were phrased in such a way as to be deliberately misleading or designed to alter perception.

Memory is vital to establishing experience and experience in its turn is vital to predicting the future. Human civilisation would have ground to a halt were it not for our remarkable ability to predict future events based on the patterns of previous history — in other words on memory. When MRI scans of volunteers who underwent tests of memory and prediction were examined, the results astonished the scientists who carried them out. Asked to recall memories and then imagine future events, the areas of the brain that were most active were almost identical!

Predicting the future is not the main function of memory, but it seems certain that it *is* one of its primary functions. An further argument for caution when using the guided imagery most often associated with hypnosis — particularly if used with 'regression' hypnosis, which brings another surprise and possibly unstable guest to the party!

From the age of around four, children develop the ability to talk about their own past and the future at the same time. The ability to recognise patterns in past events (stored in the memory) is vital for the ability to predict what will happen in the future when similar sets of circumstances present themselves. This principle is present in every facet of life, from

relationships, to political events, to economics, to earthquake prediction, to family affairs, to... well, everything.

Even more interesting is that people who lose their memories also lose their ability to imagine their future. More important is that the areas of the brain that are used for memory and prediction are also used for imagination.

Armed with all this knowledge, we can now consider the possibility of tinkering, using suggestion and focused attention and even hypnosis. But tinkering with memory under hypnosis is exactly what you must not do! Would you get on a Boeing 747 and fly across the Atlantic if you knew that the pilot had only been trained to fly a glider? Of course you wouldn't. But the therapist is the person we all want to trust. No one ever thinks of asking about the real value of all those framed certificates hanging on the wall, we just go along with whatever this perceived expert suggests. And sometimes this can get us into very deep and troubled waters indeed.