

Differences in recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse

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When a child experiences a traumatic event, such as sexual abuse, it may not be until well into adulthood that they remember the incident. It is not known how adults are able to retrieve long-forgotten memories of abuse and there has been some controversy as to the authenticity of these reports.

The results of a new study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggest that there are important differences between people who gradually recover memories of abuse during suggestive therapy sessions and those who recover memories of abuse more spontaneously. Psychologist Elke Geraerts of the University of St. Andrews and her colleagues reveal that these people are either susceptible to recovering false memories or have a tendency to forget earlier recollections of the abuse.

The study volunteers included 120 women who were classified into four groups, based on their responses during a preliminary interview. The groups were: women who spontaneously recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse on their own, women who gradually recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse during suggestive therapy sessions, women who had never forgotten having been sexually abused and women who had never been sexually abused. All of these women participated in a false-memory test. They studied a list of related words (such as bed, rest, awake and tired). After a few minutes, they were shown a set of words (which included ones they had studied as well as new words) and had to indicate which words were on the original list.

The results showed that the women who recovered their memories of childhood sexual abuse during suggestive therapy were the most prone to false memories. For instance, women from this group were more likely to select sleep (in the example above) as having been on the original list, when in fact, it was not.

The women then participated in another memory test, which measured the participants' propensity to forget what they had just remembered. The results of this test revealed that the group who spontaneously recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse was the most likely to forget that they had successfully remembered certain words earlier.

The authors note that their findings argue against the generalization that all recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse are based on false recollections and "that such effects appear to be associated with suggestive therapy, not recovery of childhood sexual abuse in general." They conclude that this research has important implications for clinicians who treat patients reporting recovered memories of childhood sexual abuse. The authors suggest that these clinicians should consider the context of the recovered memories to most effectively treat their patients.

Source: Association for Psychological Science

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