

Trusting your memories of child abuse

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ACKNOWLEDGING THAT YOU WERE SEXUALLY ABUSED

It can take a long time for survivors to be able to say that they know for sure that they were sexually abused. Acknowledging that the abuse happened is an important step in healing from sexual abuse. Many survivors waver on this issue for years, even after they do acknowledge that they were abused. This is a natural reaction and is quite self-protective, after all it is extremely painful to acknowledge that a trusted adult betrayed and hurt you in this way. It inevitably raises the question "if I wasn't safe with him/her, how can I be safe anywhere?" That can be a overwhelming thought especially if you don't know how to feel safer in the world.

WORRYING THAT YOU CAN'T TRUST YOUR MEMORIES

Some survivors worry that maybe their mind is playing tricks on them, they imagined it, their memories aren't real, and perhaps they made it all up. They think maybe they've watched too much T.V., or read too many books on the subject, or they've listened to too many survivors tell their stories. This is an understandable worry, especially when there is a well-funded organization of people (whom their children said sexually abused them) who state that recovered memories are not accurate and are created by reading books, seeing therapists, and the like.

Not wanting to believe that you or others were sexually abused as children is understandable – it's never been easy for the human race to acknowledge all kinds of horrors committed by people, especially those committed in our own backyards. But, just because it's not easy, and just because we don't or can't believe it, doesn't mean it didn't happen.

DO PEOPLE FORGET TRAUMATIC EVENTS?

A common worry for survivors (again especially since the creation of the so-called False Memory Syndrome Foundation) is whether or not they can trust their recovered memories to be accurate. Recovered memories are memories that you didn't always have, they emerge later in life often after being triggered by some event.

We know with certainty that people forget traumatic events. Probably the best examples are of people's experiences of wars and car accidents. There are men who fought in wars who remember little of what happened, yet there is no question that they were there and that the war happened. Many people who survive serious car accidents do not remember the accident. People forget overwhelming traumatic events.

TRAUMATIC REACTIONS EXIST EVEN WITHOUT MEMORIES

Many individuals develop trauma related reactions, even when they have no memory of the incident. For example, many people who have experienced serious car accidents and who do not remember the accident have strong negative reactions to being in a car or driving by the scene of the accident (even when they do not remember where the accident took place.) Many war veterans who have little memory of the war will suddenly duck when they hear a loud sound without understanding why.

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER – ACCORDING TO THE DSM-III-R

These reactions are called post-traumatic reactions – also known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. People will often have post-traumatic reactions even when they have no memory of the trauma itself. These reactions include:

- Intense fear and terror
- Helplessness

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event, flashbacks, flooding
- Avoiding situations that are associated with the traumatic event
- Numbing, feelings of detachment or estrangement from others
- Hyper-vigilance
- Nightmares
- Panic attacks, anxiety attacks
- Insomnia
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Exaggerated startle response
- Physiological responses such as intense sweating, heart racing, trembling, shaking

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER SYSTEMS MAY DEVELOP AFTER MEMORIES ARE RECOVERED

It's possible for someone to have no or few memories of sexual abuse, and to not have post-traumatic symptoms or to have only mild symptoms. Sometimes, post-traumatic symptoms don't develop until memories come back. This is why it is possible to feel relatively unaffected by sexual abuse only to have post-traumatic reactions emerge later when sexual abuse memories start emerging. Most often, people can look back after remembering sexual abuse, and recognize ways in which they had been affected by the abuse without having been aware of it at the time.

MEMORIES THAT WERE FORGOTTEN CAN RETURN

To recap, we know that people forget traumatic events. We know that even without memories of the event, people have post-traumatic reactions even in relatively mild forms. We also know that memories once forgotten can return. Again, this has been documented with war veterans who initially forgot their war experiences and then remembered them later usually via spontaneous flashbacks.

ARE RECOVERED MEMORIES ACCURATE?

While all memory, especially declarative memory – the story or details of the event – is reconstructive (recreated over time) this does not diminish the truthfulness of the memory itself. Sometimes because recovered memories can be hazy, it can be hard to be sure of all the details. Sometimes, because of how memories are categorized by our minds, it is possible to remember two different incidents as having occurred at the same time. Again, just because this happens doesn't mean that what happened isn't true, only that the events may not have happened in that exact way.

A good analogy is people are in a bank when a bank robbery occurs. They are frightened by the robbers and their guns, and are afraid for their safety. After a robbery, it is not uncommon for witnesses to contradict each other about the colour of the robbers' clothing, even what race they were, and the total numbers of robbers present. But, no one is uncertain about the fact that there was a robbery and that they were scared for their lives.

While no survivor can be certain that every single detail of their memories of sexual abuse are precisely accurate, it is possible to be confident that the crime of sexual abuse occurred, to know who did it and to know approximately what age you were.

IMPLICIT MEMORIES ARE THE MOST ACCURATE

In the robbery example, witnesses were not only certain that they had witnessed a bank robbery, but were intensely aware of how they felt during the robbery, and/or after the robbery – delayed reactions are quite common after traumatic events. They felt afraid for their lives, their hearts raced, they felt panicked, and experienced other similar reactions.

Trauma related reactions — heart racing, sweating, fear, trembling, depersonalization – and other physical and emotional responses are known as implicit memories because they require no conscious memory of the event to be experienced. Remember the example of the car accident survivor who got upset when she

drove near the scene of the accident that she had no memory of? That is implicit memory. Implicit memories, unlike declarative memories, are much more reliable. For example, people are far more likely to be accurate about the fact that they smelled alcohol on their abuser's breath, and that they felt searing pain in or on some part of their body than they are about what the abuser was wearing, or what day it was.

Implicit memories include all physical and emotional reactions – body sensations, smells, sounds, tastes, touch – which do not require conscious memory of the event itself. Implicit memories also include skills that do not require conscious memory of having been learned in order to be performed.

An example of an implicit skill is someone who, due to brain damage, cannot remember learning to play the piano but can still play the piano. While I haven't seen this issue incorporated into the trauma research, I think implicit learning might, at least partly explain why some survivors repeat trauma related behaviors. By trauma related behaviors I mean engaging in behaviors that were learned during abuse, for example feeling like you are performing during sex, knowing how to perform certain sex acts prior to your first sexual experience, getting involved with people who are similar to your abusers and perhaps behaving toward them in ways that you learned during abuse, and prostitution. These behaviors are known to many survivors even without conscious memories of the abuse.

In sum, the research on implicit memories tells us that our memories of smell, taste, body sensations, emotions, and sounds – none of which require thought or conscious recall – are the most accurate memories. Some of these ways of remembering abuse have been called body memories and feel very real to people. When survivors have body memories, it can feel as though you are back there being abused again, feeling the physical and emotional pain vividly. That's how real they are.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT TRAUMATIC MEMORIES:

- People forget traumatic incidents.
- People have trauma related reactions without any memory of what happened.
- Traumatic memories can emerge a long time after the traumatic event took place, often so intensely it may feel as if it is happening in the present.
- Recovered memories of sexual abuse are valid even if all the details aren't precisely accurate.
- Implicit memories – those of smell, taste, sound, touch, body sensations and feelings – are the most accurate, much more accurate than declarative memories – memories about the concrete details.

YOU CAN TRUST YOUR MEMORIES

What all of this means is that you can trust your inner knowledge, feelings, body memories, and visual memories to tell you the truth. Perhaps not an accurate, detailed record of what happened, but still the truth.

While it's very painful to face sexual abuse, it can also be very liberating. Give yourself the opportunity to feel better about yourself by believing in your own memories. You deserve to believe in yourself.

RESOURCES:

[RECOVERED MEMORIES OF SEXUAL ABUSE: SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH & SCHOLARLY RESOURCES](#) By Jim Hopper, Ph.D.

[THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress](#) by Bessel A. van der Kolk, MD.

[DISASSOCIATION AND THE FRAGMENTARY NATURE OF TRAUMATIC MEMORIES: Overview and Exploratory Study](#) by Bessel A. van der Kolk & Rita Fisler

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