

# Controversies:

## CAN WE “REPRESS” MEMORIES OF SEXUAL ABUSE?

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The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a surge in allegations from adults claiming to have been sexually abused as a child. The peculiar thing about these accusations was that the alleged victims claimed they had forgotten all about the abuse until a certain point in their adult life when they “recovered” the memories of abuse. These cases have caused great controversy amongst psychologists with regards to the question of whether we can “repress” and later “recover” memories of sexual abuse. This article examines the evidence for and against the concept of repression.

**“How people remember—or forget—their most horrific experiences has become the central battleground of ‘the memory wars’.”**

– Dr. Richard J. McNally

### EVIDENCE FOR.

The concept of repression is one of the cornerstones of Freudian psychoanalysis, and is readily accepted by many psychotherapists (Loftus, 1993). The theory of repression holds that some traumatic experiences are so painful to remember that the person who has experienced them pushes the memory out of consciousness, and into some dark inaccessible corner of the mind. These memories may remain suppressed for many years, or even forever; however, in some cases they may also be recovered at some later point in life, often when the person goes looking for the source of his or her psychological problems in psychotherapy. The evidence for the concept of repression mainly consists of clinical case examples. For instance, psychologists have described two female patients who entered psychotherapy (Loftus, 1993), who, while under the supervision of their therapist, recovered memories of sexual abuse by their father. In a similar vein, Williams (1987) described a male patient who entered psychotherapy for depression, and during therapy recovered childhood memories of a servant molesting him. Indeed, respected scholars concluded that, from a clinical point of view, “the evidence for repression is overwhelming and obvious” (Erdelyi & Goldberg, 1979, p. 384).

### EVIDENCE AGAINST.

Memories described as “repressed” by proponents of the concept of repression, are alternatively described as “false” by opponents of the concept of repression. In 1995, Loftus and Pickrell demonstrated that it was relatively easy to implant the false memory of getting lost in a mall in about 25% of the people in their study, and many subsequent studies have confirmed this finding. Crucially, it has been shown that people can even come to falsely remember highly emotional events, such as nearly drowning (Heaps & Nash, 2001) or being attacked by a vicious animal (Porter, Yuille, & Lehman, 1999). In sum, although many people intuitively reject the notion of false memories, particularly of something as serious as physical or sexual abuse, researchers have validated the feasibility of implanting false memories of various sorts. From a practical point of view, in most legal cases involving “recovered” memories, the only evidence available is the alleged victim’s testimony. Furthermore, in almost all cases, the abuse was discovered only after intensive psychotherapy, with therapists using highly suggestive techniques such as hypnosis or age regression (see Ofshe & Watters, 1996).

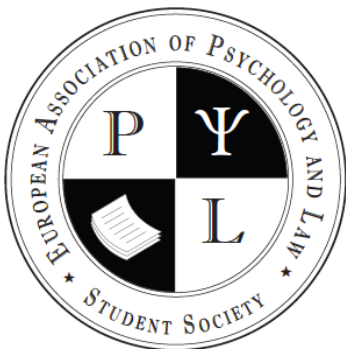
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### What it all means.

In sum, there is little evidence to support the idea that we are able to “repress” childhood memories of sexual abuse in the Freudian sense. Nevertheless, it is possible that victims overestimate the extent of their forgetting prior to the “recovery” experience, also known as the “forgot-it-all-along” effect (Schooler, 2001).

Thus, “repressed” memories of sexual abuse are likely to fall under one of two categories: false memories developed in suggestive psychotherapy, or memories that were never forgotten but suddenly interpreted in a different light. To prevent false memories of sexual abuse from occurring, psychotherapists should be discouraged from using techniques such as hypnosis and age regression with the purpose of “recovering” repressed memories, as such techniques are highly suggestive and lead to the risk of implanting false memories. At the same time, children and adolescents should be educated on the characteristics of sexual abuse, in order to encourage young victims of abuse to come forward at the time of the abuse, rather than years later.



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### THE QUOTE WALL

“The theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests.” *Sigmund Freud, founder of the psycho-analytic movement.*

“Many clinicians who work with trauma victims believe that this dissociation is a person's way of sheltering himself or herself from the pain of the memory. Many researchers argue, however, that there is little or no empirical support for such a theory.” *American Psychological Association, in a statement on memories of childhood abuse.*

“Revisiting memories from the distant past is much like rummaging through one's attic. We may be bemused by small forgotten items but we are rarely shocked by the major things we encounter. Occasionally, however, people report being truly stunned when they discover significant and disturbing recollections lurking in their memory.” *Dr. Jonathan W. Schooler, a distinguished researcher in the field who argued for a middle-ground perspective in the memory wars, proposing the concept of “discovered” (rather than “recovered”) memories.*

“There is one last tragic risk of suggestive probing and uncritical acceptance of all allegations made by clients, no matter how dubious. These activities are bound to lead to an increased likelihood that society in general will disbelieve the genuine cases of childhood sexual abuse that truly deserve our sustained attention.” *Dr. Elizabeth Loftus (1992), one of the leading researchers in the field of eyewitness memory and the first to show that false memories can be implanted relatively easily.*

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