

Chapter 4

STUMBLING DOWN MEMORY LANE

*"Memory, the priestess,
kills the present
and offers its heart to the shrine of the dead past."*

Sir Rabindranath Tagore, Nobel Laureate, 1928

After taping an interview with Focus On The Family in Colorado Springs, I sat down in a side office with "Cindy" and "Tom," a young married couple. Cindy heard that I was coming to do the show, and requested that we get together. She began her story;

"She's very good' was the advice I got from several trusted friends. 'She has helped a lot of Christians deal with the past.' Dr. Lea (not her real name) sounded professional, she was both a licensed psychologist and she had a graduate degree in theology. Our first meeting went well, and Dr. Lea gave us several books to read, including The Bondage Breaker by Neil Anderson, and Uncovering the Mystery of MPD by James Friesen. It all happened so fast. The next thing I knew I was in therapy several times a week. Dr. Lea hypnotized me, prayed over me, and began to demand to know who the spirits and the "alters" were inside of me. She empowered my emotions, and gave them names. Soon she didn't even call me Cindy. Instead she used the names of the alters she was finding."

Tom interrupts, *"As a Christian I wasn't completely comfortable with what was happening. It seemed biblical, I mean Dr. Lea and her helpers prayed, and they had a Bible verse for everything. Cindy was gone from home more and more, and when she was at home she remained isolated. I was having to shoulder more of her responsibilities and the kids were wondering what was happening to Mom. I didn't understand what was happening, and I was becoming concerned for Cindy."*

Cindy continues: *"I would go to see Dr. Lea, and she would hypnotize me. I don't believe in hypnosis, but she called it 'prayer visualization', 'relaxation', 'imagery', so I trusted her. But they were just different names for giving over control of my will to her. Every time she prayed, it just seemed so evil. I was filled with self hate, I would go home and cut myself with a razor blade. Every time she prayed for deliverance, I ended up with more alter personalities. I became worse, not better. I couldn't believe it when Dr. Lea told me to leave my husband, and move in with another patient of hers, an MPD patient. Dr. Lea even had some Bible verse to support the idea. Why? Why should I leave? Tom is a Christian, and he loves me. Dr. Lea told me that he was interfering with my therapy."*

Tom: *"It's true, I was interfering. I was starting to ask questions. I have a Bible degree as well. I met with Dr. Lea and I asked her questions that she couldn't answer from the Bible. Ultimately she told me that I would just have to trust her. That's when she started telling Cindy to leave me."*

Cindy: *"I was mixed up. Dr. Lea was very powerful. She could quote so many Scripture verses. She kept telling me that I was demon possessed. I didn't feel demon possessed. I couldn't believe I was MPD, but she was insistent that I was. I had a dear Christian friend who was questioning the memories which I was reporting. She wanted to get together for lunch to talk about them. When I asked Dr. Lea if I should meet with my friend, she became enraged. 'Who is it?' she asked. 'Who is questioning me?' She took it personally. She was so enraged that I didn't dare go out with my friend. Dr. Lea told me that I couldn't be friends with anyone who questioned my memories, or her diagnosis of MPD."*

Tom: *"By then I was having some serious doubts about Dr. Lea, and the whole idea of Christians having demons and alternate personalities inside of them. I could see Cindy was becoming a prisoner of therapy. She had gone to therapy to get better, but instead she was*

getting worse. I met with one of my pastors, against Dr. Lea's advice. The pastor didn't believe that Cindy's alters were real and that was helpful to me. He told me to encourage Cindy to take back her life from the psychologist, to regain control of herself."

Cindy: "Therapy was getting more bizarre. Dr. Lea and her helpers would call up 'alters' and then attempt to lead them to Christ. They would pray over me for hours, sometimes in tongues. The people who are into memory recovery, into MPD, into Satanic Ritual Abuse, they really believe in what they are doing. They are persistent, and dedicated to their cause."

Tom: "I do believe that Dr. Lea was well meaning. Even so, she was wrong. The therapists and pastors who are into repressed memories of abuse are hurting people, and destroying families. We didn't let our church family get as close to the situation as I now know we should have. They were supportive with casseroles and flowers. They really didn't know what was happening to Cindy."

Cindy: "Yes, our church was there for us, but only so much. We have taken some time away from the church, for now. We are just stepping back and trying to figure out what is real, what is in the Bible, and what isn't."

Tom: "This has really shaken my faith to its roots. Right now all that I have left is my faith in Jesus; church programs and religion seem so shallow and so man-made. This has forced me to go deeper, to rely only upon God."

STEPS FOR REMEMBERING

Just what is this thing we call "remembering?" There's a lot of interesting notions out there. "I've heard the brain is like a tape recorder, recording every event in a person's life." "Remembering is like rewinding a videotape. All you have to do is figure out how to rewind the brain to the right spot." "Memory is like a camera, it can capture a scene and reproduce it years later, 'picture-perfect.'" These notions about memory are quite popular. There's only one problem, they're not true.

There's a great deal of misinformation that people have about memory. That fact, in itself, is not much of a problem. I don't know much about how a automobile engine works, but I can still get in my car, turn the key and off I go. Likewise, all of us remember and forget without having to understand how the brain manages these functions. But in issues about memory, what you don't know can hurt you. Research shows a person's beliefs about memory have a direct impact on the accuracy of their memories - for good or bad.¹

Let me explain. If a person understands that memory is susceptible to distorting influences, they are actually better prepared to resist influences that corrupt their memories. But a person who has misbeliefs about memory (i.e., memory is "picture perfect," isn't subject to suggestion or reconstruction) is actually left more vulnerable to the very influences they naively assume don't exist. Here's an example. Suppose you're part of an experiment in which I'm going to hypnotise you. But before I do so, I tell you that hypnosis will make it harder for you to resist suggestions I make. Ironically, my telling you this will actually better prepare you against my influence. But what if I told you that the hypnotic technique I was going to use was a "truth enhancer" which improves your memory recall? If you believe what I've told you, research shows that you are far more likely to incorporate suggestions and fictional data into your "memories" and that your confidence in these inaccurate memories will actually increase. By telling you a lie that has put you "at ease," I've actually diminished your ability guard against suggestions I'll be giving you.

So let's look at some of the basics of remembering and forgetting. But fair warning. This chapter is one of the more "academically challenging" you'll read in this book. But it's also one of the most important. You may have to re-read a paragraph or two, but take the time to learn what's being shared. The better you're able to understand the scientific basis for how we remember and forget, the better you'll be able to defend yourself against misleading claims that

are promoted in regressionism.

The first step for remembering is called **encoding**. You're standing at the grocery checkout. You're putting your items on the counter, wondering where you put the checkbook, realizing two of your coupons are expired and another one is for the 24 ounce size of mouthwash, not the 16 ounce you have in your hand. You glance over to the magazine rack and notice headlines announcing Elvis has been discovered living in Wyoming, working at a meat-packing plant, and a live baby was found in the stomach of an alligator. In the middle of all this, your 14 year old tells you that Thursday night is the church skating party and he needs a ride and ten dollars. You answer, "Uh huh," while you watch the cashier put the milk in a bag, crushing a dozen eggs that got there first. Thursday night comes and junior strides into the living room, dressed in sheik grunge fashion, announcing he's ready to go. And you say "Go where?" With much disgust he proclaims, "I can't believe you forgot!"

Welcome to the world of "failure to encode." You see you really didn't forget, you actually didn't remember to begin with. To remember an event it has to get registered in our brain, and there are plenty of things that never get there. Most of what we remember is referred to as **explicit memory** - we are consciously aware of information that is being stored in our memory. Research also shows that we can remember information that is outside of our immediate awareness as well, something referred to as **implicit memory**. Either way, there is a short period of time that we need to transfer new information into long-term memory storage. The fact is there are tremendous volumes of information that are never registered into memory. Our ability to selectively forget some things and focus on others is actually an important survival skill. Imagine if you couldn't focus on any one thing and remembered everything from every moment of your life - what you eaten at every meal since birth, everything that has ever been said to you, every color and texture of items in every room or shopping mall you've ever been in. This would quickly drive you into stimulus overload. The notion that the brain stores every piece of sensory awareness throughout a lifetime is an old Freudian myth - it has no basis in scientific reality.

phone number. When you get together with your old high school friend, both of you repeat the old stories and have a good laugh. As part of that experience you're actually refreshing your long term memory, allowing you to recall things you've forgotten. The basic rule of thumb: the more you repeat a memory, the stronger it becomes. Without mental or verbal repetition, a memory is subject to normal processes of forgetting.

Not Quite Picture Perfect

Ulric Neisser, a psychologist at Emory University, conducted an interesting experiment the day after the space shuttle exploded in 1986.² Neisser asked 106 students to write down how, when and where they learned about the Challenger tragedy. Three years later Neisser tracked down nearly half of the original group of students. He had them again recount how they learned about the tragedy. Neisser then compared what they wrote the first time with the account written three years later. For many of the students their memories were seriously flawed or completely wrong, yet most of them were quite certain that their three year recall was quite accurate. None of the students were entirely correct and one third were "*wildly inaccurate*." Yet the "*wildly inaccurate students*" expressed as much certainty about the accuracy of their memories as those who were more correct.

We often assume that our ability to remember is "picture perfect." A popular view of memory is that it involves a process of **recollection**, that the brain calls up a memory and "poof!" it appears perfectly intact. We just have to go to the right file and pull out a perfect recollection of an event. This simply isn't the case. Memory is actually a process of **reconstruction**, meaning the brain uses fragments of a memory that are housed in different parts of the brain and

reassembles them, producing a whole "memory." What's important to understand about reconstruction is that a person's mood, mental stability, age, beliefs, and events in the current environment can seriously alter how a memory is reconstructed. A specific influence is called **retrospective bias**, which occurs when we think back over past events and unknowingly change our memories with a positive "spin." We tend to focus on details that make us look particularly good and people who we don't like end up looking bad. In addition, **post-event information** (things that happen later) often distort or contaminate our recollection of the original event. Elizabeth Loftus, an expert on memory research, explains:

*"Truth and reality, when seen through the filter of our memories, are not objective facts but subjective, interpretive realities. We interpret the past, correcting ourselves, adding bits and pieces, deleting uncomplimentary or disturbing recollections, sweeping, dusting, tidying things up. Thus our representation of the past takes on a living, shifting reality; it is not fixed and immutable, not a place way back there that is preserved in stone, but a living thing that changes shape, expands, shrinks, and expands again, an amoebalike creature with powers to make us laugh, and cry, and clench our fists. Enormous powers - powers even to make us believe in something that never happened."*³

Memory is also affected by **source amnesia**, a process scientists refer to when a person forgets where they saw an event (a movie, story, fantasy, or actual event) but is able to recall the scene years later. A therapist shared with me a compelling story regarding a client. One of his first memories was as a toddler. He had managed to get his head stuck under a kitchen cabinet, which was raised up off the floor on four small legs. To make matters worse, as he lay helpless his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the space and there, in the corner, he could see a coiled snake. He screamed in terror until his older sister and mother were able to free him. All his life he subsequently had a deep fear of snakes, which is certainly understandable. The only problem is, this event never happened to him. Several years ago, while this man recounted his memory with his family, his mother and sister burst out laughing. They confirmed the event was real, but it had been the older sister who experienced this trauma, not him! His confident memory was actually the product of a boy's vivid imagination. He could imagine what it was like for his sister to have her face stuck in front of a snake. Over the years, the source of the memory disappeared but the vivid fantasy remained.

The problem is that our mind is less than perfect and each time an event is remembered, we reshape it bit by bit. Because of reconstruction, retrospective bias, post-event distortion and source amnesia our memories are inaccurate to varying degrees, even though our feelings and pride tell us otherwise.

FORGETTING

"Where did I put my keys?" "What was that person's name?" "Did I turn the stove off this morning?" Everybody forgets! And we do so on a daily, moment to moment basis. So here's a simple question - "Why do we forget things?" The answer is a bit more complicated. Let's look at the standard theories on forgetting:

Decay is the oldest theory of memory loss. It's thought that memory traces in the brain gradually decay over time, like a fallen tree in a forest that is eroded by weather and natural processes. Normal metabolic processes in the body wear down a memory until it is diminished or fades completely away.

Interference theory suggests that a memory is neither lost or damaged, an event is simply misplaced among a number of other memories that interfere with being able to recall the event later on. In this process there is **retroactive inhibition** - in which new events interrupt recall of old ones. A similar influence is **proactive inhibition** - in which the process is reversed, old events interfere with newer memories.

Cue alteration is the theory that we remember events by having “cues” - sights, sounds, smells, which allow the mind to retrieve a memory. We forget because cues are altered with the passage of time (the old neighborhood is gradually rebuilt, our childhood friends look different as we grow older).

Research reveals that forgetting involves a combination of all three theories. What research does not support is the idea that everything we’ve ever experienced or learned is tucked perfectly away somewhere in our brain (as Freud believed). Imagine the following scenario - you’re cleaning out a box in the garage and come across one of your old algebra books. You recall that there were a series of algebra theorems you memorized back in high school. But since that time a number of years have passed (decay), you’ve learned lots of other stuff (elements of interference) and you’ve moved to a new town and thrown away your other textbooks (cue alteration). But with this rediscovered book, you can suddenly recall a couple of the theorems that you haven’t thought of for years and you also remember what a great math student you were. The book is cueing you back to old learning and you’re reviving some decaying memory traces, which includes reconstructing past events. Then you open the book and look over some of the theorems. Whoops, you got a couple of them sorta right, and two were completely off. You also pull out an old report card that shows B’s and C’s in math (retrospective bias). It was your friend Howard that was the math whiz, not you (source amnesia).

So here’s some basic rules to remember about forgetting. Rule #1 - everyone forgets. Good, bad, indifferent, we all experience memory loss. Rule #2 - forgetting increases with the passage of time. The greater the interval between an event and the recalling of that event, the greater the forgetting that occurs. Rule #3 - certainty can often bear little relation to accuracy. Research shows that people can be just as confident about something that is inaccurate as they are about something accurate.

Another thing to keep in mind - forgetting and repressing are two completely different concepts. Forgetting is a demonstrated, scientific fact that occurs according to the principles we’ve just discussed. Meanwhile, repression is a Freudian theory that maintains the mind can instantly block out awareness of a traumatic event and recall it decades later, in complete defiance of scientific principles of remembering and forgetting.

Special Cases of Forgetting

Is it possible to forget a traumatic event? In theory yes, but it’s not very likely. Research shows that children and adults remember emotional and traumatic events best, holding on to the **gist** of an event even if the details get fuzzy. Notice that even though Neisser’s students distorted the details of the Challenger explosion they still didn’t forget that the tragedy occurred.

While normal forgetting is something we all experience, there are exotic forms that occur as well. These include **motivated forgetting**, **anterograde and retrograde amnesia**, and **fugue states**.

Motivated forgetting: Some research suggests a person can take anxious or unacceptable thoughts and push them outside of conscious awareness. Sometimes by doing this long enough the thought is eventually lost, although it can be readily retriggered in the future. Now, it’s tempting to call this repression, but motivated forgetting involves a conscious act which takes place over a period of time and is not a very “fool-proof” method. Repression theory asserts that the blocking of a traumatic event occurs instantaneously, is involuntary and keeps a tight seal for decades or centuries. These are important distinctions.

Anterograde and Retrograde Amnesia: Head trauma is known to create two kinds of forgetting. Anterograde involves the loss of memory for events after trauma to the brain. Retrograde amnesia involves loss of memory for events that occurred before an injury to the brain. Both of these types of amnesia involve physical interruptions of the brain’s functions. The head trauma is an obvious event and, unlike repression, the person is acutely aware of their lost memories.

Fugue State: “Alex” is found sitting in a park in downtown Seattle. The problem is that Alex doesn't know his name, who he is or where he's from. His amnesia is extensive and quite upsetting for him. Two days later, law enforcement was able to trace him to his family in Portland. After he arrives back home, Alex was gradually able to recover his memories of the previous eight days. What had been a financially rough year culminated into a disaster when Alex received unexpected news of his brother's death. He had been close to George and couldn't handle the shock. “Something snapped inside, and I, well I just started walking.” In a confused state, he hitchhiked his way to nowhere in particular, and finally ended up in Seattle, where authorities found him.

Alex experienced a rare and controversial type of forgetting, called a **Fugue state** (a type of Dissociative Amnesia). This is the phenomenon that is most commonly confused with Freud's notion of repression. It involves amnesia for important traumatic events which are too extensive to be explained by normal forgetting. In Fugue state, it is theorized that an over-whelming event is somehow able to disrupt the normal processes involved in memory encoding. This is similar to over-loading the brain's circuitry, resulting in large portions of memories being disrupted and fragmented. Notice that Fugue state is a very unsettling and broad experience. The person is aware that they have a period of time that they can't remember, and the forgetting constitutes large portions of information, including their name, where they live, etc.

In sharp contrast, repression theory asserts that a person can push a traumatic event out of awareness and not have the slightest notion that they've done so. A teenager could have murdered a baby, drank its blood, danced around in black robes, and five minutes later have absolutely no recollection of anything having occurred. She then goes to bed, gets up two hours later and aces her high school algebra test that morning. Two nights later she does the same routine, and on it goes, countless traumatic events and she never suspects anything is wrong. Decades later, after graduating Magna Cum Laude from Harvard, she decides to venture into regression therapy. At the coaxing of the regressionist, these traumas are “recovered” and able to be recounted perfectly. This is a radical departure from what is scientifically understood about traumatic amnesias. There simply is no evidence that this kind of highly selective, non-disruptive amnesia occurs. In fact scientific research tells us the opposite. The more traumatic an event the more we will remember it, as in instances of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (which we'll discuss in a moment).

COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT MEMORY

So now we've got a basic understanding of what's involved in memory. normal forgetting and exceptional cases of forgetting. Let's get a little more specific and take a look at some commonly asked questions.

***“I've read that traumatic memories are processed differently.
So normal principles of memory don't apply.”***

Sandra, the regressionist we met in Chapter Two, believes people's most traumatic memories are hidden in clusters of cells somewhere in their body. *“It's almost like some part of them is locked in a time warp. Maybe it's just a set of cells in one part of the body, but it keeps the whole body from moving forward.”* Brent, another regressionist, explains this process. *“A child's fragile psyche can be overwhelmed in moments of intense trauma, particularly those involving people they trust.”*⁴ When this happens, the body routes the sights, smells and sounds of the experience away from the brain and locks them in a part of the nervous system associated with the trauma. *“So the person as an adult will still have a lump in their throat, and that lump actually contains the memory.”* He believes that “body memories” remain hidden for decades until the subconscious mind determines the conscious mind is ready to deal with them. At that point, the memories create pain in the area of the body where they are stored. A regressionist is

able to recognize these "signals" and can then work on releasing the "memories" and alleviating the pain. This is done through the use of body massage, which frees up the memories locked in the body cells and then allows them to float back up to the brain where they can be remembered. Another popular method is the use of natural crystals, which are rubbed on the afflicted area of the body. Regressionists believe the crystals help "unblock" the cells, allowing the memories to come forward. Michael accurately admits that there is not any scientific evidence to back up his theories. But, *"For me is not to judge . . . If a person believes enough that they have been abused, I need to work with that reality."*

Regressionists will often argue that the normal rules of memory that we've discussed don't apply to them or their clients. They believe traumatic events are recorded by the victim in radically different processes that overrule normal remembering and forgetting. The "traumatic memory theories" go by a number of names, including "body memories," "dissociative principles" and "implicit memory systems." But when it comes down to it, these different titles are simply a renaming of repression beliefs. Which leads us back to the problem with these theories. At best, trauma models of memory are only theories - actual scientific research doesn't bear them out to be valid. To the contrary, research shows that highly emotional events are actually more likely to be retained in memory, not less. Recall the studies we discussed at the end of the last chapter. When we know that a traumatic event has occurred and we interview victims after-the-fact, we find that normal processes of memory and forgetting are occurring. Keep in mind that theories, no matter how well-worded and factual sounding, are still theories. "Traumatic memory processing" is an artificial distinction and it's up to regression believers to prove their theoretical models. But to date they simply haven't done so.

"I've heard that people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder forget lots of things that come back to them years later in 'flashbacks'."

"Larry" is a 46 year old father of two. He's single now after his second marriage fell apart three years ago. He lives alone in a small apartment and works at a job that pays the bills but little else. His drinking has been out-of-control for years. But it's the only thing that keeps the memories at bay. *"These memories, they come and go as they please, like unwelcome guests, strolling in with blood on their feet."* The ones during the night are the worst. *"It always the same, I'm nineteen again, the sweat is rolling down my face, there's the bugs, and the killing."* Vietnam. Back in Iowa he didn't know or care about Vietnam. But half way around the world he found himself living and breathing it as a young man. *"Sometimes I hears the explosion, but not always. But the flash of light, the blood on my face and hands, the screaming, holding Mike's leg and trying to find the rest of him, that's always the same, that part never changes."* With an exhausted look he continues, *"I've must have gone through this scene 10,000 times. Every time I yell out a warning to Mike, and every time, 10,000 times, the ending is the same."*

Highly traumatic events can sometimes lead to a condition known as **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** (PTSD). This is a condition in which a person who has experienced or witnessed a violent event will find themselves re-experiencing the trauma through intrusive memories (called **flashbacks**) or dreams. Sometimes a smell, a sound, something said, will bring the trauma rushing in again, so the person will make attempts to avoid anything that might remind him of, or "cue", a memory. He usually experiences trouble sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating, and **hypervigilance** (being constantly alert to any potential danger).

Notice that a person suffering from PTSD doesn't forget his trauma. Dr. Paul Ingmundson is a psychologist at Veterans Hospital in San Antonio, Texas. For 12 years he has worked as a specialist with war veterans who are recovering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. *"In all my years of working with PTSD, the thing I've noticed is that my patients have always remembered their war traumas. It's never been like what the regressionists talk about, where somebody suddenly remembers something 20 years later. Really, it's the opposite. These*

*guys just can't forget what happened, though they wish they could."*⁵

Many regressionists argue that their clients are experiencing PTSD symptoms and then use hypnotic techniques to do "archeological digging." For example, a regressionist points to various symptoms in a client's life as indications of PTSD that are related to Space Alien abduction, even though the client doesn't remember any space aliens. Then in hypnosis, the client develops hypnotic fantasies of space aliens that confirm the original diagnosis of PTSD. This is a dangerous form of backwards reasoning, one that I regularly applied with my clients concerning sexual abuse.

Now stop for a moment and think. This brings up an important point of logic and sequencing. Event "A" may lead to result "X." But it doesn't necessarily work the other way around. There's a person who is skiing and accidentally breaks his leg ("A" leads to "X"). But not every broken leg is because of a skiing accident ("X" can be caused by lots of possibilities). A person's sexual abuse can lead to symptoms of PTSD, but symptoms of PTSD are not always because of sexual abuse. Symptoms mistaken to be PTSD can actually be caused by certain mental and personality disorders (discussed in Chapter Ten). In science we refer to this as a failure to provide an appropriate **differential diagnosis**, symptoms can point to a number of possible disorders that have to be ruled out. True PTSD involves recurrent and intrusive memories since the time the event occurred until the present. So here's the rule to remember: the diagnosis of PTSD requires a free-standing memory of a traumatic event, not the other way around.

"What about people who have retrieved memories from infancy or in their mother's womb?"

"Gale" is a thirty-eight-year-old Christian who believes she is the victim of sexual and satanic abuse by her father and mother. In our conversations she revealed how regression therapy helped her to recall the brutal assaults Dad and Mom had inflicted on her in infancy. In fact, she was even able to go back into her mother's womb and remember hateful words which her parents spoke about her. Ultimately, she was able to travel back in time to before she was born, where she had conversations with "God" and could clearly see "God" holding her and preparing her to be born into this life. Gale expressed confidence in her fantasies because she had prayed to the "Holy Spirit" and he revealed these to her, *"He never would have misled me."* Based on her fantasies, Gale has completely cut off any contact with her family. Living alone, left without any family, Gale has only the support and friendship of others in her regression group.

Interestingly, 54% of therapists believe that they can retrieve memories from infancy⁶ and a recent national survey has revealed shocking results - 68% of repressed memory claims are said to have occurred prior to the age of four.⁷ Are Gale and other regression believers right? Are there thousands of infant and childhood memories somewhere within you, perfectly preserved in suspended animation? Can we go back even further, to the Fallopian tube, prior to our being conceived?

The notion that we can recover memories from infancy or the womb is exotic and holds great appeal for many. But the fact of the matter is there is no scientific basis for these beliefs. We need physical brain maturity in order to transfer information from short term memory storage over to long term memory. Just as the development of the human body requires about one and a half decades to complete, so also the human brain continues its development for a few years after birth. The hippocampus, which is involved in the transfer of short term memory to long term storage, is still developing in infancy. Myelination is a protective sheath which covers the brain cell axons. Without it, a large portion of the electrical impulses that are transferred between brain cells are lost. The Myelination process is not complete for the first year of life. Bottom line, studies of childhood memory consistently show that people's earliest, reliable memories do

not date back before the age of about 4 years of age.⁸

These aspects of brain development may sound academic, but the implications are practical. Gale believes that she has recovered memories of trauma from her infancy, including digital rape by her mother. But these "memories" introduce several problems. As an infant Gale would have to distinguish between someone changing her diaper, taking her temperature rectally, cleaning and washing her, a difficult bowel movement, and digital rape. After such advanced sensory awareness, she would then need to transfer this short term memory into long term storage. But she won't have a developed hippocampus, completed myelination process, or language to encode the event for the next couple of years. Next, she would need to go for several decades without rehearsing the memory and then bring it up pristine and perfect at the prompting of her regressionist, in defiance of all that we know about forgetting. Her fantasies of being with God before her conception have no demonstrated basis in reality, but Gale's claims of abuse and previous life were accepted as truth by well-meaning therapists and Christians in her hometown.

***"What about people who can't remember periods of time during their childhood?
Isn't that a sign that something is wrong?"***

And then there's all the talk about **Memory Gaps**. A common misconception I was taught is the idea that memory gaps in a person's childhood indicates that something was wrong during that missing time period. This is one of the more popular "indicators" that there are repressed memories lurking in a person's unconscious, one that I regularly used to convince clients something was hidden inside them. In my zeal I had ignored my training as a psychologist. You see, in psychology we call these "gaps" the **infantile amnesiac barrier**. It is very common and normal for a person to have memory gaps from their childhood, even up to age 10 or 12. These gaps are due to physical and developmental issues which impede memory retention and lead to memory loss, which we discussed earlier. John Kihlstrom, a cognitive psychologist and professor at Yale University explains, *"Our memories of our childhood are impoverished, not by trauma, but by the simple facts of cognitive development. Kids just don't have the equipment to remember."*⁹ Common sense also gives us some clues. For each of us, the events of our childhood represent our oldest memories. In comparison to last summer's vacation, what you did in first grade is subject to much more memory loss. It only makes sense that our oldest memories are the least complete and most inaccurate.

"You can't make up an entirely fictional event."

Many of the regressionists I've talked to argue that it's one thing to admit that memory loss and retrospective bias can distort details of a traumatic event, but it's quite another matter to argue that an entirely fictional event can be created in a client's mind. "I mean, a client recovers the memory of her rape that occurred 30 years ago. Maybe she gets the colors of the curtains wrong, but she certainly can't make the whole thing up, the core of the memory is what's important, not the details."

That's a good point and certainly what I believed when I was promoting regression therapy. But following this line of reasoning, we must assume that all, each and every one, of the recovered memories of space alien abductions, past lives, womb traumas, sexual abuses and ritual tortures are real because the "mind can't make up such things." This much we know for certain, of the thousands of recovered "memories", we can safely conclude that a large portion of hypnotic fantasies do not have a basis in reality, something that even the most hard-core promoter of regression will reluctantly admit.

The fact is, everyone's mind is very capable of creating detailed and very emotional events that are absolutely fictional. It's called dreaming. Remember that nightmare you had several years ago? It was so vivid and terrifying. You woke up with a start, and found yourself

staring into the darkness, sweating, breathing heavy. For a moment it seemed so real, but now, thankfully you've awoken and the dream is passing. Or how about during the day, you find yourself sitting at your desk, bored. Your mind turns to adventure, exotic places, being a rock musician, whatever. For a few minutes you get to drift away to some other time and place and have some fun. Then it's back to mundane reality at hand.

Our imagination is a powerful gift. With it we can dream beautiful dreams and imagine wonderful possibilities. But this same gift can be turned towards negative purposes, imagining dark and fearful events, dwelling on imagined hurts. Our imagination is able to create vivid, detailed scenes that produce within us joy, anger, tears, or sexual arousal. You name it, we can imagine it and our thoughts have very real consequences in our lives. One of the things that happens when imagination goes awry is called **delusions**. People can come to believe hurtful, terrifying fantasies as real, and in the process harm themselves and others.

In one study,¹⁰ a researcher implanted the idea of reincarnation in numerous subjects. He scripted out several "past life" scenarios and then made subtle suggestions to subjects while they were under hypnosis. They were able to experience these scripts as real and produce intricate details of their "past lives." Elizabeth Loftus, one of the world leading experts on memory,¹¹ successfully implanted the idea in subjects that they had been lost in a shopping mall as a child. She first checked with the subjects' families to be sure the subjects hadn't really had this experience in childhood. She then enlisted family members' help. They were to confirm the implanted idea if the subject asked them about it. Then Loftus, without the aid of hypnosis, suggested that the subjects had been lost in the mall as children. At first the subjects were uncertain. But as expected, after a brief passage of time the subjects not only accepted the implanted idea as real, but even added fine detail and emotional affect when later describing being lost in the mall.

Then there's the case of the Ingram family. Paul Ingram was arrested for Satanic Ritual Abuse in 1988, based upon the recovered fantasies of his two daughters. They had been prayed over by a Christian "prophet" who had diagnosed them as having been abused even though they had no memory of having been so. Erika accused first, her sister later, at her prompting. Initially Ingram remembered nothing but he was convinced that his daughters, both strong Christians, could never lie. Later, after intense police interrogation, and the "counsel" of his pastor / counselor (who told him he was demonized) Paul began to enter into trance-states of mind and produced fantasies of how he had ritually and sexually abused his children. He sincerely believed (coached by the pastor and police) that if he confessed and pled guilty, then he would be released from the demonic power, be able to recall the crimes himself, and his daughters would feel safe and begin their own recovery.

In the middle of these proceedings Richard Ofshe, a University of California (Berkeley) sociologist, was brought in by the *prosecution* to further the case against Ingram.¹² From the outset, Ofshe had his doubts about the veracity of these recovered fantasies. Ofshe decided to test Ingram's suggestibility, since suggestion and accusation over long periods of interrogation was the primary factor in eliciting a confession from him. Ofshe made up a story about Ingram forcing two of his children to have sex together. Ofshe checked with the children involved, to be sure that the event never happened. Ofshe then confronted Ingram with the fictional story and asked him to write a description of how it happened. Ingram returned to his cell, prayed and hours later produced a detailed written account of the events Ofshe implanted. When Ofshe confronted Ingram with the truth, Ingram did not believe him, insisting that Ofshe was wrong and the event really occurred!

It was too late for Ingram. Though the stories didn't match those of his daughters very closely and there was no corroborating evidence, he pled guilty and, without a trial, was sentenced to 20 years to life. It was only after he was transferred to the state prison, where he was away from the toxic influence of his interrogators and his pastor/counselor, that Ingram

began to think critically and realized he had made it all up. But there is hope, a national effort is underway to have Paul Ingram tried in a court of law, a basic human right that he was denied.

On a lighter note, Peter J. Reveen, a stage hypnotist, recounts several events that have occurred while performing his hypnotism show:

"In suggesting to a stage full of volunteers that they are going to relive "past lives," I carefully avoid giving the impression that I have any doubts about the reality of reincarnation, for then a sizable number of volunteers would pick up on my disbelief, and fail to fantasize at all . . . Consequently, night after night, dozens of volunteers give detailed, entertaining descriptions of imagined past lives, that are partly dormant memories from their present lives, partly elaborations of historical books and movies... and pure fantasy. . .In one show two men at the same time claimed to be King Henry VIII of England. Clearly, for either one to be recalling a genuine former incarnation, the other must have been fantasizing. Another time two subjects, a man and a woman, both claimed to be Christopher Columbus. And once, in 1985, I even had a subject "regress" to a past life in which he was Prince Charles, husband of Diana and son of Queen Elizabeth II (who is still alive)."

"There are lots of recovered memories that people get without the help of a therapist. Aren't these more valid?"

This is one of the more common arguments that I'll hear from regression believers. Interestingly, the majority of space alien abductees have remembered their abductions away from therapy. So the question is, doesn't that make them valid? Researchers have noted that space alien abductees have something in common - an active belief in space aliens *prior* to recovering memories of space aliens.¹⁴ It is only subsequent to this belief that they are able to experience their fantasies of abduction and experimentation by space aliens. This was consistent with my experience as well - typically "spontaneous memory recovery" was only occurring after a client had been exposed to regression teachings and started to believe in them. In Chapter Eight we'll discuss the importance of a pre-existing belief system, media influences and how someone can experience vivid fantasies in the form of hypnagogic and hypnopompic hallucinations. Another key point to understand is that people are capable of hypnotizing themselves, referred to as **self-induced trance**. This is particularly true for **Fantasy Prone Personalities** and **Grade Five Syndrome** (discussed in Chapter Ten) in which a person is highly suggestible and can experience spontaneous fantasies that feel "more real than real." Bottom line is that fantasies experienced in self-induced trance are no more valid than those guided by therapists.

POINTS TO REMEMBER

□ Memory is a process of **reconstruction**, not recollection. **Retrospective bias**, **post-event information** and **source amnesia** can distort our reconstruction of a historical event.

□ There are several basic steps in recording an event into memory. First, we need physical brain maturity, secondly, we have to encode an event and finally, we have to occasionally repeat a memory in order for it to be strengthened.

□ In memory research there are some basic rules to keep in mind. Rule #1 - everyone forgets things. Rule #2 - forgetting increases with the passage of time. Rule #3 - certitude is not always related to accuracy. Rule #4 - We tend to remember emotional and traumatic events best, holding on to the **gist** of an emotional event, while the details become distorted. Theories for normal forgetting include **memory decay**, **cue alteration** and **source amnesia**. Less common sources include **motivated forgetting**, **anterograde** and **retrograde amnesia**, and **fugue state** . (which is often confused with repression).

- Highly traumatic events can sometimes lead to a condition known as **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** (PTSD) in which a person is recurrently plagued with memories of her trauma (without a period of forgetting). In diagnosing PTSD, it is essential that there is a free-standing memory of trauma.
- It is normal for a person to have memory gaps (called the **infantile amnesiac barrier**) in their childhood, even up to age 10 or 12. Memory gaps are *not* an indication that anything traumatic has occurred in one's childhood.
- Everyone's mind is capable of creating detailed and emotional events that are fictional. Healthy examples include dreaming and fantasy, while pathological instances include paranoid delusions and hypnotic hypersuggestibility.
- Hypnotic images that are experienced apart from therapy due to self-induced trance are no more reliable than therapist-induced trance.