

# A LINE ON LIFE

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## Recovered or False Memories? \*

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**Laura** seeks help for depression and marital problems. The therapist says her symptoms suggest that she was sexually abused as a child. At first, Laura doesn't remember any abuse. With the therapist's help, Laura gradually brings disturbing memory fragments to mind. Eventually – in a horrifying rush of flashbacks – Laura remembers her father raping her.

Through hypnosis, dream analysis and an incest survivor's group, Laura recovers other lost memories of childhood sexual abuse. With this, she takes her first painful steps toward dealing with her problems.

**Kathy** seeks help for depression and marital problems. Unknown to her, Kathy has stumbled upon a "*memory mill*." It is run by an incompetent therapist, who believes that sexual abuse is at the root of nearly all sexual problems. In the very first session, the therapist tells Kathy that she was sexually abused as a child. Kathy resists this idea, saying that she has no memory of any abuse. But gradually – through hypnosis, dream analysis and an incest survivor's group – Kathy begins to have detailed memories of childhood abuse.

Kathy's "*recovered memories*" are pure fantasy, spawned by her therapist's suggestions. Even so, she believes them completely. Kathy accuses her father of sexual abuse and breaks off all ties with him. Kathy's father loses his job, and her family is shattered. There is no way to prove that Kathy's memories are false.

These two stories represent the two extremes of a **recovered-memory debate**. Do recovered memories help clients deal with the long-buried pain of childhood sexual abuse? Or are they false memories that destroy families?

Those who advocate recovered memory therapy say that personally important traumatic memories cannot be created through suggestion. In contrast to this statement, false memories are easy to create. Elizabeth

Loftus, an eminent memory researcher, had older relatives tell college students false stories of how they were lost in a shopping mall as children. Later, when asked to recall more details, the students described elaborate memories of this fictitious event. In another study, Loftus interviewed children about a sniper that had shot at students at their elementary school. Many of the students who were *absent* that day still reported detailed memories of that event.

Although some abuse victims have repressed their experiences, "*recovered*" memories are not as common as their media coverage would lead us to believe. More typically, the problem is the *inability to forget* repeated atrocities – not a failure to remember. Children who survived the Holocaust in Nazi concentration camps vividly remember the experience.

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## **Inability to remember abuse is not evidence that it occurred.**

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Without supporting evidence, there is no way to tell if a memory is true or not. If you think that you have been sexually abused, how can you avoid making false accusations?

- If you think you have been sexually abused – but are not sure – see an experienced therapist. Never put yourself in the hands of a self-described "*recovered-memory therapist*."
- Be wary of any therapist who tells you in your first sessions that you were probably sexually abused as a child.
- If you feel pressured by the therapist to believe that you were sexually abused, discuss this pressured feeling with the therapist. If pressure continues, report your experience to the therapist's professional group and consider changing therapists.
- Beware of anyone who treats failure to recall abuse as evidence of abuse. It is dangerously misleading to assume that lack of memory is an indicator that an event really occurred.
- Keep a healthy skepticism about recovered memories. Remember that there is no way to tell if memories are real or not, unless they can be independently confirmed.
- Before accusing anyone of abuse, seek confirming evidence. If none is available, consider consulting another therapist before acting on your memories. Without firm evidence, be cautious about making accusations on the basis of recovered memories alone.

However, for those of you who have been victims of childhood sexual abuse, there is likely to be help available in your area. Look in the Yellow Pages of your telephone book under "*Psychiatrists*," "*Psychologists*," "*Psychotherapists*" or "*Social Service Organizations*."

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\* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 342-344.