

The Forgotten Lessons of the Recovered Memory Movement

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Most students in psychology and psychiatry programs today are too young to have any firsthand memory of the moral panic engendered by the recovered memory movement in the 1980s and early 1990s. This was a time when therapists proudly advertised their ability to help clients unearth supposedly repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse; the accusations that followed shattered families and communities across the country.

The belief that such memories could be repressed and then recovered through special techniques was widespread among mental health professionals for well over a decade. In books and on television, therapists portrayed themselves as the first generation of healers to understand both these mechanisms of repression and how to unlock them without contaminating the story that emerged. The results were dramatic: Patients often recovered abuse memories that began in infancy and lasted for decades. Some came to believe not only that they had repressed memories but also that their minds had fractured into many personalities to manage the pain and betrayal.

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