

Remembering TO FORGET

New research suggests that it may be possible to erase some of your most painful memories. Would you? And should you?

Considering the Information (overload) Age we live in, it's likely you've been accused of having a mind like a sieve. Perhaps you habitually forget where you put your house keys or, more conveniently, that you had a dentist appointment. Unfortunately, though, it's those memories you want to forget that are often the hardest ones to lose. Perhaps you still cringe when you recall *that* mortifying incident involving a bottle of tequila, or are haunted by the memory of a messy relationship.

Then there are some of us who are held prisoner by the burning imprint of a memory caught up in a vicious reliving of a traumatic event. 'One of the flashbacks that I sometimes still experience is the memory of my puppy looking down at me in the ditch after I'd been raped,' says Jes Foord, 26, who was gang-raped while walking at Shongweni Dam in KwaZulu-Natal with her dad and dogs in March 2008. 'My memories of that day were very vivid and detailed for a long time. They got locked into me and created this big ball of poison that sat in my stomach, which would express itself in nightmares and anger. One of my most vivid sensory memories was that of the smell of the rapists' sweat.

After that day if I caught a whiff of sweat, I'd have a panic attack. I still sometimes experience this – my friends and family always worry that they don't smell fresh enough for me.'

For decades, scientists have been trying to develop targeted memory-loss therapies to counter emotional trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression – with mixed results. Now recent research from the University Of St Andrews in Scotland suggests it may actually be possible to train people to suppress emotional autobiographical memories.

But intentional forgetting is a controversial topic. After all, our memories shape our personality and help us learn and grow, argue the experts. Should we even consider trying to erase painful personal histories?

Traumatic mementos

Often, it isn't an actual event that determines whether something is traumatic to you but your experience of it, says Dr Thuraisha Moodley, a Johannesburg clinical psychologist. 'Emotional trauma can result from common occurrences such as a car accident, the break-up or loss of a significant relationship, a humiliating experience, or other similar situations,' she says.

Traumatic events are stored differently in our brains to normal memories. Usually we can remember the complete story of the event, and it follows in a logical and understandable pattern because both sides of your brain can process what happened. But with traumatic events, the memories are generally stored as a kaleidoscope of sensory information and emotion, explains Cape Town trauma counsellor Morgan Mitchell. 'They're stored in the right side of the brain and are linked to our automatic or instinctive responses,' she says. 'So we can have beliefs and reactions that haven't been processed properly – and these may not be good or useful to us. Some people may even feel as though they're reliving an event when a traumatic memory is triggered. Others may involuntarily suppress the memory and believe that it never happened as a kind of defensive amnesia. These hidden memories can still affect a person's life in the same way as other traumatic memories.'

The ability to suppress or repress memory has long been a contentious issue in psychology. False memory syndrome (FMS) in particular has led to much debate. 'False memories are autobiographical memories that didn't occur at all, and FMS is a condition in which a person's identity and relationships are ▶

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affected by memories that are factually incorrect but are strongly believed,' explains Moodley. In the US in the '90s, there was a series of lawsuits where psychologists were successfully sued for propagating FMS – they had used recovery memory therapy, which had led to their patients falsely believing they'd been sexually abused as children.

The eternal sunshine of a spotless mind?

With extensive research into the viability of intentional forgetting and even the development of pills that can potentially erase memories, escaping the legacy of emotional trauma seems to be increasingly within our reach. And who wouldn't want to embrace revolutionary therapies that may rid people of PTSD and other mental-health issues, not to mention the very real fallout of being a victim of crime?

We're affected by the emotional conflict attached to a painful memory on every level, says Moodley – and, importantly, we grow, change and mature based on these life experiences. 'If we were to forget the memories that made us, for example, responsible, kind, ethical and so on, how do we grow, evolve and discover our true self-worth and sense of being?'

This research is obviously very interesting, says Mitchell. 'There are many things I wish my clients didn't have to remember or to have ever experienced,' she says. 'We keep these painful memories as a kind of quick survival map to use in threatening situations. This makes the research and the technique for forgetting fascinating. It poses questions – such as, do we need those memories to protect ourselves in the future? Can forgetting in this way cure or relieve symptoms of trauma?'

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Basically, if this research can show long-lasting benefits of the technique, health workers should add it to their toolkits for clients to choose from.'

Emotional healing

But for now, more traditional therapies offer the most effective solution. The resolution of trauma should preferably be done with a trained psychotherapist or clinical psychologist, says Moodley. 'Tackling the trauma all by yourself may lead to more emotional distress because you're bound to unwrap something you may not know how to let go of,' she says.

There are typically four phases of recovery from trauma. These don't follow a simple linear process and people may go through them a number of times before recovering, says Mitchell. 'The stages begin with the crisis, where you feel shocked and have a number of difficult-to-manage symptoms. This is often followed by a time of coping, where you carry on as though nothing had happened. This stage helps you to remember your coping skills. In the next stage, you start feeling all the symptoms all over again. These thoughts, feelings and behaviours can then be processed and integrated into who you are and how you are in the world. The final stage is where you begin taking up a normal life again, regaining trust in yourself, others and the world in general.'

It took more than two years of counselling for Jess to reclaim her memories. 'I wouldn't be where I am today without the professional counselling I received,' she says. 'I still have tough days where I deal with flashbacks and self-pity – but if I let those memories have a hold over me, I'm letting those men take more from me than they did that day.' ❧

What is EMDR?

The psychotherapy known as eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) has been used with great success to treat trauma survivors, says Morgan Mitchell, a Cape Town trauma counsellor and an EMDR practitioner. 'EMDR first provides the clients with a set of emotional resources,' she says.

'Next, both sides of the brain are stimulated while thinking about and feeling the effects of the traumatic event. This helps clients to think properly using both sides of the brain and so moves the traumatic memory out of its "right-brain storage". When clients are able to really process what happened, they can let go of the negative

thoughts and overwhelming emotions attached to the event. They don't forget what happened; it simply doesn't make them feel terrible or think terrible thoughts. Clients choose new and useful beliefs to attach to the memory, and also release any tension attached to the memory that's stored in their body.'