

# Mistaken RECALL

New research shows we can be convinced that an imaginary event really occurred.

**We've all read in the tabloids** about people in psychotherapy claiming to suddenly "recover" memories of abuse. Many such recollections have been found untrue, and now new research may explain how these "victims" are led down false paths. It seems that the more often someone—a therapist or even an attorney—suggests that an event occurred, the more likely we are to believe it.

In a recent study published in the journal *Psychological Science*, psychologists Maria Zaragoza, Ph.D., and Karen Mitchell showed 255 Kent State University students a video of a burglary. Then they asked the students questions that planted misleading im-

ages—implying, for instance, that the burglar wore gloves, a dog barked in the background and the robber was holding a gun. Just one false suggestion led subjects to recall the non-event about 35 percent of the time. When the suggestion was repeated, the incidence of false recall jumped. After three mentions, subjects reported false memories, on average, 55 percent of the time.

Certain suggestions were more likely than others to lead to mistaken recall. The researchers found, for example, it was easier to alter subjects' memory of insignificant details, such as whether the burglar wore gloves. The emotionally charged suggestion that the burglar had been armed was ini-

tially greeted with skepticism, but raising the notion again wore down subjects' resistance. "A person may reconstruct the scene in her mind to answer the question," says Zaragoza. "Each time, she adds a new detail. Eventually, the image becomes so fleshed out that it seems real."

Though Zaragoza cautions that the study doesn't demonstrate that anyone can implant an event as dramatic as sexual abuse, others disagree. "It's common practice for lawyers, police officers, psychotherapists and others to press a particular interpretation in their questioning," observes Elizabeth Loftus,

Ph.D., of the University of Washington in Seattle.

On a more positive note, if people can intentionally or unwittingly create false memories, the techniques might be used to a person's advantage. As Loftus suggests, people with traumatic childhoods could benefit from exercises designed to help them embrace a less damaging version of their past. —Kathleen McAuliffe

The power of suggestion: "Nothing but the truth" is sometimes open to interpretation.



## BEYOND TYPE A

A "perfect" life can also make you sick.

The friend who has it all—a fast-track career, gourmet cooking skills and well-behaved children—appears to lead an enviable life. She very well may, but new research shows that she could also be making herself sick.

We used to think that the immensely competitive, overachieving Type A personality was at greatest risk for such stress-related ailments as insomnia and heart disease. Now scientists are examining another disposition with similar risk: the repressive type, which combines Type A bodily stress levels with a more relaxed Type B per-

sona. Repressors claim to be happy and successful, yet their bodies show chronically activated stress responses. It seems repressors tend to prefer structure to surprises and keep a tight lid on their emotions. "What looks like relaxation could be exhaustion from trying to keep the unsettling world at bay," says Robert M. Sapolsky, Ph.D., a professor of neurosciences at Stanford University.

For repressors, expressing emotion is key. That may mean turning up the stereo and screaming, lashing out in therapy—or simply not pretending that life is a cabaret. —Vanessa Richardson

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