

Understanding Recovered Memory

Blue Knot Foundation fact sheet fostering understanding around recovered memory

- 1** The impacts of stress on the brain, its different memory networks, differences between *explicit* (conscious) and *implicit* (non-conscious) memory, and the capacity to compartmentalise and/or detach from experience ('dissociate') help explain 'recovered' memory.
- 2** The terms 'recovered memory' or 'delayed onset memory recall' describe the sudden intrusion of previously unavailable memories (i.e. forgotten for a period, then remembered; Barlow et al, 2017).
- 3** Research shows that trauma can disrupt memory in many ways and at any stage/s (Brewin, 2012).
- 4** Delayed recall of *traumatic, implicit memory* usually occurs spontaneously, without warning and is triggered by a prompt or cue.
- 5** The widespread myth that traumatic events are rarely if ever forgotten has been disproven; a lot of trauma is only 'remembered' when it is triggered (Brewin, 2012).
- 6** Trauma too overwhelming to process is dissociated (i.e. disconnected from and unavailable to consciousness).
- 7** Research shows that different groups - including war veterans, Holocaust survivors, survivors of national disasters, and of childhood trauma - experience traumatic amnesia and subsequent recall (recovered memory) (van der Hart et al, 1999; Elliott, 1999). Yet mainly due to the activity of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation in the 1990s (established to defend those who claimed they had been wrongly accused of child sexual abuse), the term 'false memory' often refers solely to recovered memories of CSA.
- 8** Research establishes that recovered *implicit* memories can be as accurate and reliable as never forgotten *explicit* consciously recalled continuous memories (Barlow et al, 2017 ref. Chu et al, 1999; Williams, 1995; Dalenberg, 2006; Dalenberg et al, 2012).

- 9** Recovered memories can often be corroborated although not always (Chu, 2011, citing Dalenberg 1996, Kluft, 1995; Lewis, Yeager, Swiz, Pincus & Lewis, 1997); Dalenberg et al, 2012).
- 10** Memories recovered in therapy are a small proportion of recovered memory reports (Elliott, 1997; Wilsnack, Wonderlich, Kristjanson, Vogeltanz-Holm, & Wilsnack, 2002 cited in Dalenberg et al, 2012) and can occur before or without psychotherapy.
- 11** Experiencing strong, recurrent, and/or disabling, traumatic memories, including recovered memories, may lead the person to become conscious of what they signify. While destabilising at first, this can subsequently enable their integration and thus trauma recovery.
- 12** Independent evidence, admissions of guilt by perpetrators, or findings of guilt by courts have verified and corroborated recovered memories in many legal cases globally. <https://blogs.brown.edu/recoveredmemory/case-archive/legal-cases/>
- 13** Assessing the reliability of memory needs to include a range of factors; i.e. social context, the possibility of betrayal trauma, the survival value of (explicit, conscious) 'forgetting', power disparities, and the importance of emotional and physical safety for recall and disclosure.

Further reading on memory is available with the following fact sheets:

- [The Truth of Memory and the Memory of Truth \(including references\)](#)
- [Memory Classification](#)
- [Understanding Traumatic Memory](#)
- [Recovered Memory](#)

