

Beware of false "recovered" memories
- by Lloyd Robertson

When I was Director of Mental Health for Northern Saskatchewan I once ordered a book called *Courage to Heal* to assist our staff in dealing with victims of sexual abuse. I did not realize then that the authors, Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, were not trained in psychology and that their ideas had no basis in scientific research. In their book Bass and Davis suggest that low self esteem, sexual promiscuity, sexual frigidity, depression, mood swings, failure to complete tasks, memory "lapses" and a host of other "symptoms" in women were indicators that they were sexually abused as children. The role of the therapist, they said, was to proceed on the belief that the woman was sexually abused even if the client has doubts that the abuse occurred. With this "support", they said, the client would eventually "recover" memories that had been repressed since childhood.

During this same period a Washington psychologist, Elizabeth Loftus, was conducting her now famous "Lost in a shopping mall" experiment. She suggested, to a sample of university students, that each had been lost in a shopping mall at age five but that they had repressed that memory. She encouraged them to go and try to remember what happened. Within a week a majority of the students developed such memories, some of which were extremely vivid and detailed.

Loftus received death threats from some feminists who called her a "traitor to women". Newspaper columnist Michele Landsberg compared skeptics of repressed memory to Holocaust deniers.

Yet Loftus continued on with her research. Her latest experiment was presented to the American Psychological Society last year. After exposing her subjects to a fake advertisement and a cardboard cutout of cartoon character Bugs Bunny, Loftus found 40% "remembered" having met Bugs Bunny during a visit to Disneyland -- even though the Warner Brothers rabbit isn't a Disney character and could never be found in any Disney-themed environment.

The message is clear, memory is a fragile thing and can be affected by the power of suggestion, and the power of suggestion can be used by anyone.

Loftus warned in her 1994 book *The Myth of Repressed Memory*:

A cottage industry of poorly trained and politically
inspired sex therapists has sprung up over the past
decade.

Unfortunately many men were convicted of crimes as a result of this "cottage industry" and, in Canada, the federal government has not yet ordered a review of their cases. Equally unfortunate, many women came to suffer trauma over events that did not actually happen.

It may be possible to have a repressed memory but that memory cannot be reliably recovered using the methods of Bass and Davis. Since I ordered their book, I suppose that I could be accused of having become, for a time, a part of this "cottage industry". Fortunately, I reminded our staff of social workers and psychiatric nurses that they were trained in supportive counselling and that their jobs were not to recover repressed memories. Still, many erroneous ideas promoted by the two authors could have been passed on.

You, as a potential consumer of counselling and therapy, have a right to know the professional background of the person from whom you are seeking help. Interview several such professionals and pick the one with the training and the approach that can best meet your needs. Be wary of any professional who tells you that you probably have a repressed memory that needs recovering.