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Civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was born in Atlanta.

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**SUNDAY**

JANUARY 15, 2006

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# Could a pill end bad memories?

## Scientists work on new treatment

By **Marilynn Marchione**  
Associated Press

Suppose you could erase bad memories from your mind. Suppose, as in a recent movie, your brain could be wiped clean of sad and traumatic thoughts.

That is science fiction. But real-world scientists are working on the next best thing. They have been testing a pill that, when given after a traumatic event such as rape, might make the resulting memories less painful and intense.

Will it work? It's too soon to say. Still, it is not far-fetched to think that this drug someday might be passed out along with blankets and food at emergency shelters after major disasters.

Psychiatrist Hilary Klein could have offered it to the man she treated at a St. Louis shelter over the Labor Day weekend. He had fled New Orleans and was so distraught over not knowing where his sisters were that others had to tell Klein his story.

"This man could not even give his name, he was in such distress. All he could do was cry," she said.

Such people often develop post-traumatic stress

disorder, a problem first recognized in Vietnam War veterans. Only 14 percent to 24 percent of trauma victims experience long-term post-traumatic stress, but sufferers have flashbacks and physical symptoms that make them feel as if they are reliving the trauma years after it occurred.

Scientists think it happens because the brain goes haywire during and immediately after a strongly emotional event, pouring out stress hormones that help store these memories in a different way than normal ones are preserved.

Taking a drug to tamp down these chemicals might blunt memory formation and

prevent post-traumatic stress, they theorize.

Some doctors have an even more ambitious goal: trying to cure post-traumatic stress disorder. They are deliberately triggering very old bad memories and then giving the pill to deep-six them.

The first study to test this approach on 19 longtime post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers has provided early encouraging results, Canadian and Harvard University researchers report.

"We figure we need to test about 10 more people until we've got solid evidence," said Alain Brunet, a psychologist at Montreal's McGill University who is leading the study.

It can't come too soon for some. "I don't think there's yet in our country a sense of urgency about post-traumatic stress disorder" but there should be, said James McGaugh, director of the Center for the Neurobiology of Learning and Memory at the University of California at Irvine. He and a colleague did experiments that changed how scientists view memory formation and suggested new ways to modify it.

Memories, painful or sweet, don't form instantly after an event but congeal over time. Like slowly hardening cement, there is a window of opportunity when they are shapable, the research showed.