

COMMENTARY

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Synthesized 'memories'?

Tricks of trauma search

A dangerous type of psychotherapy has evolved that is harming people, destroying families and threatening to undermine the work of skilled therapists nationwide.

This new type of therapy, which I call "trauma search" therapy, allegedly helps people deal with childhood trauma. Actually, it appears to be leading many people to "discover" sexual traumas that may not have happened.

How often does this occur? In March 1992, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation began collecting cases of parents who reported that they had been falsely accused on the basis of "memories" recovered during therapy. In less than a year, the foundation has collected 2,700 cases.

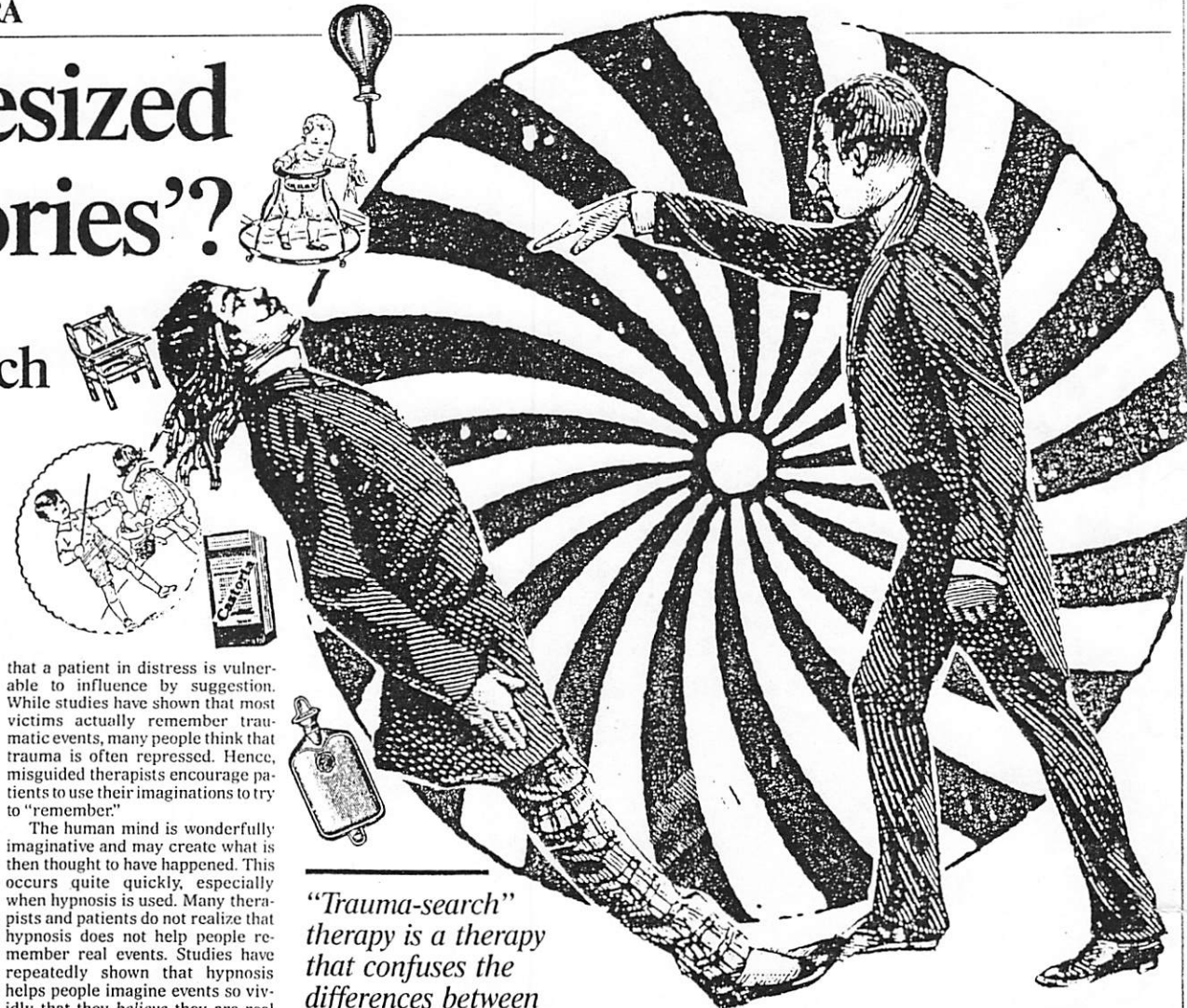
True traumatic events often have psychological effects that demand treatment: Victims may suffer from nightmares, intrusive memories or a lack of concentration or trust. Legitimate and helpful forms of therapy exist to help people who clearly know they have, for instance, been beaten, raped or tortured.

By contrast, in "trauma-search" therapy, the patient seeks help with a problem — bulimia, depression, sexual inhibition and so on — and the therapist searches for a traumatic event to explain the problem.

The therapist supposes that the patient's problems were caused by some early sexual traumatic event and that the patient will be helped if the memory is uncovered. The therapist uses intuition to ask leading questions about the past and encourages the patient to "search" his or her unconscious. Hypnosis may be used or the patient may be asked to read material describing sexual abuses that have happened to others.

The problem with this reasonable-sounding procedure is

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that a patient in distress is vulnerable to influence by suggestion. While studies have shown that most victims actually remember traumatic events, many people think that trauma is often repressed. Hence, misguided therapists encourage patients to use their imaginations to try to "remember."

The human mind is wonderfully imaginative and may create what is then thought to have happened. This occurs quite quickly, especially when hypnosis is used. Many therapists and patients do not realize that hypnosis does not help people remember real events. Studies have repeatedly shown that hypnosis helps people imagine events so vividly that they believe they are real even when they are not.

Since the trauma-search therapist presupposes that a trauma must have occurred, he or she uncritically believes the patient. Rather than help the patient separate truth from fantasy, the therapist encourages the patient to "remember" more about the alleged trauma. And when the patient has an image — a dream or a feeling that something may have happened, the therapist is encouraged, praises the patient's efforts and assures him or her that it really did happen.

Our society is beginning to realize that a lot of sexual abuse in fact occurs. Consequently, when patients search for a traumatic experience they are more likely to "discover" that they were sexually abused.

While such "memories" are quite upsetting, patients may initially feel better because they now have an explanation for their problems. It is not that their jobs are difficult, their

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children a handful, their spouses hard to love. It is that they were abused! Unfortunately, this relief does not affect lasting change.

Without the help they really need, patients who were relatively successful, relatively loving persons with problems now become "survivors" who find it difficult to cope and are increasingly dependent on their therapists.

The language of these patients all sound suspiciously alike. Anguished parents have shared the letters they received with me: "You incested me," "I am a trauma survivor," "You know what you did."

But, in fact, the parents do not know.

What are relatives to think? Whom are they to believe? Some may side with the accused and risk themselves being accused of "denial." Others side with the patient and become alienated from the rest of the family. Family members are rejected unless they accept the "memory" of the abuse as real.

At best, the family loses a member to a cult of patients and therapists who believe that everyone's pain is the result of abusive childhoods. At worst, the family is fragmented and destroyed.

The fabric of our society rests on people trusting each other, caring for one another, facing the real abuses that happen all too frequently and reconciling people who are in conflict. Skilled therapists help weave this fabric.

"Trauma-search" therapy is not a

attempt to change behavior or a struggle for the forgiveness we all owe our parents for the real mistakes they have, inevitably, made. It is a therapy that confuses the differences between real and fantasized abuse and encourages the destruction of families.

The American Psychological Association has established a committee to investigate memories of childhood abuse. The committee should recommend procedures that will encourage reality-testing and communication with the entire family if a patient "recovers" a memory of early childhood trauma.

People who are being falsely accused on the basis of "recovered memories" should contact the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, Philadelphia, Pa., so that we can all become aware of the extent of this problem. Everyone else should stay out of "trauma-search" therapy.