**Alleged memories of abuse**

By Gerard Feller

**Introduction**

Is our memory reliable? In the last 30 years more and more elderly people seem to remember (mainly sexual) abuse and incest, often also as a result of (psychotherapeutic) counselling. Also when it comes to abuse in the Catholic Church, more and more memories seem to come to light. For years there has been a battle between 'believers' and 'non-believers'. In the Netherlands, in contrast to America, not many court cases are known yet. In these cases everything revolves around the reliability of the memory. Is it possible that people in their youth experience a trauma, lose their memories of it, to find them again at a later time with the help of a therapist? Yes, quite a few psychotherapists believe that. They point out that many young children are abused by adults on whom they are completely dependent. In order to be able to live with this, it is necessary for victims to make the traumatic memories inaccessible to consciousness. Other experts say that this is impossible. Our brain is built in such a way that, on the contrary, it stores threatening experiences even better, according to these non-believers. They believe that anyone who experiences a trauma will remember it for the rest of their lives (1).

I do not claim to have the last word in this article. I am fully aware that many people suffer the consequences of abuse and incest; there is no doubt about that.

What struck me, however, during literature research and also from practical experiences and conversations at Promise Foundation, is that there is a distinct group of people, whose many rediscovered memories can be called into question. These memories have often been rediscovered after (psychotherapeutic) counselling, especially with all kinds of hypnosis and self-hypnosis treatments and also group therapy of 'fellow sufferers'. Although the psychotherapeutic guidelines have been tightened on this point in recent years, namely taking a safe distance from rediscovered memories, and the therapy is not intended to collect a burden of proof of abuse, we see that practice is more persistent on these points.

In our magazine we have been warning against the possible dangers of (self-) hypnosis for the past 30 years. In this article I want to be more specific to rediscovered memories.

**The memory**

In principle, everyone remembers what he is experiencing. It is stored in the short-term memory and from there in the long-term memory. However, as events have taken place longer ago, memories will 'fade away' more and more.

Memory traces can fade, making it more difficult to access information stored in long-term memory. This is a form of forgetting, where the information remains present. People therefore somehow try to 'fill' the gaps in their memory. This is usually an unconscious process. A person 'invents' certain details and memories, or tries to reconstruct them by logical reasoning. This creates a falsification of memory. In the Promise magazine we have published articles about this phenomenon under the heading V.L.E., the Verbal Logical Explainer (2). Typically human is the urge to portray one's own role as positively as possible. This also applies to memory falsifications. These are therefore usually more positive than the truth. When creating false memories, both external and internal factors can be involved.

**External causes**

The false memories are formed in the reconstructive memory. The elements missing in this memory are filled in by the person himself. When creating false memories, which are influenced by the environment, external factors are involved. The 'misinformation' effect is an example of this. This effect can lead to false memories, which are formed by asking suggestive questions and by misinformation. Another technique is the 'lost in the mall' technique. This technique has shown that people can create new memories about events that never took place. This technique allows people to read a number of events from their youth. They are told that these events have been written down by family members. In reality, one event is invented. This is, for example, the event that they got lost in the shopping center at the age of five. Nevertheless, this invented event is assumed to be true; some test persons even told all kinds of details about this event (Loftus, 1997) (3).

**Internal causes**

In addition to external causes, there are also internal causes for false memories. An internal factor is that it is difficult to distinguish between dreams, vivid fantasies and reality. By confusing fantasy and reality, false memories arise.

Imagination can also lead to false memories. This involves simple actions such as throwing up a coin but also unusual simple actions. Imagining an event ensures that the test person thinks he or she has actually experienced this event.

Imagining an event has a strong effect, because it makes you familiar with a certain action or event. Because this action or event feels so familiar it seems as if it really happened. This can lead to false memories (Thomas, Loftus, 2002).

Another explanation for false memories is 'source monitoring'. This involves people looking for the source or origin of their memories. To find the origin, people look for details. When they think they have found details of an event, they perceive the memory. Therapists and counsellors can be guilty of 'source monitoring'. This goes as follows. A client with chronic, non-specific complaints is asked: "Have you been abused in the past?” If this is answered in the negative, the therapist assumes that the memories are repressed as a survival mode (Freud's theory). By asking more and more suggestive questions, the client gets alleged memories, which are quickly experienced as real. This can have major consequences in families where, for example, a father is wrongly accused of incest, with all possible consequences. In the Netherlands, the first case that came into the public domain was the false declaration of incest by Mr Lancée's daughter. This also works the other way around: if people have actually experienced an event but cannot remember the details of it, they wrongly label this memory as 'false memory' (Johnson, 1997) (5) (6). McNally (7), an authority in the field of rediscovered trauma memories, presents the problem of pseudo-traumas as a hitherto significantly underestimated phenomenon. He calculates that the Vietnam veteran simulating PTSD (Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder) can at best claim a tax-free benefit of 36 thousand dollars per year: 'It pays to be sick'. This makes it understandable why 1 in 3 members of the American Association of former prisoners of war have never been prisoners of war! Just to be clear: often this is not always and everywhere a deliberate lie.

Memory problems can also be caused by mental disorders, such as Pseudologia phantastica, Munchhausen syndrome, Ganser syndrome, Korsakow syndrome, pathological liars and somatoform disorders (7). You can also think of memories of UFO kidnappings (see extensive article in this magazine). Within the context of our magazine we have to ask ourselves if rediscovered memories via EMDR (**Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing**, which many Christian counsellors practice or even Theophostic prayers or the Immanuel Prayer, can also withstand the scientific and biblical test.

**Methods that encourage allegedly false memories (8)**

Fictional memories can be claimed in any form of therapy. It is not the method itself, but the way in which the therapist deals with it that makes it risky or not. However, there is a list of therapy methods where the risk of false memories is greater than with other methods. The most important ones are listed below.

Hypnosis is a method with a great danger for fictitious memories.

The targets of most of the techniques are as follows:

* To reduce the critical awareness [(auto) hypnosis].
* To manipulate the will.
* To cause the conscious mind to be sent away (disengagement).
* ‘To descend’ (open up spiritually) through virtual, imaginary techniques, such as: hypnotic trance, trance induction, metaphors, guided fantasy, visualization, affirmations.

**Hypnosis** is a trance or sleep-like state of lowered consciousness, whereby the critical capacity of consciousness is influenced or controlled by another power or person. Suggestion, voice-influence and minimizing the contact with your body through psychological relaxation play a role in this. During hypnosis, people can no longer distinguish between reality and delusion, between what they themselves have thought and what others have said to them. Hypnosis can give people the impression that they have experienced sexual traumas, because the therapist had suggested this as a possibility. For example, it is easier to believe in reincarnation if the hypnotherapist has taken the patient to a 'previous life'. The will is also influenced or manipulated. Often the therapist works with a 'going back in time', in which the client counts down from his current age to the age he has questions about. Under hypnosis, for example, a person 'suddenly' is four years old, he talks, thinks and feels like a four-year-old. However, children tend to satisfy adults and want to meet their expectations. After all, a therapeutic relationship is comparable to the dependency relationship that parents and children have. As a 'four-year-old child' being under hypnosis, it is therefore quite possible that the client will see the images he or she thinks the therapist wants him or her to see, for example images of sexual abuse at that age.

Someone who is under hypnosis is in a situation in which he is very receptive to suggestion. The assumption that there is repressed sexual abuse can bring the first 'memories' to life. If the client accepts that these are real memories, things get out of control and more memories usually follow quickly. Alleged memories are already a familiar item in many research. For example, Green's research found that (self-) hypnosis delivers the most pseudo-memories: 42 people (38%) reported an experience from the first year of life and the majority (54%) went back at least to the second birthday. Probably it was only thanks to the use of the term 'hypnosis' that the first group was more inclined to go back unbelievably far in their memory. Although experimental research has not shown that hypnosis improves memory performance, most people still believe that it is a good way to return to the past. Test persons probably unconsciously adapted to these implicit expectations (10). Most experiments showed that the percentage is related to certain characteristics of the test persons. People who are difficult to hypnotize produce few pseudo-memories, even if no hypnosis is used during the experiment. People who score high on the Dissociative Experience Scale, on the other hand, report extra fictional memories (fantasy proneness).

**Biblical comments** (11)

Proverbs 4:23 reads: “*Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.*” In Hebrew there is a word that has the meaning of guarding, protecting, maintaining, fencing. The word 'heart' is Leb in Hebrew with the Greek counterpart Kardia. Besides the meaning of heart as an internal organ that takes care of the blood circulation, the most important meaning of the Hebrew word Leb is the total inner being of man or of his immaterial nature. The heart stands for the seat of your intellect, feelings and will, it is almost the same as the brain; the heart is an important control center. What does this mean biblically? Watching over your heart means that you do not allow anyone other than the Lord to control you through His Holy Spirit and His Word.

1 Corinthians 6:12 says: *"Everything is lawful to me, but not everything is profitable. Everything is lawful to me, but I will not allow myself* ***to be mastered*** *by anything".* The Word of God must control us, see 2 Tim. 3:16: *"All Scripture is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness"*. The Word of God must be used to bring our thinking under God's control. 2 Cor. 10:4-5: “*For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete."*

We must allow the Holy Spirit to lead our psyche.

**Guided fantasy** is comparable to hypnosis. In a relaxed and therefore suggestive state, the client sees images in the therapist's words, he imagines himself in the images that are conjured up. This can be very pleasant if the guided fantasy is used to make the client relax or feel good, but if the aim is to trace any repressed memories, the fantasy images can be misinterpreted. Guided fantasy is often used in psychiatry as a method of guiding the patient into an imaginary world, in which stress can be processed or the ego of man can be strengthened. Guided fantasy seems to be an innocent sounding name for far from harmless hypnosis techniques. A quick glance at hypnosis literature already shows that 'fantasy journeys' are a scientifically recognized introduction to hypnosis. They are used by hypnotherapists when they want to bring their patients into a state of trance. Patients should relax and imagine being in a different place (meadow, beach, mountain) than where they are at that time with their bodies. It is said that if you get out of your body in this way, you experience the intensity of the traumatic physical reactions less. What happens, however, is that in this way the order of creation of the unity of mind, soul and body is broken and in this sense you also become an easy prey of the fallen spiritual world. Because it is a matter of wanting to break what God has bound together; guided fantasy can also be described as sorcery, biblically speaking!

Dream interpretation is also a dangerous area. Especially when it is assumed that dreams are the voice of the subconscious, and that dreams about sexual violence want to make the dreamer aware of repressed experiences in that area, or when certain symbols in dreams are interpreted as references to experiences of violence. In therapy it is often dreams that give rise to new 'memories' and also caused the list of alleged perpetrators to grow longer and longer. I believe that dreams are a way to process your daytime experiences. When a therapy and the suspicion of repressed sexual abuse make you look for memories all day long and become obsessed with the question "What happened?" it is very logical that you start dreaming about sexual abuse or other violence.

**Creative therapy** can be a good way to express emotions. But here there is the same danger as with dreaming: symbols in a drawing or other creative expressions can be interpreted as references to sexual abuse, for example making a phallus symbol from clay in combination with feelings of fear or anger. Here, too, the obsessive search for memories of experiences of abuse can give rise to the need to create drawings, images or stories about them.

However, this does not necessarily mean that you yourself have experiences in that area.

**Group therapy** is often recommended because the recognition and support that group members can give each other has a positive impact on the coping process.

I don't want to deny that. But the danger here is that if several people in the group have rediscovered memories, there will be a general feeling of "What have I experienced before that I don't know yet? If the therapist or supervisor of such a group also assumes that everyone can still have repressed memories, this is the ideal climate to energize fictional memories.

**Regression therapy** assumes that the cause of problems can be found in unprocessed experiences in the past. These experiences have to be re-experienced before you can process them. These can also be experiences in previous lives, or birth traumas or traumatic experiences during the first years of life. Experiences of which it is difficult to check if they are based on truth. A great risk is hidden here to end up with fictitious memories.

**Body therapy** can be found in all shapes and sizes that are not necessarily dangerous. It is risky to assume that the body has stored memories of which the client is no longer aware. Through body exercises that can evoke 're-experiences' of sexual abuse, such as touch exercises or literally replaying a rape by lying on top of the client, the client is made aware of what she would have been through.

In therapy, these body memories can be interpreted as true memories. EMDR is nowadays also often practiced by Christian counselors. Although in recent years all kinds of explanations have been given for a possible effect, it is clear to anyone who has knowledge of the different levels of consciousness during hypnosis that EMDR uses the same methodology. In hypnosis, the client is open to the thinking of another person, and the client enters a different state of consciousness. Hypnosis is often associated with a deep hypnosis in which the person does not seem to have any contact with the outside world. However, there are different degrees of hypnosis. With EMDR the client keeps in touch with the outside world. It is quite possible to include stimulating suggestions from 'outside' and to consider these as his/her own reality. Kroger and Fetzler (Hypnosis and Behavior modification imagery conditioning, Lippingcott Philadelphia) point out that in hypnosis we should not be confused by a difference in ritual, in which this state of consciousness is generated, but that these are comparable to the different techniques that are used in Zen Buddhism and yoga. This is also noted by the researchers of EMDR. J. Hedstrom makes connections between EMDR and oriental meditation techniques such as yoga, in which eye movements are used to get into a relaxed state (12). Some will notice that the suggestive element in this method is zero. However, one should bear in mind that the method is first explained in detail and that it is very clearly indicated that the goal is a change of thinking! The process starts with evoking an imaginary situation and the question of the fear score. We know by now that this imaginary (re)presentation can evoke alleged memories. In an average session of one hour the number of sets of eye movements can increase to about 40, each with 25 quick eye movements. These are a thousand rapid eye movements, which are always interrupted by 'measurements' in order to determine to what extent the state of consciousness (feeling and/or thinking) has already changed towards the set goal. You could call it a ritual of the induction of hypnosis. Peter Baldé has mapped out the similarities between hypnosis and EMDR. Both hypnosis and EMDR have an attention fixation: The person focuses on one point, namely the finger movement or the sound stimulus. Both have a passive mental view that is encouraged. In EMDR by instructions such as 'let conjure what emerges' and 'let it happen'. The EMDR therapist fixes the attention, activates the passive primary process ("What's going through the person?") and then resumes the eye fixation. He repeats this cycle many times during the processing phase. By alternating the attention fixation and the orientation on the primary process this strongly resembles the fractional induction technique of Langen (1972) which describes this as an increasing depth of hypnosis. Induction (lead through) is the opposite of deduction (derive from). Induction is the ascending of concrete, particular concepts to more abstract, general concepts. Hypnotic induction implies the evocation of certain phenomena, memories or visualizations, which lead to a changed world of imagination for the client. The visualizations (evoking of images) and affirmations (positive word affirmation) of EMDR via hypnotic induction, which are introduced by the numerous eye movements, are typical instruments from the New Age thinking in order to bring about a change of paradigm (thinking). The changed thinking is linked to a physical process, here the eye movements, or sound stimuli, or the rhythmic tapping of the left on the right foot as an induction method. Especially in the first phase of the imagination of anxious or traumatic memories, many false, alleged memories and visualizations can take place, which if they are 'neutralized by the new state of fear' they are eventually accepted as real.

**Theophostic Prayer Ministry (TPM) (13) and Emmanuel pastoral counseling (14)**

What about prayer ministries like T.P.M. and Emmanuel prayer? The manual of the basic training of T.P.M. defines it as follows: "An intense and specific prayer with the desire to experience the presence of Christ, resulting in a change of mind and then a changed life". Theo (God) -phostic (Light) Prayer Ministry is a prayer ministry that is Christ-centered and, as far as its course is concerned, dependent on Him. It is an encouragement for someone to discover and understand God's will, by encouraging him to pray with Jesus, by letting the Lord Jesus Himself reveal His truth. In this way, advice is given to the wounded heart of the praying person, problems are diagnosed, and insights and opinions are being passed on. It is about someone allowing the Lord Jesus in the middle of his emotional pain. Similar to this is the Emmanuel pastoral counseling, which has an important root in Emmanuel interventions ™, a pastoral approach developed by the American Christian psychiatrist Dr. Karl D. Lehman and his wife, theologian Charlotte Lehman. In the Netherlands, this method is mainly developed by André Roosma. You can read a lot about this on www.immanuel-pastoraat.nl. A critical reader could suggest that this is also a subjective form of communication, which could possibly encourage alleged memories.

In theory, this is quite possible and a danger of which every pastoral counsellor should be aware. Contrary to methods such as hypnosis and others, this method places a strong emphasis on testing to God's Word, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and a counsellor must be vigilant against premature interpretations and manipulations through prayer: *"Watch over your heart with all diligence, for  from it flow the springs of life."* is the motto of these prayer ministries.

A second test of the subjective answers is done by the pastoral counsellor.

**Conclusion** (15)

The search for repressed memories of sexual abuse always has the danger in it that one will end up with fictitious memories, no matter what form of therapy is used. It is important for every counsellor to acknowledge the danger of manipulation and stimulation of alleged memories. A certain guarantee is the biblical test. In addition, perhaps a number of guidelines:

1. Accept it if the answer to the anamnesis is 'no' to the question 'Have you been sexually abused as a child?

2. Do not use a diagnosis of sexual abuse based on symptoms of the client.

3. As a counsellor, be aware of the danger of manipulative questions.

4. Keep in mind that newspaper articles, books and documentaries may give a client a seed for alleged memories.

5. Beware of altered states of consciousness such as degrees of hypnosis.

6. Put the emphasis on dealing with life now in contrast to repeated attempts to explore the past and painful experiences.

7. Do not bring people without detailed memories of abuse into a group of fellow sufferers who do have those experiences.

8. Encourage these people not to read excessively many books of 'survivors'.

9. If you, as a counsellor, know of sexual abuse in your own life, do not project it directly onto your clients.

10. Make sure that you do not use any form of sexual need of your own to make others talk about real and alleged sexual experiences.

11. Check your own motivation when confronting clients with potential perpetrators, separating them from their natural family or helping to report them to the police.

© Gerard Feller, February 2015

Translated by Ursula Moestapa

**Notes:**

1. Skepter 16 jrg. Nr. 4 2003. Harald Merkelbach: Hervonden herinneringen, einde van een discussie? (Rediscovered recollections, end of discussion?)

2. Verbal Logical Explainer, Promise magazine July and October 2009. [**http://www.stichtingpromise.nl/gezondheid-bijbel/the-verbal-logical-explainer-vle-1.htm**](http://www.stichtingpromise.nl/gezondheid-bijbel/the-verbal-logical-explainer-vle-1.htm) en [**http://www.stichtingpromise.nl/gezondheid-bijbel/de-verbal-logical-explainer-vle-deel-2.htm**](http://www.stichtingpromise.nl/gezondheid-bijbel/de-verbal-logical-explainer-vle-deel-2.htm)

3. Loftus, E, F. (1997). Creating false memories. Scientific American, 277 (3), 70-75.

4. Thomas, A., Loftus, E. (2002). Creating bizarre false memories through imagination. Memory & cognition, 30 (3), 423-431.

5. Johnson, M, K. (1997). Source monitoring and memory distortion.

6. [**http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herinneringsvervalsing**](http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herinneringsvervalsing) (memory falsification).

7. McNally, R.J. (2003). *Remembering trauma*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

8. [**http://nl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudologia\_fantastica**](http://nl.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudologia_fantastica)

9. Kitty Hendriks, Vaag verleden (Vague past), 2004. Zie ook (see also) [**http://members.home.nl/cjh.hendriks/index.html**](http://members.home.nl/cjh.hendriks/index.html)

Zie ook video Sjoemelaars en sjacheraars (frauds and cheaters) van Talpa (Television program) 27 febr. 2007.

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDx8VY7PJjM**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sDx8VY7PJjM)

10. Green, Joseph P. (1999). Hypnosis, context effects, and the recall of early autobiographical memories. *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, 47(4), 284-300. Geciteerd in Skepter 2001 nr 2 door Rob Naninga, terug naar de wieg (back to the cradle), experimentele pseudoherinneringen (experimental pseudo memories).

11. Promise, July 2010, G. Feller: Sleutelen aan het bewustzijn (Changing the consciousness).

12. Hedstrom, 1991, A note on eye movements and relaxation, Journal of Behavior 22: pp. 37-38.

13. [**http://www.stichtingpromise.nl/pastorale-onderwerpen/tpm-theophostic-gebedsgenezing.htm.**](http://www.stichtingpromise.nl/pastorale-onderwerpen/tpm-theophostic-gebedsgenezing.htm.)

14. [**http://www.immanuel-pastoraat.nl/artikelen.html**](http://www.immanuel-pastoraat.nl/artikelen.html)

15. [**http://www.valseherinnering.eigenstart.nl/**](http://www.valseherinnering.eigenstart.nl/)