

Roger Highfield's piece reviewing some research by Brendan Depue can be found at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/main.jhtml?xml=/earth/2007/07/13/scimemory113.xml>.

The BFMS sent the following letter to the Daily Telegraph.

17th July 2007

Sir,

Roger Highfield's review of Brendan Depue's memory research ('How to forget bad memories' Daily Telegraph July 13th) confuses forgetting with active suppressing. A suppressed memory exists but the person actively attempts to avoid recalling it. It is this active suppression that is the focus of Depue's research and there is a vast body of evidence to support the mechanisms by which memory suppression occurs.

There is not however a vast body of evidence to support the theory, evinced by Freud, that people can block an event or series of events in an act of involuntary or unconscious repression at the time and every time the event happens.

The British False Memory Society is concerned with the way some therapists infer chronic childhood sexual abuse from adult behaviour (eg self-harming) and then encourage their clients to consider whether they have blocked out memories of abuse. Vulnerable clients are told that repression of traumatic events is common. This is far from the case.

The language of memory research is complex and bewildering to the lay person. The sad thing is, that such seemingly small differences in wording (eg suppression vs. repression) create false beliefs which can translate into court cases and wrongful imprisonment.

To construe Depue et al's paper as evidence supporting Freud's theory of involuntary forgetting would be incorrect. Depue has himself been quoted by Reuters saying "My prediction is it won't be as easy to suppress something that's long-standing and personally emotional".

Alison Eden
Press Officer