

# FMS Foundation Newsletter

3508 Market Street suite 128, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215-387-1865)

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Dear Friends,

We thank you for your letters and cards and support. In less than a year FMSF has documented a horrendous problem and made strides in bringing that problem to the attention of the mental health community. We are glad that we have been able to help people understand the nature of the phenomenon and the issues surrounding it. *"How do we say thank you for saving our lives? We had planned to no longer be on Earth for another Christmas. Because of the Foundation, we are alive—and ready to take on whatever comes."*

We are not going to dwell on the devastating effects. There will be plenty of time later to study the stories and letters and to analyze the surveys and interviews from the perspective of trying to understand how families have coped with the ongoing nightmare. Your stories tell of profound anxiety about the safety of the children who have acquired memories and redefined their histories, of deep anger and frustration that such an outrageous and bizarre situation could actually be happening in the 1990's and of hearts that have been broken.

The stories from the people who have experienced recovering "memories" are, frankly, worse. We will do our best to try to find some frameworks for making sense out of what seems so senseless. People have told us that learning about "cult-like" thinking has been helpful to their understanding of the personality changes their children have undergone, and so we will pass on what they have learned.

Our efforts in 1993 will be directed toward understanding how reconciliations between accused and accusers may happen. Your letters cry out for "closure." Most write that you want your families restored, although one father wrote that things have gone too far for that to be a realistic possibility. Yet we are aware of two families reconciling even after legal actions. *"This just doesn't go away. How can you ever stop being a parent? They may be grown ups, but they are in trouble. Where do you draw the line?"*

This newsletter is longer than usual because we have tried to present the FMS phenomenon as we understand it at the beginning of 1993 through your stories and letters. The first describes one family's experience of being sued by their daughter. Since most families are at an impasse, we reprint two vignettes that we think exemplify that situation: one from the parent's and one from their three accusing children's perspective. Some have taken the first steps of reconciling, and we retell what they have told us.

The formal organization of the FMSF enables us to learn about these issues and to send out information. We try to be as efficient and cost-effective as we can. The ac-

tual office work gets done with a combination of many volunteers and some paid staff. There are fifty state liaisons and thirty people who help us return phone calls from their homes. There are task forces and committees working. People are holding meetings on a regular basis, making contact with the media and professionals. Hundreds of people are writing letters.

When we began 1992, the term False Memory Syndrome had never been used. We ended 1992 with so many articles about FMS that we are going to publish a collection to make them available at low cost. We start out 1993 with several outstanding articles: look for Ethan Watters' article in the January issue of *Mother Jones Magazine*. We have reprinted in this newsletter the essay by Carol Tavris that appeared on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review* on January 3, "Beware the Incest Survivor Machine."

With each month, the number of families increases, the questions that we are asked become more complex, and the piles of mail grow ever bigger. Last month, if you happened to visit the office, you might have noted some of us sitting on the floor or waiting in line to use the phones. We think it is time to move to larger quarters. Please be on the look out for our new address.

We know that the number of calls to FMSF will peak and begin to decrease. A year ago we were naive enough to think that might happen in months. We now know it will take longer. How long will that be? Computer predictions can give us growth patterns, but we don't have enough information yet to predict a peak. We simply have no crystal ball. Lacking that, we will continue to do our best to study this phenomenon and to make only those conclusions that are warranted by the data, to inform people of our findings and of other related research in order

to help families reunite. We will try record this phenomenon as accurately and completely as possible.

To do this we need to work together. Please continue to send us your stories and complete the survey when you get it. Tell us about any change in your family situation and what seemed to have brought it about. This is how we can help others bring families together. Send us articles or flyers for the archives. The FMS phenomenon will only be a tragedy if we let it be. Let's take a positive approach: professionals and families working together to collect information, to inform ourselves, to stop the pseudoscientific nonsense and to find ways to help families get back together.

Pamela

## Do false memories really exist?

"There's no longer even any question among those acquainted with the scientific literature. Any therapist who says false memories do not occur is either incompetent or, as they say in the profession, 'in denial.'"

Michael Morris, *Utah County Journal*, Novem-

## Our Critics

Some of you have written to express concern about FMSF critics. We replied that we expect criticism and view it as a natural consequence of being effective in a situation in which we are challenging the foundation of an industry. Be assured that the great majority of all letters and calls are highly positive and most criticism is constructive and helps us to refine our thinking. We learn from criticism.

Some criticism seems silly to us, but we report it as part of the ongoing documentation of the phenomenon. We try to see what we can learn about the phenomenon from it. To date our critics have accused us of being a PR front for perpetrators and of being part of a satanic conspiracy. This past month we have been told that we are supported by insurance companies, that we are against feminism, and that we are part of the pornography industry.

**Insurance Support?** We learned of the supposed insurance company connection through phone calls with some people who informed us that this was the information going around in their support groups. Our response is simple. We are a public charity and our books are a matter of record. Auditors examine everything. No insurance company has offered us any money. But this accusation leads us to think that some therapists must be worried that insurance companies are going to look more closely at diagnostic practices and at treatment plans.

**Anti-Feminist?** In an article by Cathy Wasserman in a recent issue of *Sojourner*, "FMS: The Backlash against Survivors" FMSF is described as "clearly part of the growing backlash against feminism." We respond by reminding readers that our survey data indicate that approximately one third of the accusations of active abuse are against mothers. These accusations of active acts of abuse are in addition to the demeaning, dehumanizing accusation that covers every other mother, sister, aunt and grandmother—of being "in denial," of being too dimwitted to know what was going on. While not every father is accused, every mother who questions has been accused. Although it is predominately women in their 30's who are recovering memories, being accused is an equal opportunity position.

We ask, in return, if it might be harmful to feminism to portray women as having minds closed to scientific information and as being satisfied with sloppy, inaccurate

statistics? Could it be viewed as a profound insult to women to give them slogans rather than accurate information about how memory works? Are not women really being cheated if they are not expected to use critical thinking skills? Is it really empowering to view one's life through the single lens of victimhood?

Mature adults, men and women, accept the responsibility of their accomplishments and of their failures; they may seek understanding from events in the past, but they don't blame their problems on someone else. Is that "anti-feminist?"

**Pro-pornography?** We were fascinated to learn that we have also been accused of being connected to the pornography industry. We found this somewhat ironic because just a few months ago some parents told us that they had taken some of the best-selling survivor books to the Texas Attorney General and to the Texas Department of Health and Human Services to have them investigated for pornography. "Every description is of deviant sex," they explained. "If these were scientific books there might be justification, but these are not scientific."

An anti-pornography advertisement appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* on November 19. The ad showed three adorable young girls and the headline read "1 in 3 American girls will be sexually molested by age 18." The very notion of child pornography is disgusting. But we are also disturbed when sensational statistics are bandied about. In a free society, we suspect that there will always be tensions in issues relating to freedom of the press. It is a puzzle to us why anyone would bring the issue of pornography into the discussion.

One thought is that the accusation was made to discredit the organization—like saying that we are a PR front for perpetrators. Another thought is that the people who say these things have a tremendous lack of understanding about the nature of criticism. Their attitude is "cult-like" to the extent that any challenge, any question, any suggestion for improvement is viewed as "being on the opposite side."

One year ago the common wisdom was that if a person said s/he had been abused s/he must be believed because "No one would make

up something so horrible and painful." FMSF has tried to understand the underlying belief system for the assumption. We have presented research from the field of memory and from what is known about human suggestibility to say that it is possible in a therapeutic situation that the diagnosis of a client could be biased by the preconceptions of the therapist. We have tried to point out that memory is

"We live in a world full of uncertainties, ambiguities, and a need to balance legitimate competing interests..."

"Those who work with victims may come in contact with mostly genuine cases of sexual abuse, but they must also acknowledge that false accusations are always a possibility and should be considered. Those who work with accused individuals must acknowledge as well that some who are accused may well be guilty. Both must be willing to concede that in any specific case, the truth of what happened may never be completely known. Scientists will help everyone if they consider the impact of their reported findings on the outcome of individual cases and if they are sympathetic to the passions of clinicians who deal with real people whom they believe. Most of all, everyone will benefit if we keep this critical dialogue flowing."

Berliner & Lofms (1992). *Sexual abuse accusations: Desperately seeking reconciliation. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 7 (4) p 577.*

a very complicated process and that memories are not stored like pictures in a camera or data in a computer. If it is believed that "No one would make up something so horrible and painful," then no person who is accused can ever defend himself or herself. The accusation is taken as its own proof. Does any rational person really believe that? That is "witch-trial" logic. We hope that this is the end of the "silly" labels.

**Constructive Criticism:** We received a thoughtful letter from an anonymous woman who advised us that although she believed it is wrong for therapists to "intentionally or unintentionally push clients to search for sexual abuse on very little basis," she also believed FMSF may be at fault for "not screening in any way those whom you count in your numbers." She went on to describe the problem in her own family and in particular to note that her husband had seized on FMSF literature and set up a straw man and rationale. "Please be clearer in your letters about criteria for whether what you are saying applies to a given situation; otherwise you are aiding abusers-in-denial in avoiding reality."

Ordinarily, we do not respond to anonymous information, and we never enter anonymous communications in our count of families. That is the first step in screening. We have had people call us with what sounded like very credible stories and information, but if there is no way that we could follow-up, we do not use that information. For every family that is included in our list, we have a name (sometimes, we understand, a pseudonym) and an address so that any information we have can be corroborated by other researchers. Because we mail information to callers, addresses are automatically verified. In addition, in the majority of cases, we phone back the person who called and thus verify a phone number.

We generally talk to first-time callers for 30 to 40 minutes. That is why it is so difficult to get through to the office on the phone and why we need at least 30 people to help us with the return calls. That is the beginning. As we have said over and over again, we cannot determine the truth or falsity of any story that we hear; we can simply record and look for patterns. We are not clairvoyant.

Only some of the people who tell us stories are included in our counts. We try to filter out all but those stories in which "repressed memory" is clearly an issue. There have been hundreds and hundreds of callers who have told us stories of their children being taken from them by human services organizations. These are not repressed memory issues. There have been letters from people in prisons and there have been people who have told us that indeed they were guilty of abuse but not of the things for which they are currently accused. These are not

considered "clear" cases. We are happy to send information to each person who calls if s/he wants it, but that does not mean that we necessarily include the story in the count. In addition to the moral considerations, FMSF has too much to lose to "harbor perpetrators."

Are there mistakes in our list? We are human beings working in a situation of uncertainty and ambiguity. Of course there must be some errors. When resources permit, we will be able to go back to records and determine error rates - if it is ever possible to know such things. Now we struggle to keep up with the flood of calls and questions from desperate people.

We ask that people be cautious and use their critical thinking skills and evaluate each case on its own merits rather than rushing to judgment. Hiding behind FMSF would be just as wrong as hiding behind "in denial."

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*Many survivors are being encouraged to sue their parents. "Get strong by suing," is suggested in "Courage to Heal." "Shifting the Burden of Truth" by Crnich & Crnich tells how to do it. Seventeen percent of the people in our family counts have been threatened or actually sued. "We won but we lost," is the way some families describe their experience.*

## WHEN YOUR DAUGHTER SUES YOU

This is a summary of the legal process, from our perspective, in the recently concluded lawsuit against us by our daughter.

While in therapy during 1990 and 1991, our thirty-five year old daughter called our friends, neighbors, relatives, law enforcement agencies and Child Protective Services in three states in her attempt to establish the validity of her recovered "repressed memories" of childhood sexual abuse. Her initial delusions of sexual child abuse gradually evolved into "memories" of satanic rituals, murder and drug abuse. It appears that her primary objective was to find someone who could corroborate her beliefs. However, she told many of these individuals that she intended to sue us, her parents. A few of those whom our daughter called alerted us to her intentions.

On October 3, 1991, we received a letter via certified mail from an attorney in another state. This attorney stated that she was authorized by our daughter to negotiate a financial settlement for injuries we had caused to our daughter when she was a child. The letter gave a deadline for our response. (The attorney's address is in State A; we live in State B; and our daughter lives in State C.) We immediately delivered this threatening letter to our local attorney who chose not to respond to the letter.

### WHERE DO 2,345 FAMILIES LIVE ?- 01/01/93

|   |          |          |          |          |
|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| AK(8)   | AL (5)   | AR (5)   | AZ 66)   | CA (366) |
| CO (35)   | CT (27)  | DE (7)   | FL (91)  | GA (31)  |
| HI (3)  | IA (15)  | ID (16)  | IL (88)  | IN (20)  |
| KS (26)   | KY (8)   | LA (8)   | MA (70)  | MD (37)  |
| ME (10)   | MI (77)  | MN (44)  | MO (51)  | MS (2)   |
| MT (9)  | NC (23)  | ND (3)   | NE (10)  | NH (6)   |
| NJ (73)   | NM (15)  | NV (14)  | NY (104) | OH (76)  |
| OK (19)   | OR (46)  | PA (158) | RI (7)   | SC (9)   |
| SD (5)  | TN (13)  | TX (84)  | UT (123) | VA (30)  |
| VT (10)   | WA (118) | WI (100) | WY (5)   | DC (6)   |
| VI (1)Canada - AB (4)BC (23), MB (26), NS (2), ON (91)    |          |          |          |          |
| PQ (3),SK (4) England(4)France (2) Israel (2) Germany (1) |          |          |          |          |

About six weeks later, on 21 November 1991, our daughter filed her lawsuit against us in a Civil Action in Federal District Court in State A. We had lived in State A twenty years prior, during part of the time that our daughter alleged she had been sexually abused. The charges against us were in great detail, totaled nine pages, and covered a period of thirty years!

We didn't know that the charges had been filed until 5 February 1992 when a deputy from the local Sheriff's office delivered to each of us a Summons. The cover letter accompanying the Summons was from the same attorney authorized by our daughter to negotiate a financial settlement four months earlier. It was clear that the Summons had been prepared by the same attorney. Our daughter was representing herself (Pro Se) in her lawsuit against us, but she had hired this attorney to prepare the Summons and to file it in Federal District Court. We do not know why the Summons was delayed three months before it was served.

We immediately took the Summons to our local attorney who advised that we obtain an attorney in State A where the charges had been filed. We did not know any attorneys in State A, so we called friends who happened to live in the same city where the Court is located. These friends gave us the name of an attorney who had once represented them. We in turn gave our local Attorney #1 the name, address, and phone number of Attorney #2 in State A. The two attorneys talked on the phone. Attorney #2 agreed to answer the Summons and to start work on defending us. The Summons was immediately sent by Fax to Attorney #2 and we mailed him a \$1,000 retainer fee.

Attorney #2 proceeded in our defense. In addition to answering the Summons, he took care of other court requirements and began initial phases of the Discovery Process. After a couple of months, he phoned to ask us if we might have insurance coverage for the situation. We did have insurance and sent to him via Fax a copy of a liability policy we have had with Company (I) since 1967. At the same time, we remembered we had a second policy with an insurance company which has an office locally. We immediately delivered a copy of the Summons to insurance Company (II) where we have had coverage only since 1986.

Insurance Company (I) located in State D, replied to Attorney #2 that they refused to defend us because some of the charges in the Summons were for time before 1967 and all charges were for actions excluded by the Policy, i.e. willful acts of misconduct such as rape, murder, cannibalism, etc.

We argued that they had an obligation to defend us since the only cause for the lawsuit was a mentally disturbed individual who was suing and that none of the allegations were based on any facts and that therefore their policy exclusions did not apply.

Meanwhile, insurance Company (II), located in state B where we live, initiated action to come to our defense. (Perhaps because we know the local agent personally?)

Before proceeding with the defense process by the insurance company, we need to digress to explain some of the activity by the court and by Attorney #2. The Judge in this case had issued an order to our daughter that she obtain a lawyer to represent her. He gave her a thirty (30) day deadline. Subsequently, our daughter requested an extension to this deadline and with the concurrence of our attorneys several extensions were granted. Meanwhile, the Court established the trial date of February 1993, one year from the date of serving the Summons.

Dates for completion of Discovery, etc. were also established by the Court. Our Attorney #2 and our daughter, Pro Se, exchanged lists of probable witnesses and lists of records and documents to be produced for purpose of Discovery. By mid-July 1992, Attorney #2 had used up the second thousand dollars.

We had begun to gather information and documents a year earlier when we learned that our daughter was threatening to sue us. We acquired affidavits from our other four children and twenty-five friends and neighbors. In the very beginning, we offered our documentation to Attorney #2, but he decided to have us hold the items until some later date.

In March 1992, we learned about the False Memory Syndrome Foundation (FMSF). They sent us considerable information about "repressed memories." Up until that time, we thought we were the only parents in the world with this problem. We had no idea what was going on with our daughter that caused her to falsely accuse everyone in her family of sexual child abuse, satanic worship, murder and drug abuse. FMSF gave us names of other families who had the same problem as we were having. It was from these families that we learned we should wipe the cobwebs off those old storage boxes in the garage in search of family history and records.

We collected photographs and compiled home movies that showed that our daughter could not have had a baby at age eleven as she had claimed. We worked night and day, around the clock, gathered up report cards of all the children, family history, genealogy, awards, activity cards, church records, employment records, medical

The following story generated a great deal of public interest in Canada last fall.

#### Alberta Report

November 2, 1992

#### "My abusers made me do it"

*A Canadian letter carrier, G, was arrested in 1989 after taking \$1,200 in cash on a credit card that she had stolen. When arrested she was in possession of two other stolen credit cards. She pleaded guilty in 1989 and received a one year suspended sentence. She was fired from her job.*

*The Canadian Union of Postal Workers who took G's case to arbitration argued that G was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of sexual assault she suffered at age five.*

*A Canadian Federal labour arbitrator ruled that "The letter carrier must be reinstated in her job with Canada Post because her theft was a result of childhood sexual abuse compounded by later sexual harassment on the job."*

records and hundreds of letters our daughter had written that proved she was a wonderful, loving, caring daughter...until she began therapy in early 1989. We were able to show we are a perfectly normal, hard working, God-fearing, church oriented American family...not likely to have been involved in satanic cult worship, drug abuse, murder, cannibalism, and other depravities.

By the time we received the letter from our Insurance Company (II) in early July 1992, we had in hand a big stack of defense documentation. Our insurance company gave us the name of Attorney #3 and Attorney #4 whom they had hired to represent us. The insurance company agreed to pay for our defense, but at the same time they hired Attorney #5 to represent them in a separate action asking the Court to relieve them from responsibility to defend or pay damages in the event we were found guilty.

We were very relieved to know we were being represented by one Insurance Company. We immediately called Attorneys #3 and #4 and arranged to visit with them a few days later. We made photo copies of all the documents we had prepared for our defense and drove 1,000 miles to the attorneys' office in State A. Attorney #3 and #4 and a legal aide had allocated half a day to meet with us to discuss what they called 'this interesting and unusual case.' Afterward, they invited our Attorney #2 to join us for lunch.

The situation had been made easier because a few days before our meeting, our Attorney #2 had transferred his entire file to the new law firm that had been hired by our insurance company. The new Attorneys, #3 and #4, had reviewed our case before our arrival. They were pleased that by this first meeting we had compiled so much information about our family, thereby enlightening them as to the true situation. They had borrowed from the library COURAGE TO HEAL and with our information were able to understand they were not dealing with sexual child abuse, assault and battery, and intentional emotional stress as our daughter had stated in her Summons. It became clear to them that the issue at hand was "recovered repressed memories" which had been encouraged by this book and by our daughter's therapists who had planted, propagated, and cultivated the seeds of delusion in the mind of our beautiful daughter.

The new attorneys were pleased to accept the documentation we had accumulated and asked for specific additional items. During August and September 1992, we mailed at least 2,000 pages of additional documentation to our attorneys. This included newspaper articles and research papers FMSF had sent to us about "repressed memories." Toward the very end, when Discovery time was getting short, The False Memory Syndrome Foundation mailed directly to our attorneys some research papers

on "repressed memories" by Dr. Elizabeth Loftus. FMSF also sent other related articles on the subject.

At the same time, a great deal of effort on our part was put into identifying specific contradictions to our daughter's false charges and statements. We used family photographs, affidavits from family and friends, airline tickets that proved dates, military orders that proved dates, old letters showing family activities... whatever we could find in those old boxes to prove contradictions. In her most recent weird "memories," our daughter had contradicted herself. Although it was very difficult, because the things she had written didn't make any sense, we studied her "memories" carefully...looking for all contradictions.

Since Insurance Company (I) had asked for relief from the Court, we retained Attorney #2 to represent us against that action. Meanwhile, Attorney #4 made another attempt to get Insurance Company (I) to come into the case. After a length of time, Insurance Company (I) agreed and joined Insurance Company (II) sharing the existing law firm and the expenses of our defense. At the same time, Insurance Company (I) hired a separate Attorney #6, to obtain relief from obligation to defend and to pay damages. Attorney #6 filed a separate Civil Action against us and against our daughter in the same Court. We turned this second Summons over to our Attorney #2 who answered to the Court.

In July 1992, our daughter's Attorney Advisor #7 had written us stating they were willing to settle our of court and mentioned a dollar amount. Our insurance companies were not willing to negotiate.

By September 1992, we and our insurance companies had involved in this case six different attorneys, a Federal District Judge, two insurance companies, two lawsuits in which we are defendants, and numerous Orders from the Court. Our daughter was still acting as her own attorney in the case, but she was being advised and assisted by her Attorney #7.

Our Attorney #4 was demanding that our daughter produce all of her therapy records. She had begun therapy after a lengthy and difficult labor with the birth of her first child at age thirty-three. During the course of three and a half years, she had seen six different

therapists, attended group therapy, joined support groups for Survivors of Incest and Sexual Child Abuse, read volumes and volumes of self-help books including COURAGE TO HEAL. She had traveled to two different states to see specialists who gave tests to survivors of satanic rituals.

The final extension to the Court's deadline for our daughter to obtain an attorney was drawing to an end.

Our Attorney #4 had obtained the services of a psychiatrist and was in the process of scheduling a psychiatric evaluation for our daughter. (The state in which the

"But finally we must accept that the therapeutic situation has limitations that cannot be transcended. These have already been noted: the therapeutic situation cannot get around the problems of therapist bias and suggestion, patient expectation, and direction of causality. Our theories can only be tested through experiments, whether designed by humans or by nature." Samuel B. Guze, M.D. (1992). *Why Psychiatry Is a Branch of Medicine*. Oxford University Press

lawsuit was filed gave us that right.)

Attorney #4 scheduled our daughter for one week of deposition before a video camera and a court reporter. We had been invited and planned to attend our daughter's deposition. Our daughter would be required to pay her own travel expenses, food and hotel accommodations.

Meanwhile, we sent another \$1,000 to our Attorney #2 to look out for our interests in the conflict with our insurance companies.

By the end of September 1992, our daughter was faced with the following:

a. She must produce her therapy records.

b. She must travel to State A for one week of Deposition.

c. She must travel to State A for psychiatric evaluation.

d. There is no one who can support any of her allegations.

e. There are no records or documents which can support her in any way.

f. Our insurance companies have filed actions to prevent having to pay...no matter the outcome of the lawsuit.

On 29 September 1992, our daughter called Attorney #4 to say she wanted to drop her charges. Upon advice from her Attorney #7, she agreed to Dismiss with Prejudice if we and our insurance companies agreed not to sue her for expenses we had incurred in the defense of the lawsuit. (With Prejudice means that she can not file any of these charges against us at any time in the future.)

On 5 October 1992, the U.S. District Judge signed the ORDER OF DISMISSAL WITH PREJUDICE that included the statement, "...this Voluntary Dismissal with Prejudice shall operate as an adjudication upon the merits of this lawsuit..."

The corollary actions by both of our insurance companies were dismissed within a few days following.

Our daughter was being faced with additional problems which she probably did not yet know about: 1) At our daughter's expense, our Attorney #4 was in the process of scheduling depositions for many of the sixty-seven people she had named as her witnesses located in several states; and 2) our Attorney #4 was able to get permission from both insurance companies to hire Dr. Elizabeth Loftus as our expert witness. Dr. Loftus had just begun to study some of the case materials when the case was dismissed.

We would like to have had the lawsuit proceed past the point where our daughter would have had to provide her therapy records. We would like to have known who it was that convinced our daughter that we had sexually abused her as a child, tortured her, taken part in satanic rituals and murdered babies.

We would like to have had our daughter evaluated by the psychiatrist that our attorney had selected. We had

hoped the psychiatrist could have made a proper diagnosis and could have advised a proper course of treatment.

This has been the most trying experience in our forty-four years of marriage!

Some of the things we have learned:

1. Liability insurance in our society is essential, but don't expect the insurance companies to run to your defense. Some will not. Retain an attorney who is experienced in dealing with insurance companies to represent you against your own insurance company.

2. Insurance companies should provide for your defense, but should be encouraged not to settle out of court. If insurance companies didn't pay off so easily there would be less incentive for lawsuits.

3. If we had counter-sued our daughter, it would have brought her homeowners insurance into her defense and provided her an attorney. That might have meant taking the case to jury. We understand that jury decision is absolutely unpredictable, no matter how absurd the charges.

4. In our legal system, one is supposed to be held innocent until proven guilty. However, in these cases it appears to be necessary to prove one's innocence. Concurrently, it is necessary to make sure all parties understand the reality of "repressed memories." It is essential to read and pass on to your attorney everything available on the subject.

5. It appears anyone can sue anyone for anything. And in a civil case, one apparently doesn't need to provide evidence to get a case into court. This case had no merit whatsoever. No evidence, no witnesses, and no corroboration. Even so, we spent about \$5,000 and our insurance companies spent many thousands more (we don't know how much, yet.)

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The "Meeting with your child's therapist" booklet is at the printers and will be mailed separately to FMSF members. Because we will soon have a new address, it seemed sensible to wait to print it when we could include our new address.

"We know that events, including traumatic ones, can be recalled accurately. Even very young children can remember and describe experiences. However, memory is not always accurate or complete and is subject to influence. This applies to children and adults. Many factors have been identified as affecting accurate recall, including the nature of the experience, the role of the actor, length of exposure, passage of time, age, and how the memory is tested." *Berliner & Loftus (1992). Sexual abuse accusations: Desperately seeking reconciliation. Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 7 (4) p 571.*

The Commerce Department estimates that the cost of health care will be over 14% of the U.S. economy in 1992.

*New York Times, January 5, 1993*

## Different Perspectives of an Abuse Story

The following columns by Thrity Umrigar are reprinted with permission of the Beacon Journal, Akron, Ohio. These vignettes seem to us to capture what we perceive to be the case in most of the stories that we hear: people care about each other but they don't know how to get together.

December 7, 1992

### REMINDED OF WHAT NEVER WAS

#### •Was father responsible for breaking up family, or was it therapist?

My caller was persistent. We spoke on the phone several times, with me scanning her tone, her words, for anything that could be my excuse for hanging up. I found nothing. She was intelligent, dignified, articulate. She also sent me information on the topic she wanted me to write about—false memory syndrome.

The syndrome refers to cases when an adult undergoing therapy remembers previously repressed memories of childhood incest and sexual abuse that actually did not occur. The woman says she and her husband were victims of that syndrome—victimized by their three adult daughters who all accuse her husband of incest.

Now, I know what you're thinking. I did too. Three daughters? All saying the same thing? How could they all be deluded? But the woman has a ready answer. All three daughters went to the same therapist—a therapist, the woman claims, who has convinced her children that they were abused by their father.

The Akron couple is now attending a support group in Cleveland for victims of the false memory syndrome. There is a False Memory Syndrome Foundation in Philadelphia. Psychologists from universities such as Harvard and Stanford are on its advisory board.

#### Make no excuse

I was reluctant to do this column because I didn't want to give even one perpetrator an excuse to hid behind. What changed my mind was the rational language of the brochures the woman sent me. Each one of these acknowledged that numerous cases of incest occur every year and that perpetrators should be dealt with severely. But they also questioned the thinking of those therapists who see childhood sexual abuse as the cause of all of the adult's problems today.

I don't know if the father, a former executive of a rubber company, is guilty. But I do believe my caller, a nurse, is convinced her husband of 38 years is incapable of such actions. "If God came down and said, 'Yes, he did it,' I'd say 'No, he didn't,'" she said. "And I'm a religious person."

"There is no profile of a child or adult victim or of an offender that can be used to accurately classify individuals in either group (*abused or abuser*). Nor is there any reliable way to distinguish true from false accusations or denials. Is there a typical abuse scenario? Not really. Abuse occurs in various contexts and includes a whole range of circumstances and activities."

Berliner & Loftus (1992). Sexual abuse accusations: Desperately seeking reconciliation. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7(4), p 570.

The couple have handled their problem differently than many others. Instead of hiding from the world in shame, they have sought out the support of their friends. They have spoken to their priest. The husband called his sons-in-law and told them the accusations were false. They have seen a psychologist to deal with their loss.

And a loss it is. The annual trips to the ocean with the entire family are now a thing of the past. There are too many happy memories swirling around for the woman to face going back. In grocery stores, the cookies and candies are constant reminders of the seven grandchildren she can no longer see or buy things for. Each Thanksgiving, the house used to bustle with company. No more.

#### Tampering with memory

Ray Hyman, professor of psychology at the University of Oregon, is on the advisory board of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. He says some patients take their cues from the therapist and believe what they suggest happened. "By the way the questions are asked you can insert things into memory."

Research done by Elizabeth Loftus, psychologist at the University of Washington in Seattle, has shown how easy it is to "implant" false memories.

In one study, Loftus had family members of the people in the study drop small suggestions that the subjects had been lost at age 5. Later, the subjects had detailed "memories" of being lost.

Truth is an elusive thing. The woman believes she knows the truth of what did not occur. Her children obviously

believe they know the truth of what did occur. Somewhere, a secret lies, locked in a human heart.

Maybe.

December 14, 1992

### REKINDLING LONG-SECRET ANGUISH

#### •After mother defends spouse on incest claims, daughters reaffirm it

A week ago, I wrote of an Akron couple whose three daughters have accused the father of incest. The mother believes the abuse never occurred and that her children's long-repressed memories were brought about by an over-zealous therapist.

This week you will hear from the three adult children. Like their mother, they too feel the loss of family. But their loss is compounded by the fact that for a time they also lost their trust in the world. As the eldest daughter said, "everything I thought was true, was not."

Watching the women's faces as they describe the torturous road to discovery they have walked down the last two years, it is hard to imagine that their memories of abuse are false.

"When the memories came back I thought I was going to die," the youngest said. "You lose all you ever had."

Her sister said that it was because she was beginning to get slivers of memories that she decided to see a therapist in 1990. After a year, that therapist referred her to one that specialized in sexual abuse. Soon, her other two sisters also started going to her therapist. All three said the sexual abuse occurred from the time they were children through their teen-age years.

### Heart of darkness

The women paint the picture of a well-to-do, socially respected family that gave the appearance of health and normalcy, but one which was nursing a dark secret. It was this heart of darkness, the sisters say, that finally ripped the facade of happy family vacations and elegant dinner parties.

"What the alcoholic hides behind is alcohol," the second daughter said. "What my father hides behind is his goodness."

When the mother defends her husband of 38 years against her daughter's charges, it is this goodness she refers to. The daughters themselves seem ambivalent about whether she knew of the abuse. What they are not ambivalent about is their feelings of betrayal by her.

These women, who have children of their own, speak almost wistfully of their longing for a mother. They resent the fact that she believes her husband rather than them.

The sisters all have had problems with alcohol. The second daughter was also bulimic. She started throwing up when she was 15—and says her mother never knew. The eldest said that her parents got therapy for themselves to deal with her drinking—but never for her.

Despite their journey through hell, they all agree that the freedom they now experience was worth the pain. "You lose your life to gain a new life," the second said. "Praise God, the three of us are on the other side with our families intact."

### Walls and bridges

The women said that despite the hurt, they pray for their parents. Their mother has said she prays for them too. The sisters want their father to admit his guilt and seek help. They want their mother to believe her children.

The mother wants her children to admit that they are wrong, that their father is incapable of the crimes they accuse him of. Both sides say that unless each side recants, no relationship is possible.

But while nothing else in this tangled, sordid story is clear, this much I would like to hope for—that from the mother's tears over the loss of her children and from the sisters' obvious longing for affirmation and nurturing, perhaps something is buildable, some tiny bridge of acceptance and reconciliation. Because if this family has a heart of darkness, it also has many wounded hearts.

And this Christmas, I wish for all these wounded hearts a little solace, a little peace.

### Questions raised by these two columns

*What kind of "therapy" destroys families? The parents refer to happy memories. The children refer to "happy family vacations and elegant dinner parties." Both parents and children have memories of happy family times. The children say their family appeared normal and healthy. One daughter describes her father as hiding behind "his goodness." The mother is praying for the children. The children are praying for their parents. Surely here are signs of people who care for each other. What is keeping them apart?*

*We are not clairvoyant and do not pretend to know the truth or falsity of any stories that we hear or read, but stories such as these raise many questions for us. We understand that the diagnosis was incest. We don't know if all evidence was examined and if alternative hypotheses were considered? True or false? Right or wrong? We don't know about the accuracy of the diagnosis. But we can and should ask, "What kind of treatment plan takes a family that all seem to agree had much happiness over the years and tears it asunder on the basis of newly recovered 'repressed memories'?" "Did the data warrant such drastic action?"*

*Children are not born into this world the exclusive property of their parents. Children are born into a social and cultural structure that is part of their birthright. Did the data warrant a treatment plan that denies children any contact with their grandparents — their birthright?*

*Repression of memory is a highly controversial theory. A report of memory could reflect a true past event, but it might not. In order to fully evaluate the authenticity of a memory report, it must be examined in light of current knowledge about how memory works. Certainly it is the case that people remember things that they haven't thought of or remembered for quite some time. But when someone claims sudden memory for a series of horrible events spanning years and years, a serious question about whether any current theories of memory can accommodate this arises. When three people make the same claim, the issue of a scientific explanation is all the more strained. We need to see the scientific evidence that this can be possible and how probable. We need to know, for example, why there were never such reports from people who experienced the documented horrors of World War II. At the same time, we do have both scientific and clinical evidence of the power of suggestion. The 1978 Jim Jones mass suicide is one of the most dramatic.*

*We understand that the three women have total belief in their memories. They have experienced horrific pain in their memories of abuse, in the thoughts that their parents betrayed them, and in the loss of contact with people for whom they say they are praying. They have had a complete reinterpretation of history. "As the eldest daughter said, 'Everything I thought was true, was not.'"*

*"The sisters all reported that they abused alcohol. The second daughter was also bulimic." Are those supposed to be signs of abuse? Research evidence indicates there is not necessarily any cause and effect relationship*

*between bulimia and sexual abuse. (American Journal of Psychiatry 149(4) April 1992). Research in the past decade has shown genetic factors to be linked with alcohol abuse. We don't know from these vignettes how the sisters have dealt with their own feelings of conflict about their personal responsibility in the issue of alcohol abuse.*

*We were told, however, that, "Both sides say that unless each side recants, no relationship is possible." We understand that many parents and children and sisters and brothers share these feelings that nothing can happen until there is a recanting. Is this a necessary or realistic prerequisite for families to start to get together?*

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## RECONCILIATIONS

In past newsletters we have reprinted two stories of families that had reconciled after the people with memories had recanted. In these cases the women had confronted their families and one even initiated legal action. In both of these cases, three years elapsed between the move away from the "therapy memories" and the reconciliation. In another case, the family was never actually confronted, although extended family members had been told, and the span of time from the realization that the "therapy memories" were not accurate and reuniting with the family was eight months. These women and others are currently writing their stories for publication. These are "happily ever after" stories and we hope that we hear thousands of such stories.

Our understanding of the reconciliation process is "informal." Although structured interviews and demographic surveys are in process with people who have told us that they have been through the experience of recovering memories they have since concluded were false, that information is not yet ready to report. We are working as fast as resources allow. At this time, we report our informal observations from the stories we have heard and from the letters we have received.

The majority of the people (approximately 45) who have told us they had experienced false memories are women in their 30's who had been in therapy for five to ten years and who left for some reason. These reasons included loss of insurance, death of parent, suicide attempt, missed appointment, etc. Many of these women told us that it has taken about three years for them to get on their feet again. FMSF played no role in their experience although several have written to say that the material we have sent has been helpful to them in understanding their own experience and that they would like to help others who have had similar experiences. People who have met or talked to these women describe them as kind, courageous, intelligent, articulate and struggling intently with their feelings about what they many have thought or done in respect to their family. Professionals and family members who have heard them speak at meetings write of their great respect for these people.

In the past three months, families have written to tell us about lots of little changes that they feel may be posi-

tive. These include a number of stories in which the person with memories has agreed, for reasons that we wish we knew, to consult another therapist with whom the parents also felt comfortable.

We are aware of seven situations in which contact has been resumed without the intervention of a therapist. We are going to tell about three of these situations. These are not "and they lived happily ever after" stories. These are not situations in which the individual with memories has had three years to work things out.

### Part 1 - How did contact come about?

Family 1. "How it came about was that her two sisters decided enough was enough and telephoned her. They left a message on her machine since no one was home. She returned a call to the sister who happens to be the most vulnerable, and said she was happy someone had broken the ice." After reassurances and after two years of no contact, the daughter called the mother.

Family 2. The person with memories received a copy of a letter her sister wrote to her therapist. "I'm K, D's oldest sister. I'm writing this after my most recent phone conversation with D. I found it to be very disturbing and it prompted me to write this letter."

"I felt as though I was talking to a complete stranger. Someone who is so full of anger, bitterness and self hate. Little by little she's being destroyed inside. She's pulling away from her family, the ones who love and care about her the most. Each time I speak to D, instead of seeing her become healthier, she's becoming more and more self destructive. I can't stand to see that happening to her." The letter continues for several pages.

The family believes that it was this letter that prompted a phone call from the daughter before Thanksgiving asking if she could spend the holiday with the family. "It is as if nothing ever happened! No recanting, but complete (apparent) return to normal. D spent Thanksgiving day with us; stayed overnight instead of returning to her apartment and she "camped out" in her sister's room even sleeping in a pair of my flannel pajamas! We spent the next weekend at her apartment for dinner. She was affectionate and loving, to all of us, her buoyant "old" self. We are all flabbergasted, but I think K's phone call preceding the letter must have started it."

Family 3. Family three has taken aggressive action since the accusations began. This has backfired for them on several occasions and once their daughter picked up and moved across the country (for whatever reason). Before the holidays, they made contact once again and working with in-laws and friends arranged a meeting. This time they took the advice of a psychiatrist who perhaps helped them to be more sympathetic to their daughter's perspective. Rather than project their own anger, they let their daughter know that they understood that she was suffering and in pain and that her pain was very important to them. They reminded their daughter of some of the happy times they had had together and told her of their very real love. They also said that they knew that some of their actions must have contributed to her anger

and suggestibility. After several years of no contact, the daughter said that she would come home for the holidays and attend her sister's wedding. The daughter apologized for some things but not others.

It is important that we do not draw unwarranted conclusions about the results of the "proactive" stance in each of these stories. We do not know, for example, how many families have been equally "proactive" with no results. We do not know if "proactive" stances have further alienated most victims. That is always a problem with reporting "cases." It is all too easy to draw conclusions. The information we learn from case studies can help us to formulate questions which can then be studied in a more objective manner. While case studies are critically necessary to understanding, any conclusions apply only to the cases under observation.

We suspect that this issue is one that contributes to the different perspectives that clinicians and researchers have expressed on the reality of repressed memories. To use again the metaphor of our understanding of our solar system. Case studies for millennia have indicated that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. That is the experience of each of us on this Earth. We have learned, however, that the scientific reality is that it is the Earth that is doing the moving around the Sun. Case studies have profound meaning to the people involved but do not necessarily represent scientific understanding.

### Part 2 - What happened next?

Family 1. The mother and daughter in this story had a meeting with the daughter's therapist whom the mother felt was not very professional. "He kept trying to set me up so that I would say 'it could have happened.'" The mother reported that after the meeting "I told her that I feel for her pain and I really cared, otherwise I would not have traveled so far to have this meeting." They spent the rest of the day together and left on good terms. A few weeks later a family celebration brought the extended family together and the daughter came. The mother reports that there were undercurrents of tension. Some of the siblings and in-laws are still extremely angry about the trauma the accusations have brought to this family.

"My eldest daughter and I discussed the situation. She wanted to know how I felt. I've tried to have a positive approach. My therapist tells me he can't believe these children grew up in the same house. Unfortunately there seems to be a veil I can not lift. There is a feeling that our relationship will never be what it once was. Until she realized after seven years of therapy with this man that it is time for a change or until I agree that 'it could have happened' the family relationship will be tenuous and mundane."

Family 2. "We have our fingers crossed. We are accepting everything at face value, but remain ready for anything. But I think her liberation from the medication, and her sense of growing past her therapist are more than

just positive signs. The therapist must be furious. I imagine she could still scuttle things, but, if she's got any common sense at all, she must realize she's up against a family unity that can, in the end, overwhelm her."

We received another letter from this family in which they were concerned that their daughter was pulling back into former patterns.

Family 3. We received a phone call several weeks after the news of the approaching holiday reunion to hear that the reunion plans were off. A few weeks later we received a call that the reunion plans were on again.

### Part 3. Waiting

You will just have to wait with us to hear the rest of these stories. The scripts have not been written yet.

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"On again, off again", "tensions", "tenuous", "mundane." Reconciliation will not be easy. Inevitable hurts that have been felt. There are some families who tell us that they would do almost anything just to see their children and grandchildren. There are others who say that unless there is recanting and their names are cleared, reconciliation is impossible. We think these three stories were particularly interesting because from them we may learn that the time frame of the process may be greatly shortened if people can put their "hurts" aside and not insist on prerequisites to begin the process of bringing families back together. There may be many routes to stories with happy endings. That is what we hope to learn.

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STOP ABUSE BY COUNSELORS is a national client-advocate organization which may be reached at P.O. Box 68292, Seattle, WA 98168, (206) 243-2723. This does not imply STOP ABC endorsement of any FMS literature, speeches, or political stance.

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### Research Notes

Thank you to all who have completed the 20 page family questionnaire. We understand that answering some of the questions is emotionally very difficult. We are currently entering this information into the computer and this week we have mailed survey forms to another 250 families. We will continue to collect this important information as quickly as our resources allow.

For those of you who have only contacted the Foundation in the past few months, you may be unaware that we have been collecting as much data about the demographics and family circumstances as we can in order to help understand what is happening. We are making every effort to do this in a systematic manner that can be reviewed and checked by others. In past newsletters, we have reported on various questions from the first 140 surveys that we received as we analyzed the information. We are now putting that information into a single paper and updating our numbers with the new data as quickly as we

can.

We have data from 342 questionnaires that parents completed about therapists. 100 of the respondents did not know anything about the professional qualifications of the therapist that they felt had influenced their child. Of the remaining 242 we found the following pattern

|                       |                                  |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|
| psychiatrists/doctors | 9%                               |
| psychologists         | 25%                              |
| social workers        | 18%                              |
| counselors/therapists | 48% (religious, alcohol, family) |

Do these percentages reflect the percentage of therapists in each professional category or do they say something about training for psychotherapy? We thought it might be interesting to compare these percentages with professionals who have called the office to ask for information about FMS. We took the first 300 names for which we had comparable information.

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| psychiatrists/doctors | 33% |
| psychologists         | 34% |
| social workers        | 8%  |
| counselors/therapists | 25% |

#### Researcher Request

Do you have "therapy letters" written to relatives by those suffering from memories of abuse? Researcher would like to analyze such letters to help learn about the range, nature and extent of the alleged sexual abuse. The results of such an analysis should add to our understanding and perspective of the problem — especially in cases that are not clear. It would be helpful, although not necessary, if a return mailing address and phone number from the correspondent could be provided in case there are questions about the contents of the letter. If you are interested in helping with this research, contact Martha L. Rogers, Ph.D., 17662 Irvine Boulevard, Suite 12, Tustin, CA 92680.

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#### MEETINGS / NOTICES

*Professionals and Parents in Support of the FMS Foundation.*

To place a notice in this column in February, please be sure that we receive the information in writing by the 25th of January.

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Contact your state liaison to find out about meetings in your area. Not all meetings are listed.

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**Seattle, Washington**  
**January 16, 1993**

Call Chuck, 206-364-4711 or Phil 206-364-1643

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**Arizona Area**  
**February 6, 1993**  
**Pam Freyd, Guest Speaker**  
Call Jim at 602-860-8981

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**New England Area**  
**February 7, 1993**  
**Clark University**  
Call Joe for directions 508-752-0554

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**New York Area**  
**Sunday February 7, 1993**  
**Guest Speaker, Eleanor Goldstein**  
**Author of *Confabulations***  
Call Eileen for details 516-379-5285

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**Philadelphia Area**  
**Second Saturday of each month**  
Same time, same place, February 13  
Call the office for details.

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**Columbia, Missouri**  
**February 20, 1993**  
9:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M.  
**Pam Freyd, Guest Speaker**  
Holiday Inn Executive Center  
at I-70 and Stadium Road.  
To confirm reservations, call 314-445-8531  
Call on or before 2/10  
Room cost is \$64 per night.

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#### FMS FOUNDATION CONFERENCE

**Title:** MEMORY AND REALITY: EMERGING CRISIS

**Date:** April 16-18, 1992

**Location:** Valley Forge PA Convention Center.  
Hotel information is included in this newsletter.  
Registration information will be mailed in February.

**Planned Format:** Day and a half academic conference followed by a day and a half convention. On April 16 there will be invited research presentations by speakers who represent a variety of views. On April 17, additional papers and also a panel of recanters followed by concurrent sessions on topics of interest to families.

**FMSF Conference**  
**Valley Forge (PA) Convention Center**  
**Memory and Reality: Emerging Crisis**  
**April 16-18, 1993**  
**Hotel Accomodation Information**

The convention is being held at the Valley Forge Convention Center which is where the Sheraton's two hotels are located. A special discount rate of \$75 or \$85 has been arranged, but to obtain these rates, you must contact the Sheraton directly, 215-337-2000 ext 5120 and mention False Memory Syndrome Foundation.

If you are coming in for the convention by air or train (without renting a car) we strongly urge you to reserve rooms at the Sheraton.

Other hotels in the area.

1. Comfort Inn, US 202 North, 550 West DeKalb Park, King of Prussia, PA;  
 Phone 215-962-0700, 800-424-6423  
 Single \$75.00/night, Double \$85.00/night  
 \*, \*\*  
 (10 minutes drive from the Convention C. )

2. Days Inn, Valley Forge Industrial Park (near Ft. Washington), 530 Pennsylvania Avenue, Ft. Washington;  
 Phone 215-643-1111, 800-325-2525  
 Special rates Single or Double \$39.00/night  
 \*, \*\*, +  
 (10 minutes drive from the Convention C. )

3. Marriott, 1100 Drummer's Lane, King of Prussia;  
 Phone 215-687-6700, 800-321-2211  
 Single (Thursday night \$88.00, weekend night \$69.95)\*  
 Double (Thursday night \$98.00, weekend night \$69.95)\*  
 (15 minutes from the Convention C. )

4. Guest Quarters Suite, 888 Chesterbrook Blvd, Wayne, PA 19087;  
 Phone 215-647-6700, 800-424-2900  
 Single (Thursday night \$155.00, weekend night \$89.00)\*  
 Double (Thursday night \$155.00, weekend night \$89.00)\*  
 (10-15 minutes from the Convention C. )

5. Hilton, 251 West DeKalb Park, King of Prussia, PA 19406;  
 Phone 215-337-1200, 800-445-8667  
 Special rate for single or double occupancy \$65.00/ night \*, \*\*, +  
 (10-15 minutes from the Convention C. )

6. Holiday Inn, 260 Goddard Blvd. King of Prussia, PA 19406;  
 Phone 215-265-7500, 800-465-4329  
 Special family rate \$79.00/night weekday, \$65.00/night weekend, Double occupancy, \$91.00/person/room + \$10/additional person, King-sized bed: \$99.00 \*, \*\*, +  
 (5 minutes from the Convention C. )

7. Howard Johnson's, Route 202 and South Gulph Road, King of Prussia, PA 19406;  
 Phone 215-265-4500, 800-654-2000  
 Double occupancy \$97.00/room, single \$87.00/room \*, \*\*  
 (2 miles from the Convention C. )

8. Ramada Inn, Ft. Washington;  
 Phone 800-228-2828  
 Double Thursday night \$66.00, Weekend nights \$60.00 \*  
 (15 miles from the Convention C. )

9. Stouffer, Valley Forge;  
 Phone 215-337-1800, 800-468-3571  
 Double Thursday night \$145.00, weekend nights \$79.00 \*  
 (1/2 mile from the Convention C. )

*If people have corporate or other discounts, they may be able to negotiate a lower price through the 800 service.*

\* excluding 8% sales tax

\*\* includes breakfast

+ special rate available through Maruska Pinches at 215-735-1659

# Beware the Incest-Survivor Machine

By Carol Tavis

Originally appeared in The New York Times Book Review, January 3, 1993.

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How often do you suffer from the following symptoms?

- You feel that you're bad, dirty or ashamed.
- You feel powerless, like a victim.
- You feel that there's something wrong with you deep down inside; that if people really knew you, they would leave.
- You feel unable to protect yourself in dangerous situations.
- You have no sense of your own interests, talents or goals.
- You have trouble feeling motivated.
- You feel you have to be perfect.

This checklist, from Ellen Bass and Laura Davis's book "The Courage to Heal," is supposed to identify the symptoms of incest. The trouble is that the same list could be used to identify oneself as someone who loves too much, someone who suffers from self-defeating personality disorder, or a mere human being in the late 20th century. The list is general enough to include everybody at least sometimes. Nobody doesn't fit it.

"The Courage to Heal" is the bible of the incest-recovery movement. It was published in 1988 and according to its publisher, HarperCollins, has sold more than 500,000 copies. It begat "The Courage to Heal Workbook," which begat the authors' "Allies in Healing," as well as Wendy Maltz and Beverly Holman's "Incest and Sexuality," Beverly Engel's "Right to Innocence" and E. Sue Blume's "Secret Survivors." To read these handbooks is to learn that almost any problem you have may be an indicator of abuse. Ms. Blume offers a 34-item "incest survivors' after-effects checklist" of symptoms, which range from fear of being alone in the dark to multiple personality disorder — with phobias, arthritis, low self-esteem, wearing baggy clothes, the desire to change one's name and sexual difficulties in between. For Ms. Engel, the checklist includes feeling ugly and worthless, having a tendency to apologize inappropriately, feeling like a failure, jeopardizing chances of success, feeling helpless, having problems with sex or in relationships. . . . Why, it's the all-purpose female checklist.

**T**O want to throw a small wrench into the abuse-survivor machine is like opposing censorship of pornography: nowadays, you feel you have to apologize for any support you might be providing to molesters, rapists, pedophiles and other misogynists. This need for throat-clearing is itself a problem, one that results from the terrible polarization that has emerged on the subject of the sexual abuse of children.

One side, primarily committed to protecting children, emphasizes the appalling prevalence of the abuse of children and the tendency of adults, in every generation, to deny or diminish the reality of this abuse. The other side, primarily committed to protecting adults, is concerned that in the contemporary hysteria too many innocent adults are being unjustly accused. The polarization among professionals is now so bad that researchers are quickly branded as being on one side or the other, and their work discounted by the opposition.

And both sides marshal horror stories as evidence. Read only one case of a child being treated for gonorrhea of the throat — the evidence that helped convict a man in Miami of child molestation — and you will feel a wave of nausea at what adults are capable of inflicting on children. Read only one false-accusation case, and you will feel misery and anger at what bureaucrats are capable of inflicting on parents. To further confuse the issue, the reality of the victimization of children is being obscured by a chorus of adults clamoring that they were victims too — if not as children, then as infants; if not in this life, then in a previous one. The evidence that abuse is more common than we knew is being trivialized by unvalidated claims made by pop-psychology writers that abuse is nearly *universal*, and that if you can't actually remember the abuse, that's all the more evidence that it happened to you.

Women abused as children are indeed more likely than others to be depressed and to have low self-esteem as adults, although there is no good evidence from longitudinal studies showing that such abuse *invariably* causes the entire litany of women's problems. Nor does it follow that all women who are depressed, are sexually conflicted or wear baggy clothes were abused as children. Yet many are being encouraged to rifle their memories for clues that they were.

Thus E. Sue Blume: If you doubt you were abused, minimize the abuse or think "Maybe it's my imagination," these are symptoms of "post-incest syndrome."

And Ellen Bass and Laura Davis: "If you are unable to remember any specific instances . . . but still have a feeling that something abusive happened to you, it probably did. . . . If you think you were abused and your life shows the symptoms, then you were."

And Wendy Maltz and Beverly Holman: "When survivors cannot remember their childhood or have very fuzzy memories, incest must always be considered a possibility."

And Beverly Engel: "If you have any suspicion at all, if you have any memory, no matter how vague, it probably really happened. It is far more likely that you are blocking the memories, *denying* it happened."

And if a woman suspects that she has been abducted by U.F.O.'s, that the F.B.I. is bugging her socks or that a satanic cult forced her to bear a child that was half human and half dog, must she (and we) likewise assume that "it probably really happened"?

The sexual-abuse-victim story crystallizes many of society's anxieties about the vulnerability of children, the changing roles of women and the norms of sexuality. It draws like a magnet those who wish to invoke a measure of sympathy in these unsympathetic times. It is no wonder that publishers and talk shows have a thriving business exploiting stories of abuse for commercial reasons, for these are stories that sell. The childhood abuse explanation of all one's current problems, true or exaggerated, with or without the incest variation, is now *de rigeur* for any aspiring celebrity autobiographer (Patti Davis, Frances Lear, Suzanne Somers, Roseanne Arnold, La Toya Jackson).

As individual works of confession and advice, abuse-survivor books are often reassuring and supportive. They encourage victims of childhood molestation to speak up, to understand that they are not alone and to

find help. The problem is not with the advice they offer to victims, but with their effort to create victims — to expand the market that can then be treated with therapy and self-help books. To do this, survival books all hew to a formula based on an uncritical acceptance of certain premises about the nature of memory and trauma. They offer simple answers at a time when research psychologists are posing hard questions.

To raise these questions does not mean that all "reawakened" memories are fraudulent or misguided. It does mean that we should be wary of believing every case of "me too!" that makes the news, and that we should be asking why these stories (and the advice books that play off them) are so popular now. We should also ask where these stories lead, with what consequences for individual well-being and social reform.

The great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget once reported his earliest memory — nearly being kidnapped at the age of 2. Piaget remembered sitting in his baby carriage, watching his nurse defend him from the kidnapper. He remembered the scratches she had on her face. He remembered a police officer with a short cloak and a white baton who chased the kidnapper away. But none of it happened. When Piaget was 15, his former nurse wrote to his parents to confess that she had made up the entire story. Piaget wrote, "I therefore must have heard, as a child, the account of this story . . . and projected it into the past in the form of a visual memory, which was a memory of a memory, but false."

The harvest of incest-survivor books reflects the popular vision of mind and memory, in which the mind is a camera or tape recorder: all events that happen to us are recorded in memory, although trauma often causes them to be "repressed" until a significant event "unleashes" them and reveals at last what "actually" happened. This is a view of memory inspired partly by psychoanalysis and partly by contemporary metaphors of the mind, which historically have followed major inventions. Thus, during the Industrial Revolution, the brain was likened to a machine; after the invention of the telephone, to a switchboard; after the invention of movies, to a camera; after Univ. c., to a computer.

Today many psychotherapists assume that everything significant that happens to us is imprinted somewhere in there, or maybe filed away in a dusty drawer (a metaphor for those of us who came of age before computers). Yet this view is increasingly at odds with that held by most academic psychologists. Researchers who study memory and the brain are discovering the brain's capacity to construct and invent reality from the information it processes. Their studies support what poets and novelists have always known: that memory is not a fixed thing, with its own special place or file drawer in the brain. It is a process that is constantly being reinvented. A "memory" consists of fragments of the event, subsequent discussions and reading, other people's recollections and suggestions, and, perhaps most of all, present beliefs about the past.

Thus, in the laboratory, the eminent memory researcher Elizabeth Loftus and her associates at the University of Washington have been able to inject false memories into people's minds by the mechanism of suggestion ("Remember when you were lost in that shopping mall at the age of 5?"). Similarly, the Canadian psychologist Nicholas P. Spanos and his team at Carleton University in Ottawa have created false memories of previous events and even of previous lives (at least in volunteers who believe in reincarnation). These scientists are finding that in the formation of a memory, current beliefs about past events are more important than what actually happened. This is why an event that seemed trivial when we were children can be reinterpreted and given new emotional significance when we are adults — and vice versa.

The mind does not record every detail of an event, but only a few features; we fill in the rest based on what "must have been." For an event to make it into long-term storage, a person has to perceive it, encode it and rehearse it — tell about it — or it decays. (This seems to be the major mechanism behind childhood amnesia, the fact that children do not develop long-term memory until roughly the age of 3.) Otherwise, research finds, even emotional experiences we are sure we will never forget — the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion — will fade from memory, and errors will creep into the account that remains.

**T**HIS is not easy news to take. We all get very huffy about the accuracy of our memories, and no wonder; they are the table of contents of our lives. That is why the debate over the vision of memory held by academic researchers and the one held by many therapists and laypersons is so fraught with consequences, legal and psychological. Families are being torn apart by adults who, in therapy, said they remembered their parents abusing them, and now feel the need to confront, to sever relations entirely or to sue for damages. In 1989, the state of Washington passed legislation allowing people to sue their alleged molesters for damages within three years of the time they remembered the abuse, and to date at least a dozen other states have enacted similar laws. Is such legislation warranted? How many children who are abused repress the memory — and how many have trouble forgetting?

Two recent books, scholarly yet highly readable, beautifully illuminate these complexities. In "Hidden Memories: Voices and Visions From Within," Robert A. Baker, a retired professor of psychology who taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Stanford University and the University of Kentucky, reviews the research on the processes by which perfectly normal individuals can come to believe passionately that they were molested in the crib, abducted by U.F.O.'s or victimized by a satanic cult. And in "Trauma and Recovery," Judith Lewis Herman, a psychiatrist who teaches at the Harvard Medical School, weaves together clinical and empirical evidence in exploring the nuances of trauma in all its varieties.

You would get none of this information or nuance, however, if you picked up any of the popular abuse-survivor books, such as "The Courage to Heal." None of the authors are trained in research, which is not a comment on their ability to write or to do therapy, but which does seem to be one reason for their scientific illiteracy. The authors claim to be "experts" because (a) they were themselves molested, (b) they are social workers who treat incest victims in therapy, or (c) they wrote a book. Writing a book confers further expertise, because the authors then become "nationally recognized" lecturers who conduct workshops and train other psychotherapists. In what can only

be called an incestuous arrangement, the authors of these books all rely on one another's work as supporting evidence for their own; they all endorse and recommend one another's books to their readers. If one of them comes up with a concocted statistic — such as "more than half of all women are survivors of childhood sexual trauma" — the numbers are traded like baseball cards, reprinted in every book and eventually enshrined as fact. Thus the cycle of misin-

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*In these books  
the rule is: if  
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formation, faulty statistics and unvalidated assertions maintains itself.

Consider this, from "Secret Survivors":

"Incest is easily the greatest single underlying reason why women seek therapy or other treatment. At any given time more than three-quarters of my clients are women who were molested in childhood by someone they knew. Yet . . . many, if not most, incest survivors do not know that the abuse has even occurred! . . .

"It is my experience that fewer than half of the women who experienced this trauma later remember or identify it as abuse. Therefore it is not unlikely that more than half of all women are survivors of childhood sexual trauma."

**I**N spite of Ms. Blume's emphases and exclamation marks, not one of these assertions is supported by empirical evidence, and her own experience of her own clients does not constitute such evidence. Ms. Blume seems utterly unaware, for example, of the selection process that might bring incest survivors to her office.

To reach their inflated statistics, the survivor books rely on definitions that are as expandable as a hot-air balloon. In these books, the rule is: If you feel abused, you were abused. According to the authors of "The Courage to Heal," "Violation is determined by your experience as a child — your body, your feelings, your spirit. . . . Some abuse is not even physical." It doesn't matter if no sexual contact occurred; anything your parents did that you didn't like is a violation. Beverly Engel didn't like the way her mother would plant a "wet" kiss on her, look at her in ways that made her feel "queasy" and walk in on her in the bathroom. "It was not until very recently," she writes, "that I came to terms with my mother's behavior and saw it for what it really was — sexual abuse." This is a textbook example of the reconstructive nature of memory, showing how an adult belief can transform childhood experiences into "memories" of trauma.

What is wrong with a therapist's belief in the "epidemic" prevalence of incest? Aren't we just quibbling about numbers, when the problem itself is real? Not to researchers such as Nicholas Spanos, who are worrying about the rise in what they call

"pseudomemories" that are induced by some therapists and hypnotists — not only of incest, but also of past lives, multiple personalities and participation in satanic cults.

Mr. Spanos, who has conducted dozens of studies, has concluded that "suggestion-induced reports of perceptual and memory change" offered by hypnotized individuals should not be treated as actual descriptions of events. The "central component" in studies of hypnosis, he finds, is the willingness of hypnotized individuals "to bias their responses" as they believe the context demands.

Of course, all clients in therapy are influenced by the therapist's theoretical framework. This is why people in psychoanalysis have Freudian dreams, people in Jungian therapy have archetypal dreams, people in primal scream therapy remember being born and people in past-lives therapy remember being Julius Caesar (or whoever). Yet there is a sensitive line between any therapist's normal probing for evidence of certain psychological problems and literally creating them by the force of suggestion. Wendy Maltz and Beverly Holman, therapists in Eugene, Ore., make the process explicit in "Incest and Sexuality": "It may take considerable digging on the part of the therapist," they say, "to discover incest as the source of the symptoms being experienced by the client." When does "considerable digging" become undue persuasion? On this subtle matter, the books are silent.

One other simplistic theme promulgated by the abuse-survivor books affects the survivors themselves and the solutions we seek, as a society, to the problem of childhood abuse. Uniformly, these books persuade their readers to focus exclusively on past abuse as the reason for their present unhappiness. Forget fighting with Harold and the kids, having a bad job or no job, worrying about money. Healing is defined as your realization that you were a victim of sexual abuse and that it explains everything wrong in your life.

Beverly Engel even offers a list of stages in which the victim proceeds from darkness into light. In the first stage, she, like "many victims of childhood sexual abuse," has no conscious memory of having been abused, so she denies her symptoms. In the next stage, visiting a therapist or reading one of these

books, she begins to suspect she was abused. In the third stage, she still doesn't know that she is a victim because she doesn't realize that what happened to her was abuse. In the fourth stage, she knows she was sexually abused but fails to connect her "symptoms" with the abuse. In the last stage of healing, she knows she was abused and connects the dots to her present unhappiness.

You can see this process at work in Betsy Petersen's "Dancing With Daddy: A Childhood Lost and a Life Regained" (1991). According to Ms. Petersen, the incest (which she never actually remembers) explained her nightmares, eating disorders, compulsive cleanliness, shame about sexuality, anxieties, drive for self-improvement, colon problems, back pain, insecurity about money, difficulties in wishing for something for herself, impatience with the obnoxious behavior of her sons, and even why she cooked a hot breakfast for her dogs every morning. It explained, as if no other woman had this problem, her vulnerability to fad diets. It explained, as if no other new parent had this problem, her awkwardness with her firstborn son. It explained, as if no other modern adult had this problem, her malaise of alienation and loneliness.

For Ms. Petersen, all current events are processed through the lens of incest. "Before I knew my father had molested me," she says, "the feelings cycled endlessly and attached themselves to the world outside my skin: If only my children weren't so demanding, I would think, I wouldn't feel so crazy." Exactly! One day her son, whining to be taken out for fast food, screamed and cursed her, and threw his shoe. She writes: "And suddenly I was so mad. My stomach hurt." Was she angry about this behavior? Oh, no; she was angry at her father.

Betsy Petersen seems to have completely shut out "the world outside my skin," and ultimately that is the problem and the appeal of the survivor narrative. It places responsibility for the common problems in women's lives on a single clear villain, someone safely in the woman's past. The victim doesn't have to do anything except understand the origins of her problems. Her partner doesn't have to change, as long as he is sympathetic to her early trauma. And she gets a love bath from her friends and supporters. Who could resist? In

this respect, the sexual-survivor narrative, like other popular theories based on female psyche and biology, locates the origins of women's victimization, powerlessness and unhappiness inside the woman. It's in her; it's up to her to fix herself.

In 1978, Louise Armstrong wrote one of the first incest-survivor books, "Kiss Daddy Good-night." To Ms. Armstrong and other feminist writers, incest and other forms of child abuse were not the aberrations of a few sick men, but the results of a system that endows men with the sense of entitlement to own and abuse women and children. Today the survivor movement has shifted from an emphasis on social change to one on psychological solace. Reflecting in a revised edition of her book on how public conversation about incest changed in the decade since its publication, Ms. Armstrong mused: "Where is everybody? I sometimes ask, meaning the survivors. The voices of no-nonsense, unromantic, unromantic reason. Oh (the answer comes back), they're in therapy. Nothing wrong with that. We all need help and support." But, she continued, "exclusively personal solutions do nothing to defy the ongoing tacit permission for abuse."

Contemporary incest-survivor books encourage women to incorporate the language of victimhood and survival into the sole organizing narrative of their identity. It becomes their major story, and its moral rarely goes farther than "Join a group and talk about your feelings." Such stories soothe women temporarily while allowing everyone else to go free. That is why these stories are so popular. If the victim can fix herself, nothing has to change. □

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**Carol Tavris, a social psychologist, is the author of "The Mismeasure of Woman."**

**FMS**  
**FALSE MEMORY SYNDROME FOUNDATION**  
**3508 MARKET STREET - SUITE 128**  
**PHILADELPHIA PA 19104-3311**

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