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'We can control memory'

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We may be able to selectively repress our memories

There are some things in life many of us would prefer to forget. New research shows that we may be able to choose what we remember.

Two American researchers at the University of Oregon say they have proof that people can influence the content of their memories.

Dr Michael Anderson and Dr Collin Green have mimicked memory repression in the laboratory.

They found that people who try to forget certain words do have trouble recalling them later - even when offered money for the right answer.

Dr Anderson said: "I do not believe that my subjects have 'erased' their memories.

"I believe that they have suppressed them. That is, I believe that the memories are still there, but they are difficult to access."

He thinks the work could help develop new ways to unlock suppressed memories. It may also help further research into how selective amnesia occurs.

This type of amnesia may be related to that suffered by victims of child abuse or in post-traumatic stress disorder.

The researchers found that the amount of forgetting increases with the number of

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attempts to exclude the unwanted memory.

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Continuously confronted

Dr Anderson said: "Amazingly, this type of forgetting is more likely to occur when people are continuously confronted with reminders of the memory they are trying to avoid.

"This is contrary to intuition, which says that seeing reminders a lot ought to make your memory better.

"When reminders are inescapable, people must learn to adapt their internal thought patterns whenever they confront the reminder if they are to have any hope of avoiding the unwanted memory."

This conforms with the discovery that people who were sexually abused by a person of trust, such as a parent, are more likely to report having forgotten the abuse than those abused by a stranger.

Dr Anderson acknowledges that no firm conclusions about traumatic memory suppression can be drawn from his work.

This is because his tests were based on simple pairs of words that had no emotional significance to the people taking part in the test.

However, he does believe the research is a promising start and also provides a useful test that can reveal the way an individual controls their attention to highlight the effects of age or disease.

Another application might be in helping people who are undergoing withdrawal from drugs to control intrusive thoughts or cravings.

Professor Martin Conway, an expert in experimental psychology at the University of Bristol, UK, said: "You can't control what you remember. But maybe you can consciously manipulate it if you think about it, or avoid it consistently.

"You practise learning to unlearn if you want."

Professor Conway said the mind took in so

much information that there was great competition for what would be lodged in the memory.

Political commentator Matthew Parris said: "Politicians go one better than forgetting things that did happen, they have learned how to remember things that did not happen!"

The research is published in the journal Nature.

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