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Science: An Irrepressible Idea

Newsweek

Jan. 19 issue - Remember "repressed memory"? In the 1990s it dominated headlines so much that you may well have wanted to repress the whole phenomenon yourself. Courts became clogged with cases based on memories of abuse the plaintiffs had suddenly "recovered," and even Lucy from "Peanuts," in doctor mode, made a diagnosis: "The fact that you can't remember being abducted by aliens and satanically abused," she told Charlie Brown, "is proof that it really happened."

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Scientists scoffed, of course. In many cases, therapists had planted ideas in their patients' minds. "There was an abundance of evidence that people could come to remember things they'd never experienced," says University of Oregon

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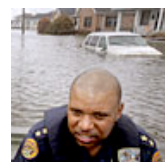
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psychologist Michael Anderson. And if people could in fact repress real memories, there was little physiological evidence of it, much less an "abundance." But times change, and Anderson thinks he now has some. In this week's Science he makes the controversial argument that subconscious memory repression really does exist—and that it's merely the sum of conscious attempts to ignore particular memories. "If people push something out of mind systematically, later on when they want to recall it, they can't," he says, adding that the principle should apply to all situations—not just traumatic ones. Based on that idea, Anderson hooked people up to an fMRI machine and asked them to actively try to forget a set of words he'd taught them. The scans showed a strange interaction between the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus—a pattern specific to memory suppression. Sure enough, subjects couldn't remember the words later. Asked if an MRI could someday discriminate between real repressed memories and suggested ones, Anderson says, "We're very far from that," then hesitates. "Well, there might be—I'm just not gonna go there." Fine, but what's he repressing?

—Mary Carmichael

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