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## Letters

### Memory and childhood sexual abuse

The articles on the veracity of child sexual abuse stories accurately describe the camps forming between those who wholeheartedly believe the client and those who subscribe to the false memory syndrome ("Sudden Recall," SN: 9/18/93, p.184; "The Survivor Syndrome," SN: 9/25/93, p.202).

Unfortunately, these factions have created havoc among clients from severely dysfunctional families of origin. The purpose of treatment is to overcome debilitating social, emotional, and cognitive habits developed in the dysfunctional family. Therapists are not diviners or seers; they are mental health care specialists whose task is to aid the client in the journey toward sound mental health.

Joyce H. Vesper  
Scottsdale, Ariz.

Freud never actually dropped his seduction theory. What he determined was that memories of childhood sexual abuse are in

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Cover: Researchers have identified a host of ubiquitous pollutants — from pesticides to breakdown products of dishwashing soap — that can mimic the feminizing effects of estrogens. Florida alligators, like this one glimpsed at hatching, are proving useful for studying the reproductive implications of such environmental contaminants. (Photo: Howard Suzuki)

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Science Service, which publishes SCIENCE NEWS, is a nonprofit corporation founded in 1921. It gratefully accepts tax-deductible contributions and bequests to assist its efforts to increase the public understanding of science, with special emphasis on young people. More recently, it has included in its mission increasing scientific literacy among members of underrepresented groups. Through its Youth Programs it administers the International Science and Engineering Fair, the Science Talent Search for the Westinghouse Science Scholarships, and publishes and distributes the *Directory of Student Science Training Programs for Precollege Students*.

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most cases a mixture of reality and fantasy.

My own experience in doing psychotherapy and psychoanalysis has led me to be very cautious about memory in general. The therapeutic situation is not a court of law, and the standards of evidence and purposes are different in both circumstances. Whether abuse is real, fantasy, or both matters differently when one is working to help someone change how it has affected his or her life. Blaming someone else for one's problems is of little value in accomplishing the goals of psychotherapy.

John F. Fielder  
San Francisco, Calif.

I was surprised to see the Claudia story presented as though it were confirming evidence that memories of traumatic events can be repressed and recovered.

In fact, "Claudia" is a pseudonym for one of the composite cases presented in the 1987 Herman and Schatzow article to which Bruce Bower refers. Therefore, we have no way of knowing whether the woman who had no memories until she lost weight is the same

woman who found a diary. If the woman who discovered the diary was a woman who had no memories prior to therapy, the existence of the diary is the sort of compelling evidence we would like to see.

I called Herman in September 1992 and asked if she had ever seen the diary. She told me she had not. Rather, she had accepted the *account of the diary* as evidence of abuse. Such an account by an anonymous composite is not the sort of evidence that readers of SCIENCE NEWS deserve.

Joseph de Rivera  
Professor of Psychology  
Clark University  
Worcester, Mass.

A footnote in the Herman and Schatzow article describes Claudia and other examples of recovered memories of child abuse as "composites of several cases." Although the circumstances of the Claudia anecdote were not made up, I agree that another case of recovered memories leading to evidence of child abuse (and such cases do exist) should have been cited. — B. Bower

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