

Filling in the Blanks

Most people have a pretty clear memory of how they got hurt. Frequently their memories are punctuated with very specific details.

“That son of a bitch looked me right in the eye before turning left.”

“The front door mat was a bright pastel color.”

“The impact made a sound just like an M-80 going off.”

But when you go through something traumatic, like a motorcycle wreck, the brain isn't focused on making memories—it's focused on survival. The same mechanisms that keep the brain sharp enough to escape immediate danger may also make it harder to accurately recall the event.

The Chemical Response

The brain shifts into fight-or-flight. This creates a hyper-focused state. Adrenaline starts pumping and the vagus nerve, which runs from the spine to the brain, promotes noradrenaline production in the brain.

The flood of noradrenaline destroys the brain's ability to store memories. And adrenaline tends to block out non-pertinent information, helping a person focus on only those things he needs to know in order to survive.

As a result, it's normal for victims to not remember the specific event or time period immediately after the event.

The Brain Fills in Gaps

It's natural for the brain to fill in missing information. The process is sometimes called “confabulation.”

People subconsciously fill in missing details with information that “fits” what they actually remember about an event. They are unable to distinguish between what they actually remember and what their brain has filled in.

Confabulation is a type of memory error. Even though it's a product of a gap in actual memory, people who have filled in gaps are generally very confident about their recollections (even if there is strongly contradictory evidence).

Confabulation can happen to anyone. But it seems like it's particularly an issue in people who have suffered a MTBI (concussion).

Memories of Traumatic Events Change Over Time

One thing that is almost certain is that memories of a traumatic event will morph over time.

Studies after the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center found that New Yorkers' reports of their experience of the attack changed significantly over the years.

Take-Aways

Science and experience teach that no matter how convinced someone is about certain details they need to be compared to other witness accounts and objective evidence (like photos or the location of property damage).

A lot of clients think that defendants and adverse witnesses are lying when they describe an event differently than the client remembers.

I think that lying is rare but that there are a lot of “memory errors” that result in gaps being back-filled with inaccurate information.



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