



26th February 2010

Serving People and Professionals  
in Contested Allegations of Abuse

The Most Reverend and Rt Hon Rowan Williams  
Archbishop of Canterbury  
Lambeth Palace  
London  
SE1 7JU

Dear Archbishop

The British False Memory Society (BFMS) raises public awareness of the inherent dangers of false memories of abuse, and supports families affected by false allegations of abuse. Over the past years the BFMS has made several representations to the Church of England regarding the inclusion of the self-help book *The Courage to Heal*, by Bass and Davis, as a resource in *Protecting All God's Children*, the official child protection policy of the Church of England.

In a recent email, a BFMS member wrote to the Reverend Pearl Luxon, Safeguarding Adviser to the Church of England and the Methodist Church of Great Britain, raising yet again the concern over the inclusion of *The Courage to Heal* in the Church's literature. In a reply to this message, Mrs Luxon wrote:

“According to specialists working in child protection in the statutory sector and with survivors of abuse there is no such thing as ‘false memory’. It is either a memory or it is not. It is quite common when people have suffered severe trauma for memory to be patchy and disjointed. This is now recognised by the police as well.” (Mrs Luxon, by email on 02/02/2010)

We are a group of professionals, both academic and clinical, that has been actively engaged in researching and writing about the phenomenon of false memory since the early 1990s. We are disappointed by Mrs Luxon's reply because it contains inaccurate information, and these details are important in the discussion of memories of childhood sexual abuse. Here are the facts about memory and *The Courage to Heal*.

**“No such thing as false memory, it is either a memory or it is not”:**

False memories do indeed exist. There is a wealth of experimental evidence showing that a range of suggestive techniques can lead normal, healthy adults to remember entirely fictitious events (Loftus, 2004). Across 13 peer-reviewed studies, an average of 37% of people (range 25 -53%) have reported images or memories for a variety of false events, such as being hospitalised overnight, being attacked by an animal, winning a prize in a contest, or playing a prank on a teacher, after direct suggestion or being shown doctored photographs (Desjardins & Scoboria, 2007; Hyman, Husband, & Billings, 1995; Ost, Foster, Costall, & Bull, 2005; Porter, Yuille, & Lehman, 1999, Wade, Garry, Read, & Lindsay, 2002). Together these studies show that people can generate a variety of rich, false autobiographical memories.

Of course, the events suggested to people participating in false memory research are often stressful events, but they do not come close to eliciting the kind of trauma individuals might experience when they are abused. This is an important point. A related point is that some clinicians and research scientists, particularly those in the field of trauma, assert that traumatic memories are fundamentally different from other memories and that “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness” (Herman, 1992). The academic position, however, is that memories of trauma are subject to the same

processes of distortion and confabulation as other memories. There is no evidence to suggest that the mechanisms underlying traumatic memories are different to those underlying memories of non-traumatic events (McNally, 2003). In short, Mrs Luxon's assertion that false memories do not exist is completely at odds with the scientific literature.

We should also note here that hundreds of individuals who recovered memories during psychotherapy in the 1990s, with the passage of time, began to retract their 'memories.' In America, patients have sued therapists for malpractice, accusing them of wrongly implanting false memories of abuse and destroying family relationships in the process. Prominent clinicians were disciplined by their professional bodies, some were struck off, and enormous sums were paid in compensation to the patients (Loftus & Davis, 2006).

**“It is quite common when people have suffered severe trauma for memory to be patchy and disjointed”:**

Memory can be patchy for both traumatic and non-traumatic events, but nearly two decades of research has shown that people often remember a variety of traumatic events, including 'war horrors' and 'major disasters,' only too well (McNally, 2003; Porter & Birt, 2001; Shobe & Kihlstrom, 1997; Thompson, Morton, & Fraser, 1997). Moreover, we know that trauma-induced psychogenic amnesia—where people completely forget a traumatic, isolated event—is extraordinarily rare, if it exists at all (Christianson & Merckelbach, 2004; Kihlstrom & Schacter, 2000). Yet there remains a school of thought that believes the normal response to extreme trauma is to 'block it out'. Curiously, proponents of this idea only apply it to sexual trauma and not, for example, to people affected by natural disasters, combat, or sniper attacks. There doesn't appear to be any logic behind this thinking at all.

We also know that traumatic incidents are sometimes remembered better than other relatively less emotional experiences (Peace & Porter, 2004) and that memories for traumatic events may be just as susceptible to suggestion as memories for non-traumatic events (Nourkova, Bernstein & Loftus, 2004). Interestingly, Goodman and colleagues found that more severe abuse was associated with an *increased* likelihood of disclosure 10 to 16 years later (Goodman et al., 1996). Thus the overall finding is that trauma does not necessarily have a deleterious effect on memory and that memories for traumatic events do not appear to be special, either in their accessibility, their uniqueness, or their resistance to distortion.

**“Recognised by the police as well”:**

The police are not equipped to comment on the reliability of scientific phenomena, and this is recognised by the courts in their use of expert psychiatric and psychological evidence to explain to juries how false memories can occur. Members of the BFMS independent Scientific Advisory Board regularly act as expert witnesses. Mrs Luxon is probably correct however, in saying that some police officers believe that fragmented memory, or no memory at all, is common after sexual abuse. Indeed, surveys show that many people hold erroneous beliefs about how memory does and does not work (Magnussen et al., 2006).

***The Courage to Heal***

Finally, we would like to draw your attention to a few facts about *The Courage to Heal*. Bass and Davis—who do not have any training in psychotherapy or science—wrote *The Courage to Heal* on the basis of a creative writing workshop. The book is not based on psychological theories or research, and has been condemned by clinicians and academics around the world for promulgating inaccurate and misleading information about sexual abuse (Aronson & Tavris, 2007; Loftus, 1993; McHugh, 2008). In response to this criticism the authors removed some of their unfounded claims about memory from the most recent anniversary (2008) edition of *The Courage to Heal*. However, the Church of England

continues to recommend the versions published in 1988 and the reprint in 1990, which still contain baseless claims about how memory works and potentially harmful information. For instance, the 1991, 1993 and 2003 editions contain checklists of a broad range of ‘symptoms’ that the authors suggest can point to past abuse. The most recent version contains this checklist as well but the authors acknowledge that the list should not be used for diagnosing abuse. Research shows that in many cases there are no such symptoms that can be used to detect past abuse (Rind, Tromovitch, & Bauserman, 1998). Moreover, Bass and Davis claim in the earlier editions that even if you only think you might have been abused, then there is a good chance that you have been because it is normal to forget abuse for long periods (see p. 21, p. 22, and p. 81). There is no empirical evidence to support this claim.

We acknowledge that self-help books can be very comforting to real victims living with real memories of sexual abuse, but *The Courage to Heal* contains advice that may be misleading, or even harmful, to people who do not have any memories.

Returning to Mrs Luxon’s email: Why, then, did Mrs Luxon report that false memories do not exist, that traumatic memories are often “patchy,” and that many police officers share her view? One explanation could be that Mrs Luxon relied on unreliable sources: specialists who are not aware of the current research being conducted in the UK and around the world on the reliability of autobiographical memory. We urge you to invite the Safeguarding Committee to look again at the evidence, and to consider removing *The Courage to Heal* from its list of resources. Sexual abuse is an extremely important issue and it is vital that you consult with experts who know about this field, so that misleading and harmful information does not appear in the Church literature.

We can offer to make an expert available to discuss the issues with the Safeguarding Committee if that would be helpful. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

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Professor Sir Patrick Bateson, FRS, Emeritus Professor of Ethology, University of Cambridge;  
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**Copies to:-**

Reverend Pearl Luxon, Safeguarding Adviser to the Church of England and the Methodist Church  
The Rt Reverend Anthony Priddis, Bishop of Hereford and Chair of Safeguarding Liaison Group  
Reverend David Gamble, President of the Conference, the Methodist Church  
Reverend Dr Martyn Atkins, General Secretary, the Methodist Church

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