

Remembering to forget

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(Medical Xpress) -- New research suggests that it is possible to suppress emotional autobiographical memories. The study published this month by psychologists at the University of St Andrews reveals that individuals can be trained to forget particular details associated with emotional memories.

The important findings may offer exciting new potential for therapeutic interventions for individuals suffering from emotional disorders, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.

The research showed that although individuals could still accurately recall the cause of the event, they could be trained to forget the consequences and personal meaning associated with the memory.

The work was carried out by researchers Dr Saima Noreen and Professor Malcolm MacLeod of the University's School of Psychology. Lead author Dr Noreen explained, "The ability to remember and interpret emotional events from our personal past forms the basic foundation of who we are as individuals.

"These novel findings show that individuals can be trained to not think about memories that have personal relevance and significance to them and provide the most direct evidence to date that we possess some kind of control over autobiographical memory."

The research involved participants generating emotional memories in response to generic cue words, such as theatre, barbecue, wildlife etc.

Participants were asked to recall the cause of the event, the consequence of the event and the personal meaning they derived from the event. Subjects were then asked to provide a single word that was personal to them which reminded them of the memory. In a subsequent session, participants were shown the cue and personal word pairings and were asked to either recall the memory associated with the word pair or to not think about the associated memory.

Interestingly, the findings revealed that whilst the entire autobiographical episode was not forgotten, the details associated with the memory were. Specifically, individuals could remember what caused the event, but were able to forget what happened and how it made them feel.

Co-author Professor MacLeod commented, “The capacity to engage in this kind of intentional forgetting may be critical to our ability to maintain coherent images about who we are and what we are like”.

The research, which was funded by the British Academy, is published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, [Memory](#) and Cognition*.

Provided by University of St Andrews

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