

The complex relationship between memory and silence

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(Medical Xpress) -- People who suffer a traumatic experience often don't talk about it, and many forget it over time. But not talking about something doesn't always mean you'll forget it; if you try to force yourself not to think about white bears, soon you'll be imagining polar bears doing the polka. A group of psychological scientists explore the relationship between silence and memories in a new paper published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science.

“There's this idea, with silence, that if we don't talk about something, it starts fading,” says Charles B. Stone of Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium, an author of the paper. But that belief isn't necessarily backed up by empirical psychological research—a lot of it comes from a Freudian belief that everyone has deep-seated issues we're repressing and ought to talk about. The real relationship between silence and [memory](#) is much more complicated, Stone says.

“We are trying to understand how people remember the past in a very basic way,” Stone says. He cowrote the paper with Alin Coman of the University of Pittsburgh, Adam D. Brown of New York University, Jonathan Koppel of the University of Aarhus, and William Hirst of the New School for Social Research.

“Silence is everywhere,” Stone says. He and his coauthors divide silence about memories into several categories. You might not mention something you're thinking about on purpose—or because it just doesn't

come up in conversation. And some memories aren't talked about because they simply don't come to mind. Sometimes people actively try not to remember something.

One well-studied example used by Stone and his colleagues to demonstrate how subtle the effects of silence can be, establishes that silences about the past occurring within a conversation do not uniformly promote forgetting. Some silences are more likely to lead to forgetting than others. People have more trouble remembering silenced memories related to what they or others talk about than silenced memories unrelated to the topic at hand. If President Bush wanted the public to forget that weapons of mass destruction figured in the build-up to the Iraq War, he should not avoid talking about the war and its build-up. Rather he should talk about the build-up and avoid any discussion of WMDs. And at a more personal level, when people talk to each other about the events of their lives, talking about happy memories may leave the unhappy memories unmentioned, but in the future, people may have more trouble remembering the unmentioned happy memories than the unmentioned sad memories.

Or to supply another example of the subtle relation between memory and silence: If your mother is asking you about your boyfriend and you tell her about yesterday's date, while thinking—but not talking—about the exciting ending of the date, that romantic finish may linger longer in your memory than if you just answered her questions without thinking about the later part of the evening.

“Silence has important implications for how we remember the past beyond just forgetting,” Stone says. “In terms of memory, not all silence is equal.”

More information: www.psychologicalscience.org/journals/perspectives

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