

# Emotional Factors in Memory: Repression (Motivated Forgetting)



**This activity will help you to:**

- Explain what is meant by motivated forgetting
- Discuss the evidence relating to repression
- Assess whether repression is an important forgetting process

**Repression**, in Psychodynamic psychology, is a **defence mechanism** whereby painful thoughts or memories are forced out of consciousness and buried in the **unconscious mind**. Give two examples of memories that might be repressed, and, in each case, explain why.

Example 1

Example 2

Some researchers have tried to demonstrate repression in the laboratory. Two such studies are by Levinger & Clark (1961) and Klein (1972). Read the outlines below, and answer the questions that accompany them.

**Levinger & Clark (1961)** compared recall of neutral words like 'window', 'cow' and 'tree' with emotionally loaded words like 'fight', 'angry' and 'fear'. Recall was significantly poorer for words on the 'emotionally loaded' list.

*Does this result support or challenge the concept of repression? Why?*

**Klein (1972)** reports a study in which PPs learnt a wordlist under two conditions. One was the control. In the other, PPs were insulted by the experimenter. These PPs tended to have poorer recall later. Klein suggests that being insulted had led to negative emotions that caused them to repress the words, supporting the idea of repression.

*Is this a reasonable conclusion? Can you think of a criticism for this study?*

Much of the evidence for repression comes from clinical case studies of apparent amnesia. This evidence can take many different forms. Identify a potential problem with the validity of some of these (a clue is given for each).

**Event-specific amnesia**, for example, where a criminal is unable to recall having committed a particular crime.

**Recovered memories** of child abuse, where a person (usually following psychotherapy) starts to remember apparently forgotten incidents of sexual abuse whilst a child.

Disrupted recall of **traumatic events**, for example, when emergency services workers or combat veterans are unable clearly to recall incidents in which they were involved.

Freud claimed that most, if not all forgetting was the result of repression one way or another. Do you agree?