

A mind PROTECTED

Cathy blamed her poor memory for not remembering her childhood. The truth was far more sinister

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Everyone loves a trip down memory lane. Remember playing hide-and-seek? Starting school? That first kiss? But that was a trip I couldn't make.

At 40 years old, I wasn't able to remember a thing between the ages of four and 14.

'I'm just one of those people with a shocking memory,' I'd shrug when people questioned it.

Besides, what I lacked in memory I made up for in intellect. Over the years I had worked through medical school and started work as a GP. Even my medical training didn't make me suspect there was anything wrong with me.

Life was great and I went on to marry to Dan, now 57, and have four kids – Tamara, 27, Julian, 26, Sarah, 22, and Gina, 20. Watching them grow up, I imagined my childhood had been as much fun as theirs.

Then one day in 1995, my happy life was interrupted when my niece, Angela, 18, was killed in a car accident. My world crumbled.

'You need to take some time off work,' Dan said when, a week later, I still wasn't functioning.

'You're right,' I agreed.

It wasn't just Angela's death I was dealing with. The tragedy had triggered memories of my dad Cyril's* death. He'd passed away when I was 14.

'Maybe you should see someone,' Dan suggested.

I nodded reluctantly.

Seeing a therapist a few days later, her first question was the hardest. 'What was your childhood like?' she asked.

'I can't remember,' I shrugged. 'I'd forget my head if it wasn't screwed on.'

A few weeks later, while my mother Lucy* was overseas, I went to her house to hunt for old photographs.

Maybe they'll help me remember something, I thought.

Suddenly one photo made me flinch. Staring at our family friend, the doctor, a chill ran down my spine. For some reason he filled me with horror.

What's wrong? I asked myself.

Then I found a letter from him, inviting Mum and us kids away for a holiday.

All of a sudden the feeling of dread became too much. *It's okay,* I told myself, racing out the door.

Then while I was in bed one night, something terrible happened.

I was a 14-year-old girl again and I could hear heavy footsteps walking towards me. My heart pounded as I felt the doctor's hand tracing up my leg. His rancid breath panted against my neck.

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me. My heart pounded as I felt the doctor's hand tracing up my leg. His rancid breath panted against my neck. I felt violently ill as I was overcome by horrid sensations, one after another. Pain. Terror. Shame. I wanted to fight him

off. But he was too strong and I was too scared.

'This is special between us,' he whispered.

And then I woke up. I was on the bedroom floor, curled in a ball, horrified my mind could conjure up something so violent.

After that, the episodes got worse. My father started appearing in them, as well as the doctor. I tried to understand what was happening but couldn't. I had never been abused. If it had happened in real life, surely I would remember.

Instead of the professional educated woman I was, I began to feel like a crazy person. 'It's horrible,' I sobbed to Dan. 'I don't know why it's happening to me.'

In an attempt to make sense of it all, I started writing down what I was experiencing.

At every stage I was doubtful and confused, but as time passed I began to accept what I was seeing wasn't just fiction, it was memory. 'I don't want to believe it, but deep down I know it's true,' I sobbed to Dan.

When I worked up the courage to tell my counsellor, she agreed that I had been

experiencing flashbacks of the memories I'd repressed.

It was true. The monstrous doctor and my own father had put me through years of sexual torture that my mind had, until now, completely blanked out.

'It's called repressed memory,' I was told. 'The brain blocks out things that are too difficult for it to deal with at the time.'

I was aware of the controversy around repressed memories.

But I, and the experienced



I couldn't recall anything from my childhood (top) or early teenage years



I hope my book will help others



(From left) Sarah, Dan, Julian and Tamara supported me



Now I feel strong

TRAUMA and the mind

- Repressed memory is a significant memory, usually painful or traumatic, that has become unavailable for recall.
- Flashbacks are the recovery of repressed memories. Because of the terror surrounding the traumatic event, the brain stores the memories in a different way. Once a repressed memory is recovered through a flashback, the memory stores it the way it normally would.
- One study of subjects with childhood trauma showed 42 per cent had suffered significant or total amnesia at some point.



Innocence Revisited - A Tale in Parts, by Dr Cathy Kezelman, JoJo Publishing. For more information visit, www.asca.org.au.

PHOTOS: ANDREW SHAW