

Confabulation

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What is confabulation?

Confabulation is difficult to describe. At its simplest, confabulation is a problem with a person's memory. Some people think of it as having 'false memories'. Someone who is confabulating believes in this memory as if it is real, they genuinely do not realise that what they are remembering did not happen.

This can be difficult to understand. A good way of thinking about it is that all of us from time to time make mistakes in what we remember. Usually we realise our mistake, we have a feeling that it is not quite right. However, when someone has had an injury to the brain, these memory mistakes can become real, or the person stops realising they are making a mistake. For example, the affected person might tell you in great detail how his or her parents visited last night, and later you discover that the mother died four years ago and the father died twenty years ago!

Remembering false memories, believing in them completely and even acting on them can all distress family members/carers. But remembering that the person does not (in fact, cannot) realise that what they are saying is wrong, can sometimes help.

What causes confabulation?

No one really knows what causes confabulation. Confabulation is the result of damage to the brain, but where the damage occurs to produce confabulation or what kinds of damage because it is not known.

The experts think that confabulation is probably caused by a problem in bringing back memories. So, for example, the person might be recalling a real memory, that actually happened but the problem (or the 'memory mistake') is that the person has remembered when it happened incorrectly. Lots of different areas of the brain are involved in remembering things. It might be that if some parts of these memory

pathways are damaged, the brain tries to compensate and 're-route' the memory recall through a different pathway. Because the memory pathways are very strongly connected to emotions (which makes sense because when you remember things you also often remember how you were feeling at the time), this might explain why a person can become preoccupied with some of the false memories and believe in them so strongly.

How common is it and what can be done?

Confabulation is uncommon after encephalitis. Most commonly, it is seen in the early stages of an illness, when the patient is confused, and often it will settle with time. In occasional cases it may be persistent. Unfortunately, there is no very effective treatment for this form of confabulation. It can be distressing for relatives and carers because of the bizarre and preoccupying forms it sometimes takes.

From research in patients with Alzheimer's disease who confabulate, it is suggested that when a person is experiencing confabulation:

- Repeatedly challenging the person and telling them they are wrong does not work and can make them more agitated.
- You could try to re-orientate the person back to the correct year or date, but this should be done gently and not repeatedly.
- It can sometimes help to reduce distractions if a person is trying to remember things, like switching off the TV.
- It would also help to ask the person to be referred back to the consultant in charge of their case with a view to discussing and managing the confabulation.

FS031V4 Confabulation

Date created: June 1999; Last updated: September 2022; Review date: September 2025

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