

WHO'S TELLING **THE TRUTH?**

when memories
tear families apart

by David Hechler



Peter and Pam Freyd founded the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. *Above right:* Jennifer Freyd, who accuses her father of abuse



Child sexual abuse is much more common than once was believed. On that, most people agree. But there are passionate disagreements on how to judge if allegations are true or false.

Most controversial are the claims of adults who suddenly remember childhood molestation years after it supposedly occurred.

Critics argue that many such "repressed memories" are actually fantasies planted by misguided therapists in the minds of their all-too-compliant patients. Advocates counter that the mind's ability to repress trauma is well established, and that therapists help resolve, not manufacture, their patients' problems.

What follows is the story of one family whose private turmoil became an ongoing public debate about child sexual abuse and the nature of memory.

Jennifer Freyd is about to give the speech of her life. She only wishes there were some way out. Freyd (rhymes with pride) is a psychology professor whose specialty is memory. But that's not why she was invited to address the 250 mental-health professionals crammed into this room. Freyd has been the silent center of a very loud national debate. Silent, that is, until now.

Three years ago, Freyd suddenly remembered that her father had molested her. Nothing has been the same since—for Freyd, her family or the therapists and patients who deal with incest.

The details of Jennifer's memories are disturbing. She recalls being molested repeatedly, beginning at age three and culminating at age 16 when her father raped her just before she left for college.

Like countless other parents accused of sexual abuse, her father, Peter (a mathematics professor at the University of Pennsylvania), vehemently denies the charges, and her mother, Pamela (a former elementary-school teacher), believes him. But unlike most other parents, the Freyds chose to speak out. In doing so, they became the standard-bearers for others who claim to be falsely accused.

To publicize the problem, Peter and Pam Freyd concocted a catchy name for what they saw as a new social phenomenon—"false memory syndrome." In 1992, they founded a national organization, the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, to function as a public-relations firm for parents like themselves. By any measure, the foundation is a success. As executive director, Pam recruited M.D.s and Ph.D.s from world-class universities, including Harvard, for its advisory board. The Freyds' impassioned campaign caught the attention of countless news shows, newspapers and magazines. That led more than 10,000 families to join, including Roseanne Arnold's parents, whom the actress publicly accused of abuse.

Until the Freyds' big splash, "recovered memories" seemed just another ripple in a rising tide of concern about child sexual abuse. But recently the mental-health profession has split over this issue. One side preaches unquestioning support of patient accusations; the other denounces colleagues for finding abuse where none exists.

THE ACCUSER

Reluctant to speak, Jennifer Freyd at first watched the deluge of attention from the sidelines. Thirty-six years old and already a full professor at the University of Oregon in Eugene, she had wanted to keep her personal and professional lives separate.

Why, then, did she decide to go public with her private life?

"I make this decision," she explains from the lectern at a day-long conference on recovered memory, "partly because I have already lost so much of my privacy, and"—referring to her parents' campaign—"in such an unclear and distorted way." Freyd speaks rapidly. She doesn't explicitly discuss her memories, but focuses on patterns in her parents' behavior that she's never forgotten, like "boundary violation" and "inappropriate and unwanted sexualization."

Her family, she says, was always unconventional. Her parents are step-siblings: Peter's father married Pam's mother about the same time Peter married Pam. They met as children, when their parents—then married to other people—began an affair.

Molestation was no stranger to the household. When Peter was 9, he was sexually abused for two years by a male family friend. As Jennifer was growing up, Peter spoke of it quite openly—not in terms of "abuse," she notes, "but in terms of precocious sexuality."

Such talk made the little girl uncomfortable. But what bothered her most was the way he introduced sex into their relationship. Peter often sat in the living room, bathrobe open, genitals exposed. When she was 11, Jennifer says, her father directed her in a play and publicly taught her to "kiss like a grown-up." Years later, when she visited her parents' house, her father insisted on showing her a replica of his penis and testicles that was displayed as sculpture in his living room. On top of all that, Peter was an active alcoholic "during most, if not all, of my childhood," she says.

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Why, Jennifer asks her assembled colleagues, do so many media reports portray her father as a victim, her as a zombie? Why is his denial deemed more credible than her accusation? "Is it because I remember impossible or crazy things?" she demands. "No. I remember incest in my father's house." Seemingly oblivious to the standing ovation, she strides out through an emergency exit, tears streaming down her face.

LOOKING BACK

The next morning, Jennifer is sitting on the grass outside her hotel. Relaxed, she tells her story, beginning in December 1990 when she started seeing a psychologist. It was during her second therapy session that Jennifer first voiced anxiety about seeing her parents. At some point, her therapist asked if she'd been sexually abused. "I did two things at once," she remembers. "I said, 'No.' And I immediately launched into recounting events" like those detailed in her speech.

At home, Jennifer began shaking uncontrollably, besieged by waves of "flashbacks." The timing couldn't have been worse. It was nearly Christmas and her parents were due in 48 hours for a 10-day visit. Jennifer decided to postpone it, but when her parents called, bubbling with excitement, she chickened out.

By the time they arrived, she was a nervous wreck. Still, she thought things would be okay. Until dinner. Jennifer's two-year-old son was playing with a turkey baster, which prompted Peter to describe how lesbians use turkey basters to inseminate themselves.

Jennifer was furious. It was *just* the sort of remark that bothered her as a child. But now her father was saying it in *her* home, sexualizing the innocent play of *her* child. Even so, she didn't confront him.

That night, Jennifer couldn't sleep. In the morning, she made up a story about having to take her son to the doctor, then she and her husband, J.Q. Johnson, took both kids and literally fled. Several hours later, J.Q. called to ask Peter and Pam to leave town. They demanded an explanation, so he told them the truth: "Jennifer remembers that Peter abused her."

"I have no memory of that," Peter replied, adding that either he or his daughter was crazy. They have not seen each other since.

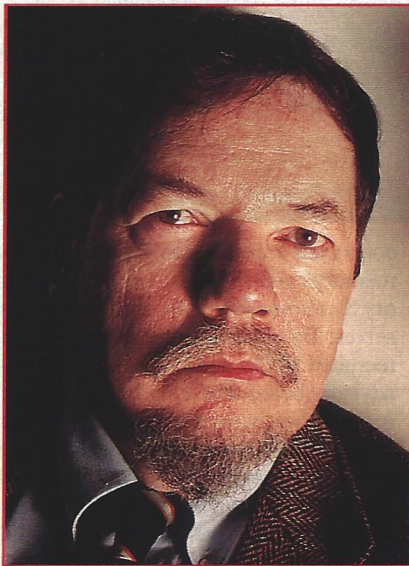
HOW CAN YOU BE SURE?

Soon after, Jennifer experienced one of her most vivid memories. She saw a bathroom—in the apartment where the fami-

ly lived when she was about three. She and her father were in the bathtub. Suddenly, she knew: He had molested her there. He'd pulled her to him and used her body to masturbate. More than once.

Jennifer thinks she remembers other acts of incest, including the rape, but refuses to discuss them. "The bathtub scene has some fear, but it doesn't have a lot of shame," she explains. Her memories of what happened when she was older do. She feels guilt. And she can't guarantee those memories are true. "There is some doubt in my mind," she confesses.

One of the few things Jennifer and her



"I admit I wasn't the perfect father"

parents agree on is this: Memory is not a videotape waiting to be replayed. In other words, some memories may be utterly inaccurate. That's one reason Jennifer hasn't sued and doesn't plan to. "I don't think people should be convicted on the basis of recovered memories alone."

Yet when she first experienced the memories, Jennifer believed them as readily as she believes what she sees when she looks out the window. Only later did some uncertainty creep in.

"But I feel doubt even for events that have been confirmed," she says. Referring to the replica of her father's genitals, she elaborates: "I will say, 'No, that didn't

happen.' Then I'll say, 'But wait a minute, they agree.' The feeling of doubt is really a disbelief about the *whole thing*." How then can she say her father abused her?

"Recovered memories [of incest] don't come out of a happy childhood," Jennifer says. She believes the whole picture adds up to abuse, even if she can't swear every memory is accurate. At a minimum, she adds, "the intrusion I experienced of my sexual psyche was abuse."

SHATTERED LIVES

"Why are we here?" asks Pam Freyd.

A gray-haired woman of 55, she is seated in a University of Pennsylvania building where she works. Next to her is Peter Freyd, 58, who doodles as his wife repeats: "Why are we here? Why aren't we sitting down somewhere and talking about all these things with our daughter?"

It is six days after Jennifer's speech. The Freyds wanted to attend, but were warned they wouldn't be admitted. This shocked them, since the organizer originally invited Pam to speak, then rescinded the invitation and invited Jennifer.

They are seeing a copy of Jennifer's speech for the first time. But what they really want, they say, is to see their daughter. Jennifer refuses even to talk on the phone. For a while, they corresponded frequently via computer. Such exchanges are rare now. Jennifer didn't even inform Peter and Pam when her daughter was born in September.

The strain on Pam is apparent as she says, "This shouldn't be in the media. This should be handled in therapy."

Surprising words given the Freyds' own savvy use of the media and their diatribes against therapy. But Pam has a ready answer. They don't condemn all therapists. After all, their foundation's advisory board is overflowing with them. And Peter and Pam have been in therapy themselves. Their rage is reserved for *bad* therapists—therapists who they say induce "false memory syndrome" by diagnosing sexual abuse *before* the patient brings it up, by asking leading questions until the patient "remembers," by using mind-control techniques, such as hypnosis, dream interpretation and guided visualization.

WHO IS THE VICTIM?

The Freyds also deplore "outing" accused parents. But Jennifer insists *they* outed *her*. Peter and Pam say they only spoke publicly after hearing that Jennifer's accusations were "common knowledge" where she teaches—and beyond.

Jennifer admits she shared some revelations with about 20 trusted people—friends, colleagues and her children's teachers. That cannot compare, she says, to disclosures her mother made in an anonymous article entitled *How Could This Happen? Coping with a False Accusation of Incest and Rape*, published in 1991 in an obscure journal called *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations*.

Not only that, Pam mailed the piece—and revealed her identity—to many people, including members of Jennifer's department, who received it just as they were deciding whether to promote her.

Pam insists she wrote the article primarily as a form of therapy. Though she sees it as filled with love, she now regrets divulging her identity. Certainly, the portrait of Jennifer is far from flattering. Pam described her daughter, variously, as promiscuous, anorexic and sexually frustrated. Pam also disparaged Jennifer professionally by writing—falsely—that she was refused tenure at another university. Though Pam now says she wrote that falsehood only to shield her daughter's identity, she used it as a fundamental fact to explain Jennifer's "false memories" when she wrote in that same article, "Is 'violation' a feeling that comes when tenure doesn't?"

When Jennifer read the piece, it felt like a frontal assault. In retrospect, Peter agrees that circulating it was at least "an escalation" of their conflict, but adds: "As far as we could tell, [the accusation] was becoming very well known, and you either cower and hide or acknowledge it."

In Pam's piece, Jennifer's therapist bore the brunt of the blame, just as therapists do in the foundation's newsletters.

Her daughter was particularly vulnerable in therapy, Pam argues now, because she is "an achievement-oriented person, and if she perceived during her therapy that in order to get better she would have to remember being abused, then that's what she would do."

FACING FACTS

Molestation cases are wrenching. Confessions are rare and physical evidence is often absent. The stakes are high and it is difficult to know what is true.

Jennifer is the first to admit that there is no definitive proof. For the most part, she is careful not to overstate her case, and her father takes issue with comparatively few of her statements. Still, he adamantly denies the most serious allegations, and Jennifer acknowledges her own doubts about some of her recollections of sexual contact. Furthermore, she will not offer details from adolescence. Her husband and only sibling (a sister who sides with Jennifer) decline to be interviewed. And Jennifer refuses access to her therapist.



"I remember incest in my father's house"

Her parents are caught in the impossible position of trying to prove Peter's innocence. His main defense: He wasn't a perfect father. He said and did things that were inappropriate. That doesn't mean that he sexually attacked his child. Peter disputes some charges, verifies others. He doesn't recall, for example, teaching Jennifer to "kiss like a grown-up." He acknowledges his alcoholism, but insists he never suffered blackouts or memory loss.

To counter Jennifer's most serious accusations, Peter arranged to take a polygraph test, which found he was "not deceptive." Most courts view lie detector tests as too unreliable to use as evidence. Still, Peter cites his as proof he's not lying or repressing any memories of his own.

That view, however, is contradicted by the very man who tested Peter, Robert Brisentine Jr. "A polygraph can only determine what the individual has on the conscious level," Brisentine explains. "It is not necessarily based on fact. It's based on the perception of the person taking the exam."

To further his assertion of innocence, Peter offered Jennifer a challenge. He claims to have a "genital anomaly" that is not noticeable when his penis is flaccid, but "conspicuous" when it is erect. Had Jennifer seen him with an erection she would, he says, remember it.

He claims she *can't* describe it. Jennifer says she *won't*. "I do not want to think about my father's penis," she sobs. "And he keeps doing this to me. I refuse to play this game."

What does all this prove? It is easier to say what it does not: namely, whether Peter Freyd did—or did not—sexually violate his daughter. It does demonstrate how polarizing these cases are. Still, there is common ground. Peter and Pam have stirred up a cauldron of controversy. Even Jennifer agrees they've raised questions about memory that need to be answered. When the smoke clears, we may all see more distinctly. ◆

FORGOTTEN MEMORY

Nobody remembers everything about her childhood. In fact, most of us can recall very little that happened to us before age 5 or 6 and almost nothing before age 3. This "forgetting," however, has more to do with how memory is formed than with any early trauma.

Think of the brain as a giant computer that automatically records significant events—both good and bad—in its "long-term memory bank." To be retrieved later, the event must also be "tagged" or linked to a major life happening—a grandparent's death, for example. Without this "tagging," it would be virtually impossible to distinguish, or recall, the event from any other. According to experts, it's lack of

tagging that accounts for almost all so-called forgotten memories. Because of immature brain development, childhood experiences are even harder to retrieve.

Sometimes, however, an event is so traumatic that the conscious mind can't accept it. Childhood sexual abuse is a sad but not uncommon example. Too painful or frightening to be remembered, the event is repressed or forgotten—but the memory is still there. Often, years later, a sensory trigger (a similar taste, touch or smell) may remind the victim of the original event and the repressed memory surfaces, unbidden. Though she still may not consciously recall the actual trauma, it's then that the victim begins to suffer psychological and even physical distress that the memory brings on.

—by Frank Evens