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Psychology professor's research looks at flashbulb memory

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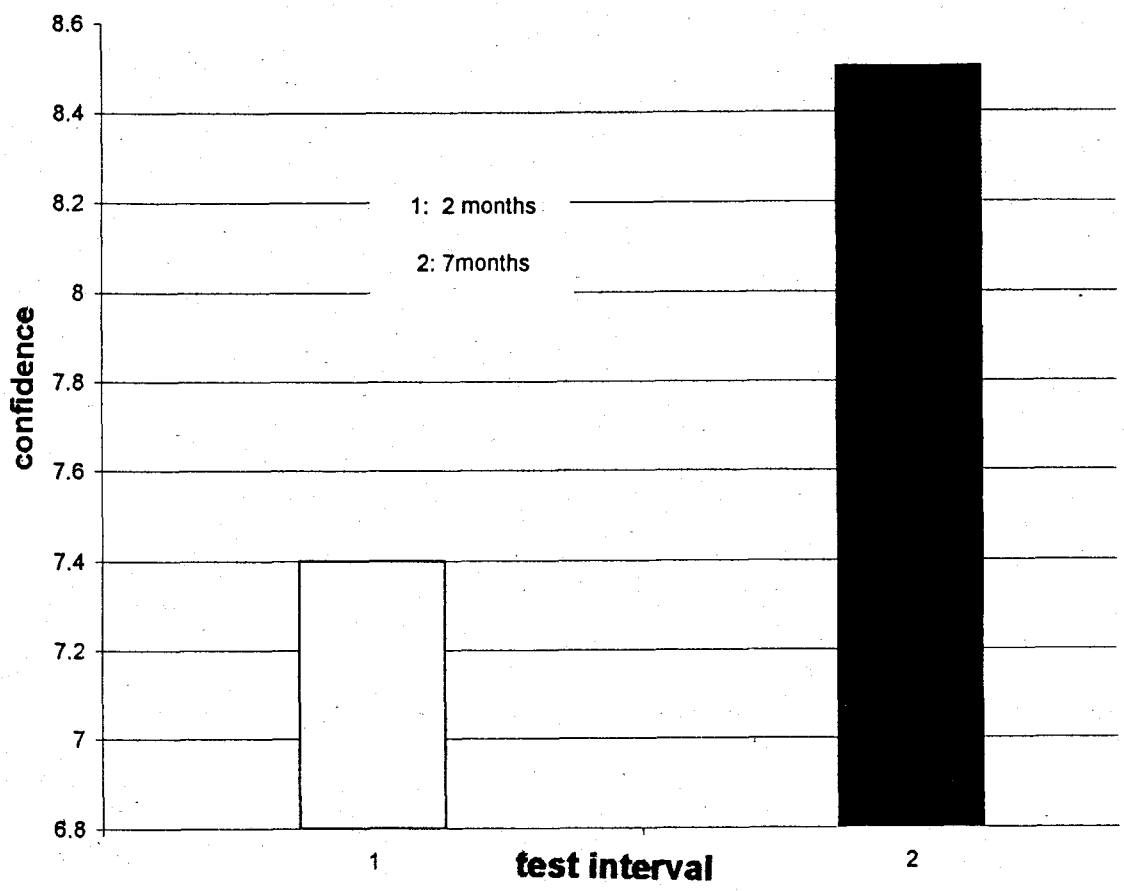
Psychology professor Mark O'DeKirk's recent study on flashbulb memory relating to terrorist events on Sept. 11, 2001 reveals findings that are contrary to popular belief.

What is flashbulb memory? The term is frequently used, but rarely specifically defined. Flashbulb memory is defined by some researchers as the result of a specific set of variables: a certain degree of surprise about the event in question, a feeling of personal relevance and connection to the event, and intense emotional feelings towards the event can all result in a flashbulb memory. This type of memory is one of vivid, detailed images of circumstantial evidence, such as location, presence of other people, and even minute details such as the clothing worn by the person recalling the event.

The question is often whether traumatic events leave an especially vibrant, clear mark-a flashbulb memory- in the minds of people who experience the trauma. September 11, 2001, the day of terrorist attacks on the US, is one event in history many people feel they can recall vividly and explicitly. Researchers Mark O'Dekirk, a professor of psychology at Meredith, and Paige King, 2003 graduate, set out on September 11, 2001 to determine the accuracy of flashbulb memories of the attacks in a group of students in O'Dekirk's Psychology 432 class.



This figure illustrates O'DeKirk's findings.
Photo courtesy of Mark O'DeKirk

Students entered their class that morning at 9:30 a.m., just minutes after attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. Researchers O'Dekirk and King asked students to record their observations while viewing television reports of the attacks. Students were asked to answer questions about where they were when they first heard of the attacks, who told them about the attacks and their feelings while viewing the coverage. Students were also asked to record what clothing they were wearing that day. Two months later, and again seven months later, O'Dekirk and King asked the group of students the same questions to test their recollection ability. They also asked the students to rate how confident they were in the accuracy of their answers on a scale of one to ten.

The results revealed that student's memories of the day remained consistent between two months and seven months. However, only 28% of the recollected answers were completely accurate. Of the other 72% of answers, some were completely incorrect and many were more detailed or less detailed than original answers. Students grew more confident of the accuracy of their answers as time passed between two months after the event to seven months after the event. At seven months, students were significantly more confident of their memories than they were at two months.

O'Dekirk's and King's findings suggest that while people think their flashbulb memories are accurate long after the event, studies show that this is not true. Memories become changed by time by events that occur after the fact. Trauma or considerable emotional impact from the event does not ensure accurate recollection of the event.

"Overall, our findings suggested that, over time, people's 'flashbulb memory' appears to NOT be immune to forgetting or to distortions even though their confidence in that memory increases with the passing time. Even though the event is very emotional and people report that they will 'Never forget exactly where I was when I heard...,' the data suggest otherwise," O'Dekirk stated.

On the inside: