Trauma, Safety, and Recovering Choice · About 4 minutes

A Familiar Feeling Is Not a Complete History

Taking a response seriously while leaving its origins open

“I've felt this before.” A familiar dread can arrive with the force of a memory while its history is still obscure.

Sometimes a clear memory does come. Sometimes there is only the feeling. Both deserve careful attention, without making the feeling provide a history it cannot establish.

Ines, a fictional employee, goes blank when the chair of a meeting interrupts her. She recognizes the response from other meetings. She wonders about childhood, but no specific event comes to mind. She is certain of one present fact: this chair repeatedly cuts her off before she has finished speaking.

It would be easy to become so interested in the possible past that the current interruption vanished from view. It would also be premature to assume the chair explains everything. Fatigue, expectations and other experiences may contribute. Ines can ask for a chance to finish without first settling those questions.

What kind of information do we have?

Memory researcher Larry Squire distinguishes conscious recollection from learning expressed through habits, skills and dispositions.[1] A learned response need not arrive with a remembered episode attached. But implicit learning is broader than a hidden autobiographical scene waiting to be discovered. A sensation does not, by itself, tell us which event produced it.

A useful account of Ines's situation separates what she knows from what she suspects:

The chair interrupts her, and she loses the thread of her sentence.

She has experienced similar blankness in other meetings.

She does not yet know how this response developed.

Those statements leave room for investigation without supplying an answer in advance. The absence of a clear memory also cannot prove that nothing happened.

Research by Oeberst and colleagues found that suggestive interviews could produce false autobiographical memories in a study setting.[2] That does not let us pronounce a particular person's memory true or false. It gives us a reason to be cautious about confident explanations built from suggestion. A dream, image or bodily feeling may be important to the person experiencing it without serving as evidence of a specific historical event.

Help need not wait for certainty

Ines may want practical support at work. She may also want to discuss the blankness with a clinician who can consider several explanations. A careful conversation can attend to her distress while leaving historical uncertainty intact.

This matters because the search for an origin can itself become demanding. You may begin to feel that you owe someone a memory, or that your difficulty will count only after you can explain it. There is no such requirement for taking the present problem seriously.

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Repeated time loss, unexplained changes in awareness or detachment that disrupts daily life warrant professional assessment, including consideration of medical causes. More inward attention is not automatically the answer.

Ines's meeting gives us a place to ask how much such recognition can tell us about its own history.

A familiar feeling deserves a hearing. I would give it the time it needs and let the question of where it began stay open.

Companion reading · When the Past Arrives Before You Can Think

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Trauma, Safety, and Recovering Choice (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Squire, L. R. (2009). Memory and brain systems: 1969–2009. The Journal of Neuroscience, 29(41), 12711–12716. Source.

[2] Oeberst, A., Wachendörfer, M. M., Imhoff, R., & Blank, H. (2021). Rich false memories of autobiographical events can be reversed. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118(13), e2026447118. Source.

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