101 RECOVERED MEMORIES

What are they?

Due to the way trauma is stored in the brain, **it's not uncommon for survivors of a traumatic event (or events) to lose all or partial memory of the experience.** In the context of trauma, recovered memories–sometimes referred to as 'repressed' memories–are **memories that resurface a significant amount of time after the trauma has occurred**, often years or even decades later.

Why do we forget?

The figurative explanation given to trauma induced memory loss we often hear is that the event is **too painful to access, so the mind "blocks it out".** While there is truth to this deconstruction, understanding the science behind recovered and somatic memory can be extremely helpful.

Our brains are fascinating organs, and its mission–first and foremost–**is to ensure we survive.** While some of these mechanisms can be extremely effective initially, that's not to say they can't cause problems down the line. It's believed that during a traumatic experience, **the brain enters a different state of consciousness,** like switching between radio stations. It's in this separate state that that memory is stored, hence why it's unable to be accessed even after the danger has passed.

But let's get a little more scientific. The prefrontal cortex (found in the frontal lobe) is responsible for cognition, personality, processing, reasoning and rationality. During a traumatic event, **the body goes into survival mode which often results in the prefrontal cortex shutting down.** Instead of encoding a traditional episodic memory, instead, different sensory **fragments connected to the traumatic event are imprinted onto the amygdala,** a part of the limbic system. These sensory fragments–sights, sounds, smells–may act as triggers later, throwing the body back into 'fight or flight' even though the trauma has already passed. This is the literal breakdown behind what we mean when we say '**the body remembers trauma**'–it does.