

Chapter 5 Case Study

The Case of Helen Fairchild: Part 1

Dr. Dorothy McLean's Assessment and Preliminary Treatment Plan for Helen Fairchild

Reason for Referral: Helen Fairchild was self-referred. She says that she is distracted, has no sexual desire, sometimes feels that life is not real, and has no memory for parts of her past.

Behavioral Observations and Brief History: Helen Fairchild, a 27-year-old female, reports feeling distressed for the past few months. Her husband of seven years left her three months ago and moved in with his secretary. Helen says that she never had much interest in sex and found little enjoyment in intimacy. Since her husband left, Helen has developed recurrent stomachaches, dizziness, hot flushes, and headaches. She sought medical advice, but no physical cause was identified. Her family doctor prescribed painkillers for her headaches. She denies any illness or substance use.

Helen has found it difficult to concentrate and has been having trouble at work. She has not been completing tasks, has been missing appointments, and sometimes has missed whole days of work. On several occasions, she found herself driving in the country when she was supposed to be at work. On these occasions, she was unable to recall how she had gotten to the country or what she had done during the preceding hours. She finds this loss of memory distressing, especially since she also has few memories of her childhood. Sometimes she feels that life is not “real” and that she is simply “playing a role.” She says that she feels as if she is standing outside herself, watching herself go through the motions of everyday life.

Helen was carefully dressed and groomed. Although she seemed quiet, she was not weepy, nor did she seem particularly anxious. Although she was responsive to questions, she would lapse into silence and from time to time had to be prompted to respond. In general, she seemed to be a mildly depressed woman with a variety of physical complaints coupled with feelings of unreality and memory loss.

Diagnostic Considerations: Helen seems to be mildly depressed, but she also has distinct signs of dissociative disorders, such as depersonalization and amnesia. It is premature to make any specific diagnosis, but the following are possibilities:

- Dissociative amnesia (rule out with dissociative fugue)
- Depersonalization/derealization disorder
- Somatic symptom disorder
- Major depressive disorder
- No medical reason has been uncovered for memory loss, headache, and stomachache; could be signs of a somatic symptom disorder.

Preliminary Treatment Plan: Although Helen's problems may be a reaction to her husband's infidelity and abandonment, there are some troubling and puzzling aspects to this case. Helen has no interest in sex, and she has unexplained gaps in her childhood memories. She also

seems to have “blank” periods when she cannot recall where she was or what she was doing. Putting these together, it may be possible that Helen has repressed sex-related childhood memories that have led her to fear sex. One possibility may be childhood sex abuse. This would be consistent with her stomachache, which could be a “body memory” of what happened to her. Her dissociative symptoms may arise from the same source.

Therapy will be targeted at uncovering evidence for such early abuse. Free association and hypnosis may help her to recover these memories. If such evidence is uncovered, Helen will be enrolled in a support group for trauma survivors. She will also need to confront her abuser.

The Case of Helen Fairchild: Part 2

Excerpt From Transcript of Treatment Session Conducted by Dr. Dorothy McLean With Helen Fairchild

Dorothy McLean, Ph.D., Psychologist

Transcript of Treatment Session: Helen Fairchild

Client: Helen Fairchild

Therapist: Dr. Dorothy McLean

DR. MCLEAN: The hypnotic induction is now complete. Are you relaxed?

HELEN: Yes.

DR. MCLEAN: Last time we met, you had trouble recalling your childhood. Do you think there is something that you might not want to remember?

HELEN: I don't know. I guess it's possible that I do not want to remember some things.

DR. MCLEAN: Perhaps the events you do not want to remember were so painful that you just cannot bear thinking about them.

HELEN: Maybe.

DR. MCLEAN: In my experience, people who have problems like yours sometimes turn out to have been molested as children. Do you think that is what you are afraid to remember?

HELEN: I don't know.

DR. MCLEAN: You know, sometimes our bodies recall things even when our brains do not. Your stomachache, for example. It may be your body's way of remembering what happened to you as a child. Maybe you were molested and your stomach was injured. Your hot flushes may have a similar origin.

HELEN: I guess that makes sense. My stomach may have been hurt.

DR. MCLEAN: Early sex abuse would also explain your lack of desire and interest in sex.

HELEN: I suppose it is possible that something terrible happened. The only really horrible thing that I can recall from my childhood was the death of my friend Jacqueline when I was only seven.

DR. MCLEAN: Tell me what you remember.

The Case of Helen Fairchild: Part 3

Newspaper Article Reporting Accusations of Murder

Woman Accuses Father of Decades-Old Murder

by Jack Gregory

Helen Fairchild, a 27-year-old office worker, has accused her father, Stanley Fairchild, age 57, of murdering her school friend 20 years ago.

On the basis of Ms. Fairchild's charge, police have reopened the murder case of Jacqueline Buchanan, which has remained unsolved for 20 years. Jacqueline, who had just celebrated her seventh birthday, went missing after visiting the Fairchild home. Her naked body was later found in some bushes on the north bank of the Torrens River. She had been raped and strangled.

Because he was the last adult to see Jacqueline, police investigators questioned Stanley Fairchild at the time. He claimed that the girl was perfectly all right when she left his home. The police theorized that someone had accosted Jacqueline as she walked home from the Fairchild house, but no suspects were ever found.

A few months ago, after Helen Fairchild's husband left her to live with his secretary, Fairchild became distressed and sought the assistance of a psychotherapist, Dr. Dorothy McLean. During her treatment, Fairchild recalled incidents of Jacqueline's rape and murder, which had taken place 20 years earlier. Not only did she recall details of the slaying, Fairchild also recalled that her father had sexually abused her on many occasions.

According to Dr. McLean, the young Helen was so traumatized by what she saw that she put all the details out of her mind. In treatment, however, these terrible memories came flooding back. Dr. McLean says that these "repressed memories" were causing Helen's psychological problems. Curing her required that the memories be brought to the surface.

Stanley Fairchild denies the charges. The police are investigating.

The Case of Helen Fairchild: Part 4

Transcript of Helen Fairchild's Testimony at the Trial of Stanley Fairchild

TRANSCRIPT

In the Matter of Stanley Fairchild

Cross-Examination of Helen Fairchild by Counsel for the Defense, Michael Moriarity

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: You have testified on direct examination that your father drove you and Jacqueline to the river. He left you in the backseat of the family car while he raped and strangled Jacqueline on the riverbank. Yet you never told this story to anyone at all for the next 20 years.

HELEN FAIRCHILD: No. I did not.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Why not?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: I could not remember it. I must have been so traumatized that I repressed my memories.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: These are interesting words: "traumatized," "repressed." Where did you learn them?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: I don't know what you mean.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Well, they sound like the sort of words that might be used by a psychologist. Did you learn them from Dr. McLean?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: I may have.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Was she the first to suggest that you may have been "traumatized"?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: Yes. I think so.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Did the memories of the murder appear to you all at once?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: No. I had many hypnosis sessions in which I gradually recalled details of what happened that day.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Were these memories spontaneous?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: I don't know what you mean.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Did they just come to you, or did Dr. McLean lead you to them?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: They are my memories.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Yes, but did Dr. McLean point you toward them? Did she suggest that you had been sexually abused, for example?

HELEN FAIRCHILD: She may have, a few times.

Transcript of Dr. Dorothy McLean's Testimony at the Trial of Stanley Fairchild

Cross-Examination of Dr. McLean by Counsel for the Defense, Michael Moriarity

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: What was your first impression of Helen Fairchild?

DR. MCLEAN: She came to see me shortly after her husband left her. She reported problems at work: an inability to concentrate, missed days, and forgetfulness. She said that she was simply going through the motions of life—going to work, looking after her kids. She said that nothing seemed real. It was like she was outside her body watching herself. She also said that her stomach and head hurt and that she had hot flushes, although doctors could find nothing wrong. She also said that she had no sexual desire.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: What did you make of these symptoms?

DR. MCLEAN: She sounded as if she was showing signs of depersonalization, somatic symptom disorder, and dissociative amnesia.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Did she have other problems with her memory?

DR. MCLEAN: Yes. She said she was unable to recall events from her childhood.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: When did you first suggest to Helen that she had been sexually abused by her father? When did you first plant this idea in her mind?

DR. MCLEAN: I did not plant the idea. Helen remembered it. Even her body seemed to remember, although the memory was disguised as hot flushes and a stomachache.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: But Helen had never made any such accusation prior to seeing you in therapy. The pediatrician who looked after her as a child never noticed any sign of abuse, nor did her mother, her neighbors, her grandparents, or her teachers. Perhaps her stomachache was simply that, a stomachache.

DR. MCLEAN: I don't think so. I believe that the details of her abuse and the rape and murder of Jacqueline were so traumatic that Helen not only repressed them but also hid them from others.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: If she repressed these details so well that she completely forgot them, and never mentioned them to anyone, and no one ever noticed anything, how did she come to mention them to you?

DR. MCLEAN: I may have asked her whether any such event occurred in her childhood.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: How do you know that what she told you was the truth?

DR. MCLEAN: People do not lie about such things. Besides, Helen's memories were like films, full of detail. She believed them strongly. She was able to recall them because I made her feel safe and gave her the strength to face her past. I also helped her by placing her under hypnosis.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: Are you sure that her memory was spontaneous?

DR. MCLEAN: Of course.

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE: You never suggested to her that she may have been sexually abused and then repressed any memory of the abuse?

DR. MCLEAN: I may have, on a few occasions. Many of Helen's problems were those associated with childhood abuse. Her memory gaps, her forgetfulness at work, her stomach pain, headaches, her lack of desire for sex, all of these things come from her repressed sexual trauma. I may have pointed her in the right direction, but the story came from her. I only facilitated her getting in touch with her past.

The Case of Helen Fairchild: Part 5

Excerpt From the Summation for the Defense

TRANSCRIPT OF TRIAL

In the Matter of Stanley Fairchild

Summation by Counsel for the Defense, Michael Moriarity

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you have heard testimony about the constructive nature of memory. You have heard how Dr. McLean, Helen's psychologist, continuously probed her for evidence of abuse and murder. Dr. McLean violated professional ethics by telling Helen that

people with her psychological problems were often molested as children. Dr. McLean asked Helen repeatedly about whether she had any such memories. When Dr. McLean heard of her childhood friend's murder, she suggested that this terrible tragedy was tied to the alleged abuse. In this way, Dr. McLean created Helen's memories. She took a vulnerable woman, a woman who had been abandoned by her husband, a woman who was suffering psychologically, and she planted in her mind an explanation for the shambles of her life. It wasn't Helen's fault: It was all because she was abused as a child. She rewarded Helen for producing detailed memories of abuse by showing special interest in them and encouraging her to recall more details.

Remember, ladies and gentlemen, that despite Helen's claims of physical and sexual abuse by her father, she had never before mentioned it to anyone. Not a soul has ever seen any evidence. Her neighbors suspected nothing. Her mother and sister say nothing ever happened. Her teachers never noticed a thing, nor did her family doctor. There is no corroborating evidence that Stanley Fairchild committed any crime at all. Fairness requires that you acquit him and let him return to his family.