

# Flashbulb Memories for a Medical Diagnosis

23

Anthony Dein    Cynthia May  
College of Charleston

Jaclyn Ford  
Boston College

## Overview

Flashbulb memories (FBMs) are memories of highly significant, often negative events that are consequential and distinctive. Although FBMs may be no more accurate than everyday memories, people report higher emotional salience, confidence, and vividness for FBMs (Talarico & Rubin, 2007). Preliminary evidence suggests that FBMs are not only salient and powerful, but they may also affect future behavior. For example, people who have FBMs about previous disaster events engage in more disaster-preparation activities (Greenberg et al., 2013), and those who focus on heroic events after a bombing demonstrate prosocial behavior (Ford et al., 2017). Our study extended these findings by examining FBMs for a serious medical diagnosis. We surveyed parents who received a diagnosis of Down syndrome for their child, and assessed the nature and impact of these memories over time.



**Participants.** Our participants included 310 mothers of children with Down syndrome. Mothers ranged in age from 21 to 79 yrs, and their children with Down syndrome ranged in age from 1 month to 52 yrs. Thus, for some parents the medical diagnosis was relatively recent (shortest time = 1 month), and for others the diagnosis was relatively distant (longest time = 52 years).

Participants were recruited via Down syndrome support groups on social media and asked to complete an extensive survey about their medical diagnosis experience and several outcomes measures.

**Materials.** The survey included 127 questions, including a request that parents provide a narrative of their memory for receiving their child’s diagnosis of Down syndrome.

## Information requested included:

- Demographic information about the participant
- Narrative detailing the diagnosis experience
- Assessments of the diagnosis experience based on measures from Talarico and Rubin (2007):

recollection    vividness    belief  
perspective    intensity    visceral reaction
- Outcome measures for the parent and child:

relationships    advocacy    well-being  
access to therapy    employment  
inclusion in school    participation in sports  
independent living    enrollment in college

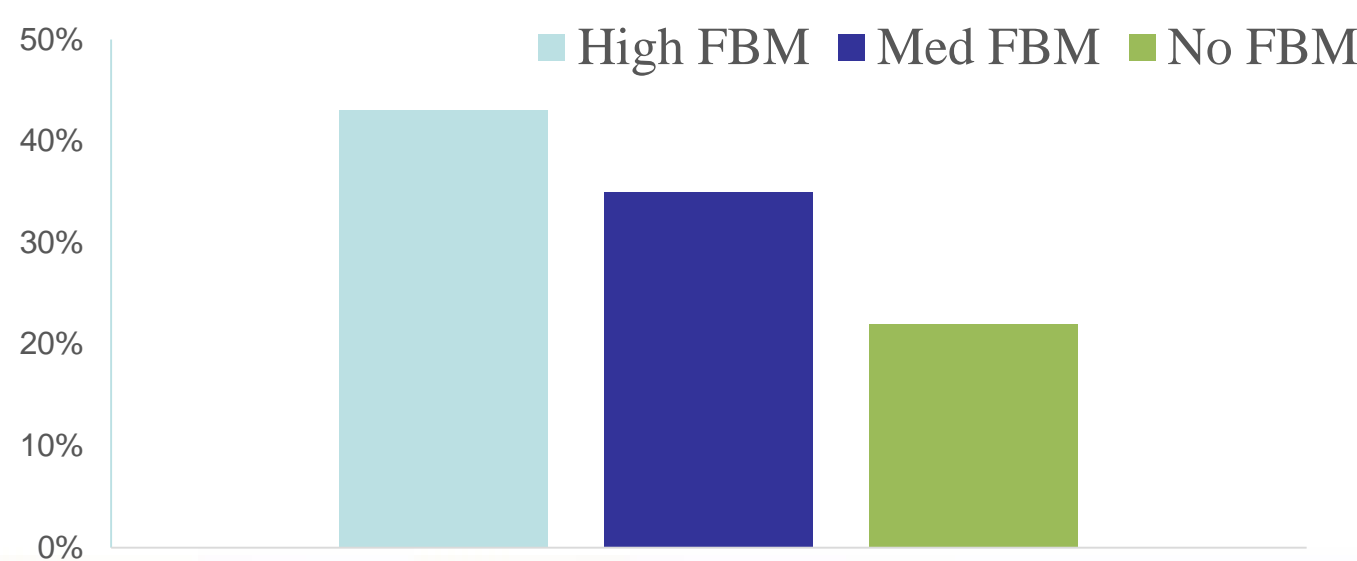
**Scoring.** FBMs were evaluated in two ways:  
(1) **FBMC:** We scored participants’ narratives of their medical diagnosis experience using the Flashbulb Memory Checklist (FBMC) criteria defined by Lanciano et al. (2018).

(2) **TR scores:** We also had participants rate their memories on a number of dimensions (e.g., vividness, confidence, intensity) that are known to distinguish FBMs from every day memories (Talarico & Rubin, 2007).

**Preliminary Results.** Evidence from FBMC scores and TR scores indicates that **receipt of a diagnosis of Down syndrome resulted in a FBM for the majority of mothers.**

More than 75% of narratives qualified as FBM using FBMC scores, and the pattern was similar for responses to TR criteria.

## Percentage of participants whose narratives scored as high, medium, or no FBM on the FBMC scale.



## Percentage of total participants whose scores exceed the TR score criteria for FBM

Recollection	Vividness	Belief	Intensity
>4	>4.7	>5.5	>3.5
73%	91%	83%	70%

Visceral Reaction	Perspective
>2.25	>4.5
75%	75%

Findings also suggest that **although the flashbulb nature of these memories fades over time, 72% of memories for the diagnosis still qualify as FBMs after 10 years.**

## FBMC category by time since diagnosis.

Years since diagnosis	N Per group	High FBM >14	Med FBM 11 – 14	No FBM <11
0 – 3 yrs	55	51%	36%	13%
4 – 10 yrs	104	48%	35%	17%
10+ yrs	151	37%	35%	28%

## Percentage of participants whose scores exceed the TR score criteria for FBM after 10+ yrs

Recollection	Vividness	Belief	Intensity
>4	>4.7	>5.5	>3.5
67%	90%	66%	69%

Visceral Reaction	Perspective
>2.25	>4.5
68%	69%

Finally, TR composite scores correlated with several outcome measures. For example, **moms with strong FBMs were less likely to report the birth of their child to be a positive experience (r = -.33).**

**Conclusions.** Receiving a significant medical diagnosis can create a FBM. These memories show similar qualities to FBMs for public events, and may endure for years to decades. Further analyses will examine whether these FBMs affect other outcomes.