

Your Memory - How to Improve It, Not Lose It!

Medical Review: 2003

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How often has this happened to you: You enter a room and forget why you wanted to go into that room, or you cannot find your keys or your glasses? You become frightened that you are losing your memory. But in fact, everyone, in any age group, has trouble remembering things from time to time.

Memory is critical to our daily lives. Memory is the capacity to retain information about past events, and helps us plan future events. We should be aware of how our memories work, what changes occur in memory over time, and how we can improve our memories as we get older. Fortunately, most changes in memory are normal changes of the aging process, or may be caused by temporary or treatable problems.

Our brains are amazing organs and the part of our brain that controls memory is a complicated system of numerous functions. Our brains can stay strong and healthy well into old age. But as people get older, memory changes bring on the concern that something may be “wrong” with your mind.

It is important to understand that there are memory problems in all age groups. Children and teenagers seem to forget everything they’ve just been told. Many adults are so busy and have so many distractions, they just don’t have time to remember everything. Seniors are more likely to have difficulty remembering names, items on a list, or where they put things. In general, no one has a “perfect” memory. Most of what happens around us is forgotten because there’s no need to remember everything. We are bombarded with information all the time and the memory processes only the information that we need to remember.

How Does the Memory Work?

The Senses (vision, hearing, touch, taste, smell) help us to receive and record information. If information is not recorded in our brains, we cannot recall it. Using the senses to record information is called **Sensory Memory**. Think of your brain as a filing cabinet where you store this information.

Short Term Memory is remembering something you just recently saw or heard. For example, remembering the name of someone you just met, or a phone number you just looked up involves short-term memory. Short-term memory only lasts an average of 5 seconds. In order to remember the same information at a later time, your brain transfers this information to **Long Term Memory**. This is done by repeating the information, or visualizing it. Your long-term memory contains information that you have recorded in your brain in the past. Long-term memory has no limit on capacity and can store vast amounts of information.

Although long-term memory always remains intact, it may take longer to go through the memory filing cabinet to find the exact information you want.

Recall is the final process of remembering. Recall means finding and pulling out information that is stored in your brain’s long-term memory filing cabinet. We often need cues to trigger the recall of certain information.

Age-Related Memory Changes

There are many myths and stereotypes regarding memory problems. Most Seniors have some decrease in memory function but that is not necessarily a sign of declining mental health. Severe memory loss can be caused by Alzheimer’s Disease, stroke, acute alcoholism, and some neurological illnesses. However, minor memory lapses are **not** indications of dementia. Most Seniors will never suffer severe memory loss and the degree and type of any loss varies with the individual.

Age-related memory changes may include:

Slower thinking - as we age, everything slows down a bit, including the speed of processing new information to our brains, and the speed of recalling information. The older we get, the more information is packed into that filing cabinet so it may take a bit longer to retrieve certain memories. It is important to be patient when trying to recall long-term memories and not get frustrated.

Decreased concentration - our ability to pay attention to things decreases with age and we are more easily distracted, especially if we are interrupted. To compensate, we need to strengthen our powers of concentration by paying attention, using our senses, and avoiding interruptions. For example, if the phone rings, turn off the TV so that you can pay attention to the caller. Being a good listener is essential to help you remember. Often the problem is “not listening”, rather than “not remembering” (this principle applies to all ages). Just remember, many memory problems are related to **attention**, not retention.

Decreased Use of Memory Strategies - visualizing, organizing, and associating are all strategies used by your brain to recall memories. As we age, these strategies slow down and it may require more time to organize and store information. It helps to **visualize** and think about the object, person, etc. in your mind, over and over.

Need For More Memory Cues - as we get older, we need more cues, or triggers, to jog our memories. For example, if you can't remember someone's name, visualize what the person looks like, what job they have, what your last conversation was about, what they wore, etc. The more visualization cues, the more assistance you will give your brain to recall the name.

What Factors Affect Memory Loss?

There are several factors that influence how well or how poorly our memories function. It is important to recognize that many memory changes are caused by temporary and treatable conditions that may require medical attention.

- Attitude - our attitudes about memory changes are important. Becoming upset and anxious when we forget things creates more anxiety and interferes with our memory process. If you convince yourself that you have a poor memory, it is unlikely that you will use helpful strategies to try to improve your memory.
- Disuse - many memory problems are related to inactivity. If you are not active, there will be fewer demands on your memory so it becomes lazy or “rusty”.
- Illness - chronic illnesses can lead to social isolation, and disuse of memory. With your health as your major concern, you may not concentrate on other aspects of life and become forgetful. Even temporary illnesses can cause temporary memory loss.
- Sensory Problems - vision and hearing problems decrease your ability to receive information, which is the first step of the memory process. Talk to your physician about corrective devices (glasses, hearing aids).
- Medications - some side effects or combinations of drugs can cause memory loss. Discuss memory changes with your physician. Altering medications often helps. Studies are continuing as to the effect of estrogen on cognitive functions. Also, a popular herb called Ginkgo Biloba has been touted as a memory-booster and there are some studies that indicate that this herb may enhance memory and alertness. However, it is important that you discuss taking any herbs with your physician.
- Alcohol - excessive alcohol use affects your thinking and memory processes. Long-term alcoholism can cause serious memory impairment.
- Diet - poor nutrition can affect memory. Everyone needs a well balanced diet to keep brain cells sharp.
- Depression - being depressed can cause your thinking to slow down and affect your ability to concentrate. Depression may cause withdrawal and disinterest and this can impair your memory. Severe depression and other emotional problems are often mistaken for dementia. Feeling sad, lonely, or bored is more common in older people who are facing retirement, health problems, and deaths of friends or loved ones. Adapting to major changes can leave people feeling confused, depressed, and forgetful. Emotional problems can be helped by health professionals.
- Grief - is often a temporary cause of memory loss. As grief subsides, memory functions usually return to normal.

What Are Memory Assessments?

A memory assessment is a psychological test that measures your memory function. If you are concerned that you are having problems with your memory and improvement strategies are not helping, you may want to discuss this with your physician. Identification of memory problems is important in order to determine if memory loss is in the normal range or if a medical problem is present. Keep in mind that everyone has lapses in memory now and then and practicing some of the self-improvement strategies should help. Avoiding stress and improving your listening skills will go a long way toward helping you have a better memory.

How Can I Improve My Memory?

- Reduce Anxiety - relax and be patient with yourself. Try not to be self-critical and fearful of forgetting. Relaxing, through deep breathing, yoga or other relaxation techniques, will improve your attention span and ability to recall.
Be self-confident - stop complaining about your memory and avoid people who do. Pat yourself on the back when you remember things.
Be honest if you can't remember - minimize memory loss to others. "It's so nice to see you again but your name has slipped my mind".
- Choose What to Remember / What to Forget - be selective about what is important to remember and what is not. Being selective will avoid memory over-load.
- Strengthen Memory Skills - there are internal and external strategies for improving your memory:
Internal strategies are exercises that you can do mentally:
 - Make up rhymes (30 days hath September).
 - Compose mental pictures, visualize images.
 - Improve your listening skills, pay attention.
 - Read materials out loud, repeat several times - repetition is helpful.
 - Use memories to trigger other memories - reminisce with someone, look at photo albums.
 - Relax - relaxation will clear your mind of clutter.
 - Keep your mind active, exercise your brain by reading, playing chess, doing crossword puzzles, etc.External Strategies use environmental cues to help you remember:
 - Organize your life. Put keys, glasses in the same designated place, and get rid of clutter.
 - Reduce noise and background distractions as much as possible.
 - Keep a datebook or calendar.
 - Use helpful devices such as cooking timers, alarm clocks, etc.
 - Keep lists! Writing things down is the best way to reinforce memory.
 - Keep your lists by the door, in your car.
 - Be physically active. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain which enhances the mind and also helps to reduce stress and anxiety.
 - Take care of your health and eat nutritious meals.

A Note About Medications

Many people, especially seniors, need to take several medications daily. There is a lot to remember in order to take medications properly and safely. Organizing a chart system will help you to remember what medications need to be taken at a specific time, and directions on how to take them. Ask your pharmacist for information regarding specific medications and/or your physician.

This information is provided for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for sound medical judgment. If you have any questions or concerns, you should discuss them with your physician.

Resources:

National Institute of Mental Health
National Institute on Aging
AARP

Related Healthy Living Links:

HealthyExtensions
Discounted programs, products, and services
Today's Health and Wellness Magazine