

Forget How to Remember?

By: Nancy Haught

Oregonian, Living Section, October 4, 2005

Don't worry, your memories are still on file; you might just need some help in retrieving the information and strengthening your recollection collection

Your memory is like a library. When you're 20, it's a spanking-new building with spacious shelves, a decent number of books and a state-of-the-art catalog system. It's easy to find what you're looking for. By the time you're 50, the library is a little run down. There are a lot more books, the shelves are crowded and the catalog is showing signs of wear. It's harder – and takes longer – to find the information you want.

Most of us have had that experience. You can't remember what's on deck for Saturday night, what your boss said about deadlines in the last staff meeting, when you're supposed to pick up the kids, the name of the street that bike shop is on, who sang your favorite song in 1979 or where the heck you put your keys.

Not all at the same time, of course. If you consistently couldn't remember all sorts of things, you'd see a physician. But for most of us, the problem is annoying, a daily brush with aging, and we don't want to yield to it.

The good news is that the library is still open and you still have borrowing privileges. The library metaphor is courtesy of Douglas Herrmann, an emeritus professor of psychology at Indiana State University who has studied and written about memory improvement for most of his memorable career.

"The secret is to assume a positive attitude and remember that all the information you need is still in there somewhere," he says. That, and a few mental tricks will help offset a fading memory.

We consulted psychologists, a neurologist and a naturopath to check out why our memories fade and to offer some tips on using them more effectively. You might want to post this on the fridge, for future reference.

Two kinds of memory

It's not your imagination. "Memory begins to fade in our 20s and 30s," says Dr. Jeri S. Janowsky, professor of neurology at Oregon Health & Science University. There are two kinds of memory, she adds. Our working memory, where we hold things for brief periods of time, and our long-term memory, where we file away information that we hope to use later.

Writing down a phone number, for example, becomes sort of an "external hard drive" that takes pressure off our working memory, Janowsky says. Other strategies are more useful when it comes to storing information in an already crowded long-term memory. When you first learn someone's name, for example, you can attach a phrase of context to it: Susan Smith is Jeremy's mom and she works at my dentist's office. That gives you multiple points of entry for recalling the name, Janowsky says.

Memory is linked to the process of aging, she says but also may be a result of busier lives, too many distractions, depression or hormonal changes. On the extreme side of things like brain tumors, small strokes and Alzheimer's disease. "It's one thing to be a little forgetful," Janowsky says. "But if other people are pointing it out to you – if you didn't pay your bills and you thought you had – see your doctor."

Forget how to Remember?

By: Nancy Haught

Oregonian, Living Section, October 4, 2005

Page 2

How to perk up memory

Lifestyle choices and mental strategies can affect your ability to remember. Five natural steps can lead to a better memory.

1. Sleep goes at the top of the list, says Carrie Jones, a resident at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Southwest Portland. "When you sleep, your body repairs itself." Some people believe they can get by just fine on six hours of sleep a night, but eight remains the number to shoot for.
2. Make sure you sleep well. Jones suggests sleeping in a dark room – cover the windows and glowing clock faces and get rid of the night light. "Sleeping in total darkness helps your body find its natural rhythm," Jones says.
3. Keep hydrated. The old rule was to drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water a day. A better guide is to divide your body weight by half and drink that many ounces of water. A 180-pound man should drink 90 ounces of water a day, more than 10 8-ounce glasses. Coffee and soda don't count, Jones says. They flush water from your system.
4. Maintain your blood sugar, Jones says. Eat three healthful meals a day, and restrict sugar and carbs. "This reduces the chance of diabetes, but excess sugar also gums up the works in the brain."
5. Watch what you eat. Wild salmon and other deep-water fish contribute DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), which has a positive affect on mental functions. Bright colored vegetables – carrots, squash and red peppers, for example – help rid the body of free radicals, which in turn can cause disease, she says.

Rekindling memory

Renew your memory with eight approaches.

1. "Get some good basic information about memory and aging so you know what to expect," says Robin West, a professor of psychology at the University of Florida. Know what's normal and don't panic.
2. Research shows that self-confidence seems to affect the ability to remember, West adds. Don't become obsessed by your mistakes. "Focus on what you do remember, and don't beat yourself up for being in your 50's, being overloaded at work, raising teenagers and taking care of older parents. Life gets complicated."
3. In this age of PINs and passwords, forget the string of numbers and make yours a word that you can remember, Janowsky says. This is easiest on a computer keyboard, when you can type in letters.
4. Repetition helps, but not the say-it-over-and-over kind. Spaced retrieval is a better way of storing things in our long-term memory, Janowsky says. Make a list. Set it aside. An hour later, look at it again. An hour after that, look at it again.
5. Learn things in multiple ways, Janowsky says. Hearing it, writing it, seeing it, for example, all help in recalling information later.

Forget how to Remember?

By: Nancy Haught

Oregonian, Living Section, October 4, 2005

Page 3.

5. Exercise your brain. "Staying mentally active and learning new things looks like it does prevent memory loss," Janowsky says. And education doesn't have to be academic. Learning to dance, for example, is both physical and cognitive.
6. Keep a calendar and don't apologize, Herrmann says. An external record is probably more effective than asking someone else to remind you of an appointment.
7. To remember faces and names, try to convert the name into an image and imagine that image on the face, Herrmann says. If someone's name is Tower, imagine a tower rising from his or her face.

Memory resources

To find out more about memory and strategies that work, check out:

- "How to Cure Your Memory Failures: Dozens of Proven Methods From Two World Experts," by Michael M. Gruneberg and Douglas J. Herrmann (Sterling, \$12.95, 128 pages). Herrmann also writes a memory blog for the Tribune-Star, Terre Haute, Ind.

See www.tribstar.com Under "opinion," click on "blogs" and look for "A Sharper Mind."

- Memory newsletters by Robin West are online at the Everyday Memory Clinic Web site at www.psych.ufl.edu/~emc/
- To read about Janowsky's memory research at Oregon Health & Science University, or to volunteer for a study, see www.ohsu.edu/research/janowskylab/