

Forget Me Nots

by Dr. Mitchell Flaum & Bennett Flaum

Memory is a gift that allows us to savor the sweet spice of life experiences. It enables us to learn and grow and develop. It gives us a sense of continuity, linking past, present and future into a unified, coherent whole.

However, memory can be elusive, escaping us when we need it the most. Imagine attending a concert but forgetting where you put the tickets. Imagine forgetting where you've left the car in the mall parking lot or in a worse case scenario, whether you've driven the car there altogether. When we are young, we attribute such lapses of memory to stress, exhaustion, emotional preoccupation or trauma. As we get older, we begin to worry about whether we are losing our mind altogether. We hope and pray that our thinking and memory functions will remain intact and vital throughout our lives. The question remains as to what is memory and what can we do to insure its vitality and efficiency over time.

Memory can be compared to moving into a new home. You need to figure out where to store things so that you can easily retrieve them later. You also need to organize things according to whether they are needed immediately or frequently, occasionally (Seasonal Clothing) or rarely (high school yearbook) to (silverware). Similarly, memory consists of two phases. Phase one is that of "encoding", or taking in information from the environment and sorting it through internal representations, and "retrieval or recall" the ability to recall information at a later time. Furthermore, memory processing can be broken down into short term, long term and immediate memory. Finally, memory seems to be organized as multiple systems as we integrate separate visual, auditory and motor

system memories into a comprehensive understanding of our world.

While we may expect perfection from our memory, we may easily be disappointed, as when we find things to be "on the tip of our tongue" and they take awhile to come to us. Furthermore, as we age, normal changes do occur with memory, along with other mental functions. Information processing slows down, and our attention wanders more. On a biological level, our brain cells deteriorate over time. The myelin sheath covering the nerve cells breaks down, slowing down the speed of our thinking. The connectors between nerves (synapses) decrease, making it more difficult to encode new memories or recall some old memories.

However, there is good news. Memory is a process that can be improved upon across the age span. Indeed, many memory experts view the brain and the workings of the mind as similar to a body muscle. Like any muscle, years of being out of shape can leave it shabby and debilitated due to flabby thinking habits. Through proper exercise, nutrition and attitude it can be revitalized. If we believe that we have some degree of control over our memory skills, then we will.

Mason and Kohn, in "The Memory Workbook" offer the following mnemonic device- to improve memory function (RARE=Relax, attend, rehearse and envision. Dream=Developing Rational and Emotionally Adaptive Mandrels) They discuss progressive muscle relaxation and conscious breathing for relaxation. For improved attention they stress limiting distraction when learning new material, and repeating information aloud so as to rehearse it once it is learned. Making a



mental note of where you are at the time of learning will also aid with memory storage and retrieval. Finally, as a memory tip they recommend organizing them in a numerical order so as to provide a context in which to anchor the items to be remembered (such as a grocery list).

According to other doctors and researchers there are many ways to enhance your memory.

1. Exercising the Mind-For example, by studying or learning new language
2. Eating Properly-For example, eating a well balanced diet with enough fruit and vegetables. Studies with Ginkgo Biloba, an herb, have found it effective in increasing memory, recall, and concentration. Choline has also been found to improve short-term memory. Foods rich in RNA such as sardines can help in memory synthesis
3. Social Interaction-Having meaningful relationships with others is important.
4. Sufficient Relaxation-Relaxation reduces stress and tension allowing one to better concentrate.
5. Physical Exercise-Exercise reduces stress and improves attention. It also oxygenates the brain
6. Sleep-Receiving enough sleep is necessary for efficient brain functioning
7. Medication-Some medications cause memory difficulties. If one takes such medication consult with a physician to either alter the dosage or switch the medication.

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