

Five Steps to Better Memory



You've met her before. You can even remember where. But her name? It eludes you, taunting you, just out of reach. Has this happened to you? Do you accept it as part of growing older? Ironically, new research shows this attitude may make things worse.

When older adults were told they couldn't control their memory during a University of Florida study, they lost confidence and made little effort to remember a series of names. In contrast, older adults who had been told they could improve their memory tried much harder.

"We believe what happens when you have this kind of negative mind frame in the long run is that you will give up doing things you should be doing to improve your abilities," says Robin L. West, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology at the University of Florida Center for Gerontological Studies. "When you get older it's extremely important to continue to work on your memory, continue to challenge your memory and keep using your skills."

Aging can make it harder to remember some things. But by focusing on your potential and continuing to exercise your mind, you may be able to boost your memory power. Get started with these strategies:

1. Take on New Challenges. Studies show that when researchers put adult mice and rats in a more stimulating environment, their brain structure changes in ways that enhance cell communication. That improves the animals' ability to learn and recall new behaviors.

These studies suggest that similar stimulation also may help humans, says Andrew Monjan, Ph.D., chief of the neurobiology and neuropsychology at the National Institute on Aging. "If you maintain an intellectual challenge, it may help maintain your cognitive function.

"If you are skilled at crossword puzzles, doing more crossword puzzles would not be an intellectual challenge," says Dr. Monjan, "whereas learning a new language, learning to use computers or reading something new that is stimulating would be."

2. Control Stress. Studies show that anxiety hampers your memory. "All the research we know of shows that it isn't so much whether or not you're exposed to stress, it's how you respond to it that seems to make a difference in the way stress hormones are released," says Marilyn S. Albert, Ph.D., professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School.

Rather than giving up when faced with difficulties, she says, it's best to take the initiative so you feel you're making a difference. If you're troubled by financial problems, for example, develop a detailed plan to reduce your expenses and debt.

"If you feel out of control, you have higher levels of stress hormones, or glucocorticoids," Dr. Albert explains. "If you give large amounts of glucocorticoids to animals for long periods of time, you actually damage brain cells. So our theory is that ultimately attitude translates into some hormonal difference that influences the brain."

Stressful experiences, such as grief or moving, also may limit your ability to store and recall information.

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- 3. Make the Effort.** “Whenever you know you have to remember something, plan a way to study it and plan a method for recalling it,” Dr. West suggests. For example, if you want to tell your daughter about an article you read, you may post it on your refrigerator and read it when she calls. But that’s too easy, Dr. West says. Instead, post that clipping just as a reminder: Its presence will jog your memory when she calls, but you’ll try to recall and relate the main points.
- 4. Use Memory Tricks.** These techniques can help you recall things:
 - Visualization.** “If you want to remember a person’s name, you imagine the face with the name written across it,” Dr. West suggests. Or, imagine the face with something connected to the name. “So if the name is Gordon, you remember a garden on his face.”
 - Association.** Connect things you’re learning with something you already know. “If you meet someone whose name is similar to a person you’ve already met, you try to connect it that way,” Dr. West recommends. “If you meet someone who has an interesting job, associate the name with the job.”
 - Organization.** By keeping your important items — keys, glasses and wallet — in one place, you always know where to find them. When writing your grocery list, group items by category. Even if you forget to take the list with you, you’re more likely to remember its contents, says Dr. West.
- 5. Stay Fit.** Cardiovascular health is important to your memory because it allows the heart to effectively pump blood with nutrients and oxygen into the brain. Congestive heart failure and long-term untreated high blood pressure have been shown to hurt memory. To fuel your body and brain, eat healthy foods. While you’re trying these strategies, focus on your capabilities and don’t get discouraged. “Plan ahead. Plan for memory. Study things you want to remember and really go after it in a way that you wouldn’t if you weren’t thinking about your potential,” says Dr. West.

How Age Alters Memory

Aging can affect your memory in several ways, experts say.

“It becomes harder as we get older to get new information into memory, but we do a very good job at remembering things that fit into our general knowledge base, things that we know something about from the past, our specialty areas,” says Dr. West. “New information on these things tends to move very well into memory and stay there.”

“However, it’s harder to remember unfamiliar or abstract information. Older adults also are good at retrieving information from semantic memory — in using words and understanding their meaning,” Dr. West explains.

If your memory slips or if you’re becoming more forgetful, talk with your doctor.

Memory problems can be caused by stress, depression, hypothyroidism, cardiovascular problems and a range of other illnesses. Some drugs, including certain heart medications, antidepressants and even cold remedies, also may hurt your memory.

“Memory requires alertness,” says Dr. West. “Anything that depresses the system — alcohol, Valium, any kind of tranquilizer, any kind of sleeping pill — will depress the memory system as well.”

When you begin any new drug or change dosage, keep an eye on your reactions. Even drugs not known to disrupt memory may affect yours. Drug interactions also may contribute to memory problems.

