

Practical Memory Techniques

While no one has a perfect memory, forgetfulness is more common in those whose brains have been affected by advancing age, injury, illness, pain, or emotional distress. When this happens, we tend not to lose our memories from earlier in life. What usually declines most is the capacity to form and recall new memories. Here are some examples of this kind of memory difficulty:

- Being unable to recall where we've placed our keys or important documents or where we've parked our car
- Forgetting why we've walked into a room or what we intended to buy when shopping
- Forgetting the names of people we've just met or what we've recently read or seen on television
- Having trouble learning to use new technology or remembering directions to new locations
- Forgetting to follow through on something we intended to do

Sometimes information is not actually forgotten, but is hard to access when we need it. For example, we might struggle to find a word to express ourselves in conversation or have trouble recalling the name of an old friend or famous movie actor even though we know that we still know it.

Such experiences can be frustrating, especially when we compare our current memory performance to earlier times in life when memory seemed to work almost effortlessly. Fortunately, though, better day-to-day memory functioning is possible for those willing to practice the techniques described here. For example, in this first section, you'll learn ways to make sure you don't miss appointments or fail to follow through on things you've agreed to do.

Remembering Future Events, Appointments, and Obligations

We've all had the experience of forgetting about some event, appointment, or obligation, perhaps an assignment for school or work, a bill payment, or the birthday of a loved one. The embarrassment, hurt feelings, late penalties, and other consequences of such forgetfulness can usually be avoided by using the following techniques:

- Purchase an appointment book or daily planner, preferably one small enough that you can carry it with you almost everywhere, but large

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enough to write in comfortably. (It's helpful if it also contains a section for addresses and phone numbers.) Use your appointment book or planner as described below:

1. Record all appointments, plans, anniversaries, birthdays, and obligations on the appropriate dates.
 2. Never agree to go anywhere or do anything in the future without immediately writing that plan down on the date or dates that you will need to take action on it.
 3. Review your appointment book or planner every morning and again several times throughout the day.
 4. Also review your appointment book or planner each night to see what your plans are for the next day and for the rest of the week.
 5. As you accomplish each task, cross it off with a single line so you can still read it to see what you've done.
 6. If you don't accomplish a task on the day you intended, cross it off your schedule on that date and transfer it to the next reasonable date that you can accomplish it.
 7. Draw an arrow after each entry that is a recurring meeting or responsibility. For example, if you have a meeting the first Wednesday of each month, draw an arrow after that entry (e.g., "Bridge Club 2:00 p.m. first Wednesday of each month→"). As you cross that entry off after the meeting, you'll notice the arrow and be reminded to mark that event down on your schedule for the next month.
- For tasks that need to be done at a specific time, alarm clocks or timers can be useful. Most basic cell phones and all smartphones and tablet computers have this alarm or reminder capability. Wrist watches with built-in alarms are convenient since you can easily take them with you wherever you go. If you need assistance setting up such devices to alert you at the right time, just ask a friend or relative who's good with technology to help.
 - Another technique to jog your memory about things you need to do is to put notes or other reminders where you're likely to see them (e.g., on the bathroom mirror, by the front door, attached to your key ring, on the refrigerator). Self-sticking note pads are especially handy for this purpose. Just be careful to take your notes down when the task is finished, and don't use so many that you start to ignore them.

- To make sure you don't forget to pay bills, it's best to pay them as soon as you open them before you even set them down. If you need to wait until you have the money to pay your bills, write a note in your appointment book or planner for the date when you will be able to pay them. Then make sure you store your bills in a special place where you'll always know to find them, preferably right next to your checkbook and stamps. If you regularly have enough money in your account to cover your bills, consider setting them up to be automatically paid by your bank. Your credit card, mortgage, insurance, and utility companies will often help you set up automatic payments.
- For the kind of forgetting that happens in the middle of a task, such as walking into a room and not remembering why you went there, try one or both of these techniques:
 1. Repeat your intention over and over in your mind until your mission is complete (e.g., "going to get the vacuum").
 2. Picture yourself using the object you're going to get in some strange or comical way to make the memory stronger (e.g., vacuuming up all the furniture in the room).
- For problems remembering steps in a routine, write the routine in the form of a numbered checklist and post it right where that activity normally takes place. As you perform each step, check it off. You can create checklists for complex, multi-step work responsibilities, as well as for simpler tasks such as making sure you take everything you need with you when you leave home.

Remembering Names When Meeting People

One of the most common memory complaints is inability to remember the names of new acquaintances. The techniques described below can help you become better at this useful social skill:

- One very important principle of memory is that **the more we think about new information, the better it sticks**. While this principle seems like common sense, many of us ignore it when we're introduced to someone new. We hear the new name but immediately shift our attention to what we want to say. By doing so, we make it much less likely that we'll remember the name.

So take a moment when you meet someone new to think about his or her name, and perhaps to comment on it. Here are some examples of ways

to get yourself thinking about a name so that you're more likely to remember it:

1. You might note whether the first or last name is the same as that of a friend or of someone famous. If it's a last name that they share, perhaps you can inquire about whether they're related.
2. If the name is unusual, you might ask how it's spelled or inquire about its national origin.
3. Many last names originally had some meaning that you can think about as a way to get your brain to more actively process the new information. For example, you might wonder if Mrs. Goldsmith had an ancestor who made things out of gold or if Mr. Wilson had an ancestor who was the son of someone named "Will."
4. You might think to yourself of a humorous or otherwise memorable association between the person's name and his or her job or appearance. For example, if your new plumber happens to be named "John," you might remind yourself that some people use this name as another term for "toilet." Or you might make a mental note that your new acquaintance "Paul" is unusually pale.
5. Mental images make memories even stronger. In the plumber example above, if you picture the plumber's torso as a toilet, with his head, arms, and legs attached to it, you're more likely to remember his name is "John." The name "Mary" might stick better if you picture her standing at the altar in a wedding dress.
6. Rhymes also make names more memorable.

Any technique that makes you actively think about new information, such as a name, will help you recall it later.

- A second important principle of memory is that **the more we use new information, the better we'll retain it in the future**. You can apply this principle when meeting someone new by using that person's name immediately (e.g., "Nice to meet you, Juanita") and again when the conversation ends (e.g., "Hope to see you again, Juanita"). If you can also work the name into the middle of the conversation, all the better.
- A third important principle of memory is that **reviewing or rehearsing information periodically over time helps you to retain it**. You can apply this principle when you've met someone new by thinking about that person's name several times later in the day and over the next few days. If you're not sure you'll remember the name long enough to review it later,

ask for a business card or write down the person's name and a few identifying characteristics as soon as possible. When you rehearse the person's name, try to also rehearse the mental images or other associations you used to try to remember it.

- Keeping such information in an address book will make it easier to find later. To be really thorough, you can enter it in your address book twice, once alphabetically and once under the name of the place where you're likely to see that person again. For instance, you might list the key people you want to remember from a certain office or business under the name of that office or business in your address book. Then, right before you visit that place again, review the names and any important facts you've written about each person. This minute or so of extra review will pay off in better memory performance.

Remembering What You Read

Memory for what you read can be improved through the use of the **SQ3R** method, developed by psychology professor Dr. Francis Robinson. This method has five steps:

1. **S**: In the first step, you **survey** or **skim** the material, with special attention to chapter and section headings and any chapter summaries, to gain a general overview of what topics are covered and how they're organized.
2. **Q**: In the second step, you think of the specific **questions** that you hope to have answered through careful reading of the material. This helps you feel like you're reading for a purpose, which keeps you more focused and therefore more likely to remember what you read.
3. **R**: After this initial survey and formulation of questions, the third step is to actually **read** the material, searching for the answers to these questions.
4. **R**: The fourth step is to **recite** or **rehearse** in your own words the major points and important details of what you've read. It also helps to write a few notes about these major points and important details.
5. **R**: The fifth and final step is to **review** the material one last time to remind yourself of its major points, as well as how the specific details you've read relate to those major points.

This approach does take a bit more up-front time and effort, but research over the past few decades has shown that it improves ability to recall what you read. Reading in a place with few distractions also helps. It's also a good idea to do your reading and other mentally demanding tasks in the morning or at whatever time of day you feel most alert.

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Remembering Where You Place Belongings

Have you ever lost your keys, misplaced a check, or forgotten where you parked your car? Everyone occasionally misplaces important belongings, but if this happens to you frequently, here are some solutions:

- You're less likely to lose track of your possessions if you follow this rule: **"A place for everything and everything in its place."** So, take the time to decide where you'll routinely store your keys, phone, checkbook, shoes, and any other objects that are inconvenient to lose. Establish a filing system for important paperwork.
- As you assign each item a "home," write the name of the item and its "home" on a list. Then rewrite the list using some method of organization, such as alphabetical order or groupings of similar items. Leave space between items so you can easily add additional items as you think of them. Post your master list of object locations on a wall or refrigerator so you can't misplace it.
- Then make certain that you always return your belongings to their designated "homes" as soon as you're finished with them.
- Use your appointment book or planner to jot down the location of objects that you temporarily need to place away from their customary "home." For example, when leaving your car in a parking garage, make a note of its location. Or use your smartphone to take a picture of the sign showing its location or to make a voice recording of its location. (Just don't let your smartphone battery run out.)

Remembering to Take Medications

Memory problems can be particularly dangerous when they result in the overuse or underuse of medications. Medications obviously don't work when they aren't taken, and overdoses can be toxic.

Both types of problems can result in unnecessary emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and deaths. Researchers have estimated costs in the hundreds of billions of dollars per year in the United States from failure to take medications as prescribed.

To reduce this risk, try these techniques:

- Buy a plastic medication dispenser with separate compartments for each day of the week. These inexpensive items are available in most drugstores and are very helpful for keeping track of how many pills you've taken.

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- If you take pills more than once a day, you might even buy more than one dispenser and clearly label each (e.g., “Morning Pills”).
- Keep your medication dispenser in a place where you'll see it frequently, but out of reach of children and pets.
- Fill up your medication dispenser at the beginning of each week, placing the appropriate pills in each compartment.
- Set your cell phone, smartphone, or watch alarm to alert you each time you're due for another dose of medication.
- Use your appointment book or planner to write reminders to take your medications, fill up your pill dispenser, and refill prescriptions.
- Sign up for automatic prescription delivery if you're eligible for this service.
- Ask a trusted family member or friend to help you manage your medications.

Remembering Jokes, Interesting Facts, and New Words

How often have you heard a joke, planned to tell it to a friend, and then just couldn't remember it? Some people are naturally gifted at remembering jokes, but most of us have to put in some extra effort. These techniques will help:

- Next time you hear a joke worth re-telling, take out your appointment book or planner and write down the punch line and two or three key phrases.
- Rehearse the joke in your head until you have it right.
- Then actually tell that joke the same day to three or more different people. That will usually be enough to make a joke stick in your memory, at least for a while (unless of course it was a truly forgettable joke to begin with--- you'll know that from the groans and rolled eyes of your audience).

The same method works when trying to remember an interesting fact or new vocabulary word:

- Write it down in your appointment book or planner.
- Rehearse it a few times in your head.
- Bring it up in conversation several times that day.
- Review the new fact or word again before going to bed that night.

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Then, to make your new joke, fact, or word really stick with you, write it down in your appointment book or planner a few more times, spaced out in increasingly long intervals (e.g., 2 days, 4 days, 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month, 2 months, 4 months).

Each time you see it in your appointment book or planner, bring up the new joke, fact, or word in conversation, or at least talk about it to yourself.

Periodically recalling and actively thinking about something over increasingly long intervals is one of the most important keys to forming durable memories.

Remembering What You Do and Talk About

If you have trouble remembering what you've done or talked about, it helps to make a summary of each important event or discussion.

When talking with someone, you can do this by summarizing out loud what you heard the other person say and asking him or her if you understood correctly. This technique not only helps you remember the conversation, but also helps you avoid miscommunication and shows the other person that you care about what he or she has to say.

Immediately after each important event or conversation, make a record of what happened. This record can be in the form of brief notes entered into your appointment book or planner. If you run out of room, you can use a separate notepad. Or you can dictate notes to yourself with your smartphone or voice recorder.

Make a record of the people you talked to, what you talked about, how you felt, and what you did each day. The process of writing or talking about your experiences helps you to remember them. Reviewing at the end of the day what you've written or recorded further helps you remember.

To make your memories even stronger and more durable, keep a separate journal or diary at home (so you never lose it) and write a summary of the day's events before you go to sleep.

As you put the day's events and conversations into words again, the memory traces will grow stronger, and during sleep they'll continue to strengthen. And if you still forget some of the details, you'll at least have a written record to remind you.

Some of us are bothered by a mixture of forgetfulness and anxiety that shows up in nagging doubts, such as not being sure if we've locked the door, closed the garage, set the alarm, turned off the stove, or shut the gate. These nagging

doubts generally apply to actions performed on “**autopilot**,” without thinking much about them.

Memory traces are less strong for actions done on “autopilot,” so a solution to this type of memory problem is to perform these tasks in a more mindful, aware state. You might, for example, say out loud, “Locking the door at 7:34 on Monday morning.” If you need even more reassurance, you can write a brief note in your appointment book or planner (e.g., Locked door 7:34).

Remembering Addresses and Directions

Some people are great with directions and seem to almost have built-in compasses. Most of us, though, have to try a little harder and rely more on written notes, maps, or modern technology.

GPS technology has made it much easier to navigate to places you want to go, even if your memory for directions is poor. If you have a smartphone or GPS navigation device, enter the locations you want to be able to find and set them as “favorites.” (To prevent accidents, never enter information into your smartphone or GPS device while driving.) Or if your smartphone or GPS device has voice recognition ability, just tell it where you want to go. If necessary, ask a friend or relative who's good with gadgets to train you to use GPS technology.

If you don't have a GPS device or smartphone, or if you're in a location where GPS signals are weak, then you can rely on your address book. List the addresses of places you need to go and write out directions in as much detail as you will need.

Help with getting turn-by-turn directions is readily available on the Internet on sites such as **MapQuest** and **Google Maps**.

Remembering Shopping Lists and To-Do Lists

The simplest way to deal with forgetfulness when shopping is to write down what you need in your appointment book or planner. Or use a separate piece of paper if your list is lengthy. Then just cross off each item as you find it at the store. The same method can be used for to-do lists. You can also find free smartphone apps for shopping and to-do lists.

There are more advanced techniques for quickly committing lists to memory without relying on notes, such as **The Roman Room Technique**. You can find this technique described in my book, as well as on websites such as **wikihow.com**. While these techniques can be used very effectively, most people won't put forth the effort to learn and implement them. It's simply much easier to write a list.

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Conclusions

It's usually best to work on mastering just one memory technique at a time. Any change in how you do things is likely to be a challenge, so give yourself plenty of time to work on each technique. Write notes or set alarms to remind yourself to practice.

If a technique doesn't work quite right for you, think creatively about how you can fine-tune it so it does work for you. Then, as you master one technique, move on to another.

Once you've mastered most of these techniques and begun to use them on a daily basis, you'll make fewer memory errors. You might even notice that your stress level decreases as you discover that you can count on yourself to function more reliably. Memory tends to work better when chronic stress is kept in check, so using these memory techniques may help protect your brain's memory ability. Other stress management techniques, such as meditation, may also help with memory.

Keeping stress in check is just one way to maintain your brain's memory systems. Other important protective steps include staying socially and physically active, taking medications as prescribed and going for regular medical checkups, and keeping a positive outlook.

If you want your memory and other mental abilities to stay strong, be careful about what you put into your body. For example, smoking tobacco decreases oxygen supply to the brain and significantly increases the risk of dementia. Marijuana use is known to impair memory, as is excessive alcohol consumption.

People who eat "**brain-healthy**" foods have a substantially reduced risk of developing dementia. For example, support has been found for the **MIND diet**, which emphasizes healthy foods such as leafy green vegetables, berries (especially blueberries), whole grains, nuts, beans, and olive oil.

Adequate sleep is also very important since memories formed earlier in the day are strengthened during sleep. If you've been told that you snore loudly, make gasping sounds, or stop breathing at times during sleep, ask your healthcare providers to make sure you don't have **obstructive sleep apnea**, as this condition can impair your memory and cause other health problems.

When memory errors do happen, don't waste energy being overly upset with yourself. Instead, think of each memory failure as a learning opportunity. Focus on figuring out where your memory technique broke down and how you can modify your technique to work more reliably next time. Or be creative and invent a new memory technique that will prevent that problem from occurring again.

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