

MAINTAINING MEMORY SKILLS

“Now why did I just come into the kitchen?”

“Can’t find my other checkbook anywhere in my office!”

“What’s his name again? Starts with an R—Robert, Roger?”

Everyone experiences memory lapses and many of us worry about memory loss. Research tells us that 50-75% of adults over age 50 will experience some degree of memory loss in:



- **Short-term memory:** Recently learned information often for immediate use, such as phone numbers. We usually remember just long enough to dial or write it down for later. Information we don’t need beyond a single use is removed to make room for new, more relevant memories.
- **Long-Term Memory:** This includes personal information like your name and address, as well as common, over-learned tasks. In contrast to short-term memories, these are not easily purged or lost and we have a much larger storage capacity for long-term memories.

We remember in a 3-step process. Knowing the steps may help us understand how a breakdown occurs for us or a loved one. We can then target those processes for improvement.

- **Acquisition:** Initial learning and storage of new information into short-term memory; getting the new information “into the system”
- **Consolidation:** Strengthening new, short-term memories over a period of weeks or months which allows them to be transferred to long-term memory.
- **Retrieval:** Recalling information. The length of time it takes to retrieve a memory depends on our familiarity with the topic and the complexity of the memory.

It is helpful to know what normal memory “glitches” are and when to be concerned if more serious problems exist. The question is best addressed on a 1:1 basis with your doctor but there are some characteristics of typical memory loss over the course of a healthy lifespan.

- **Transience:** Gradual loss of memories that have not been accessed for a long period of time.
- **Forgetfulness or lack of focus:** Difficulty concentrating makes for poorer conditions under which to create new memories or retrieve established memories.
- **“Tip of the Tongue” syndrome:** You *know you know*, but can’t retrieve a memory just when you need it, especially in conversations or when there is an imposed time limit.
- **Bias:** Memories become increasingly colored by personal experiences and biases as we age.
- **Misattribution:** Accurately recalling some part of an event, but reporting other distorted details. We may remember a famous quotation but quote the wrong speaker. We may share an idea that we are sure is our own, but that we actually read somewhere. The likelihood of misattribution increases as more time passes between the event and retrieval of the memory.

CAUSES OF NON-TYPICAL MEMORY LOSS

One cause of non-typical memory loss is dementia (progressive deterioration of memory over time; usually does not occur before 60); Alzheimer’s disease is one type of dementia. Traumatic head injury, stroke and other neurological illnesses (MS, brain tumors, Lyme disease, etc.) may produce memory loss. Thyroid dysfunction or Vitamin B12 deficiency can effect memory skills. Importantly, life style patterns of behavior (lack of sleep or poor sleep, lack of exercise, limited cognitive stimulation, stress and depression) may produce memory problems.

BENEFICIAL LIFE STYLE CHANGES

- **Make adequate sleep a priority.** Both the quantity and quality of sleep are important.
- **Keep your mind active.** This might include discussions, reading, puzzles, brain-teasers, or classes. Learning new challenging information is esp. good “brain food”.
- **Keep your body active.** Regular exercise is more vital than intense exercise—everyday!
- **Talk to your doctor** about medications or vitamins that might be appropriate, particularly as they relate to memory loss.
- **Reduce stress.** Try exercise, meditation, counseling, music, quiet time or any activity that calms you. Avoid people and situations that cause unresolved stress or frustration.
- **Organize.** Old organization methods may no longer provide the structure and support you need to feel in control. Experiment with new ways to organize yourself such as:
 - Keep a day-planner or electronic organizer with daily/weekly/monthly tasks to be done. Add vital contact information so that everything you need is in one location.
 - Keep all emergency and personal information and important documents in a file cabinet with clear categories and labels. Clean out the outdated material regularly.
 - Designate a location that is logical to you and centrally located for easily misplaced items such as keys or a cell phone. Use it every time, all the time!
- **Monitor your level of focus.** Become aware of when/where you are focused and when/where your mind wanders. Attempt more challenging tasks in situations and at times that are conducive to good concentration. Some ways to assure optimal focus:
 - Eliminate background noise and visual distractions; control group settings.
 - Don't “multi-task”! It is rarely effective under even the best of conditions.
 - Repeat a speaker's message aloud by paraphrasing to confirm the meaning.
 - Advocate for yourself. Ask others to repeat or clarify and find quiet, stress-free environments in which to interact with them.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING MEMORY

- **Associate:** When learning something new, immediately ask yourself how it relates to your life or something you already know. Attaching new information to long-term knowledge and memories increases the likelihood it will be retrieved later.
- **Chunk New Information:** This strategy is often used for phone #s. We “chunk” the area code or familiar exchanges (first 3 #s) in our local area. The technique is applicable to other tasks as well. When planning personal errands, “chunk” tasks by location rather than trying to remember an unrelated string of things to do.
- **Repeat:** Consecutively repeating information several times is one way to remember facts or details. It focuses our attention and may even strengthen the brain connections for that information. Re-phrasing aloud may also be helpful in retaining it.
- **Write it Down:** This is a compensatory strategy which allows us to refer back to important plans and ideas. The actual act of writing helps form stronger memories. Some people also use portable recording devices to help store and remember “spur-of-the-moment” thoughts.