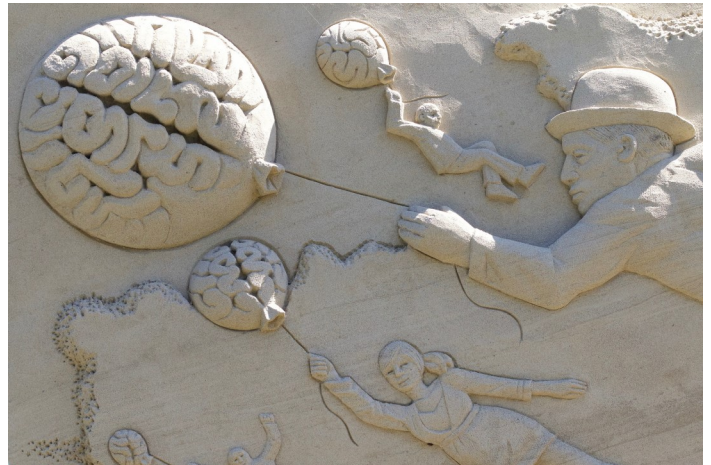


# ACTIVE MEMORY TOOLS

As we age our brains become somewhat less efficient, and as a result it may take more effort than it previously had to learn new information. Memory difficulties occur as well following injuries, illness, and with emotional distress. Memory lapses generally relate more to new information. Things learned earlier in life are usually retained. These memory changes can be extremely frustrating. However, it is possible to improve or support memory functions by putting in a little work.



## ACTIVE MEMORY TECHNIQUES

The best way to learn and retain new information is to use it right away. A simple technique is to repeat back what you have just been told. Even better is to paraphrase the information and put it into your own words. This forces your brain to process and manipulate the information, which strengthens the memory pathways. In long conversations it is often helpful to summarize what you have heard the other person say, and then to confirm with them that you understood correctly. Not only will this help you recall the conversation and prevent misunderstandings, it shows the other person that you care about what they are saying.

Writing information down, such as on a calendar, in an address book, or in a journal, is also a good way of practicing the information. It also provides you something to review later if you need it. After a conversation, it can be a good idea to write down a few notes about anything of significance. You can even record how you felt about the conversation, who you talked to, and what you talked about. This process of writing down your experiences will help you to remember them.

It is also important to review and practice the information later to really improve retention. There is a reason you cannot now speak that foreign language you studied in high school. When you learn something new, be it a name, a fact, or an upcoming appointment, try to think about it later that day, and also occasionally over the next few days. Reviewing will improve your ability to retain and retrieve this information later.

Another active memory approach involves organization. Organizing information you wish to retain is another way of getting your brain to actively practice and manipulate the information. One such useful mental technique is chunking. For example, when you wish to remember a phone number, you usually do not learn all 7 digits individually, instead you group them into a 3 digit number and a 4 digit number. Chunking can also be used to sort a large amount of items into subgroups based on common characteristics. For example, to remember a grocery list it can be helpful to sort items into categories, such as fruit, drinks, and paper products. This makes the list of items more manageable by reducing the overall number of items. It also provides a cue to remember each subgroup. When you recall the category fruit, your brain will be cued to recall the items in that category. More specific strategies for various memory problems are discussed below.



### **Remembering Where You Put Things**

It is quite frustrating to lose your keys or forget where you parked your car. We all occasionally misplace important objects, but here are some strategies that can be helpful.

- Have a place for everything and keep everything in its place. Decide on a specific routine place to store important objects, such as your keys, phone, or mail. Make sure you always return your belongings to their designated “homes” as soon as you are finished with them.
- Create a master list of where things are. After you assign each item a “home,” write the name of the item and its “home” on a list. Make sure you organize it, such as alphabetically or by groupings of similar items. Post this master list on a wall or refrigerator so that you cannot misplace it.
- If you put things down that are not on your list, make a point of looking at the place where you put it and repeat out loud where you put it several times.

### **Remembering Appointments, Events, and Why You Walked Into the Room**

It can be embarrassing or costly to forget bills or appointments. Practice helps you avoid those consequences.

- Sometimes we forget little things quickly, like why we walked into a room. A simple strategy is to repeat your intention over and over until you complete your task (for example, “going to get the vacuum”). You can also picture yourself using the object in an odd or funny way as this association can strengthen the memory (for example, vacuuming up the room furniture).
- For events and appointments, use a daily planner, appointment book, or the calendar app on your smart phone. Record all appointments, plans, and special dates and always check your schedule before you agree to an activity. Review your appointment book every morning and several times during the day. Also review it each night to be familiar with your plans for the next few days.
- As you complete tasks, cross them off with a single line in your appointment book. Use a single line so that you can later see what you have done. If you don’t manage to complete the task on the day you planned, cross it off your schedule and transfer it to the next reasonable date you can do it.

### **Remembering Names**

Difficulty remembering the names of the people you meet is a common memory complaint. Here are some techniques that can be helpful.

- When you meet someone new, use their name immediately. For example, “It was nice to meet you, Mr. So and So”.
- Using associations can also help names stick. When you meet someone, think about their name for a moment. Consider if they share parts of their name with someone you know or have heard of, or think about if the name is unusual in some way. You might ask the person to spell it, or what the origin of their name is. You might also consider if there is any memorable or humorous association with the person’s name.

### **Remembering What You Read**

One active reading strategy is the SQ3R method. It takes more effort initially, but results in better recall.

1. Survey the written material to get a general overview of topics covered and their organization.
2. Formulate specific questions to be answered.
3. Then read the material.
4. Then recite or rehearse the material in your own words. Consider written notes of the main points.
5. Review the material one last time to remind yourself of its major points and the specific details you read that relate to those points.

# COMPENSATION STRATEGIES

Sometimes there will be complicated things to learn or things you otherwise can't remember easily. It may be more efficient to consider compensation strategies for these things, rather than struggling to learn them and becoming frustrated.

## Remembering Medications

It is dangerous to either overuse or forget medications. Here are some suggestions to help with remembering them.

- Set your alarm on your cell phone or watch to remind you when you are due for a dose of medication.
- Buy a weekly pill box that has separate compartments for each day of the week. These are available in most drugstores, and help you track that you have taken your pills each day. If you take pills several times a day, you can buy an additional pill box and label it. Make sure to fill your pill box at the beginning of each week, putting the appropriate pills in each section.
- If you are not using a pill box, consider leaving your medications somewhere easily visible to you as a reminder. Some people find it helpful to turn the pill bottle over when they take their medication so that they know that they have taken that pill for the day.

## Remembering Steps in a Routine

You may have certain activities that involve multiple complicated steps, but which you only do a few times a year. Consider writing up a numbered instruction list that you post right where the activity normally occurs. For example, if like most of us you only download photos from your camera several times per year, keep basic instructions for this near your computer. You can create checklists for complex multistep situations, or for simpler situations, such as a checklist to make sure you pack everything you need before you leave for a trip.

## Remembering To Do Tasks

- To remember when to do tasks, consider using an alarm clock, timer, or the alarm capability on your cell phone, smart phone, or tablet computer. Some wristwatches also have built in alarm capability.
- To remember tasks, it can also be helpful to leave notes or reminders in a place you are likely to see them (for example, a sticky note on a mirror or the inside of the front door). Just make sure to remove them when the task is done. Also don't put up so many that they become overwhelming or that you begin to ignore them.



### Remembering Names

- Besides the strategies discussed earlier, a helpful compensation strategy is to use an address book.
- Enter names in the address book twice. Enter them alphabetically, but also under the name of the place where you are likely to see the person again. For example, list the key people you wish to remember from a certain business under the listing for that business. Before you visit that place again review the names and any important facts about them that you have written down.

### Remembering Where You Park Your Car

- Use your smartphone to take a picture of the sign showing where the car is.
- Jot down the location of your car in your appointment book or planner.

### Remembering Jokes, Facts, and New Words

- First, use the information. Telling people the joke or fact is a good way to practice and better retain the information.
- Consider writing the punch line down, as well as some of the key phrases. Then rehearse and practice the joke (or fact). Review it before you go to bed for the day. Such repetition will improve retention of the information.
- To really make it stick, write the fact down in your appointment book multiple times. Space it out in increasingly long intervals (for example, 2 days, 4 days, 1 week, 2 weeks, 1 month). Each time you see it in your planner use it in conversation or at least think about it. This type of periodic recalling and actively thinking about something over increasingly long intervals is called spaced repetition, and is a key component to forming long-lasting memories.

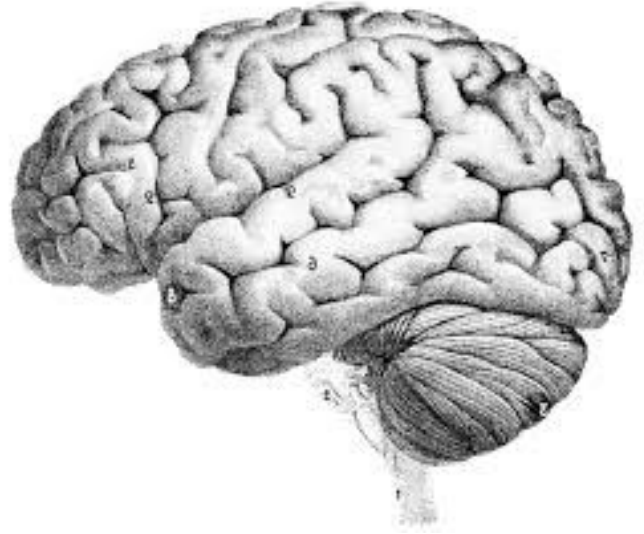
## REDUCING DISTRACTIONS

As our society has become increasingly technologically focused, we have developed a number of tools to help us multitask and generally be more efficient. Unfortunately, this focus on multitasking has also significantly increased our ability to be distracted by everything available to us. This distraction limits our ability to focus and can weaken our ability to remember new information. Here are some strategies to help reduce distractions at home and work.

- ◇ Try to create a calm environment where you can focus on the task. For example, don't pay the bills while eating dinner and watching television with your spouse. Instead wait to do it when things are quieter or move to another room.
- ◇ Set aside a specific time of day for returning phone calls or for completing routine tasks that are necessary daily or weekly, such as paying bills. By having a specific time for these, we can be sure to get them done. Also, if we set them aside until the specified time, we prevent them from becoming distractions.
- ◇ If you are concentrating on work or another task, try not to answer your phone or email until you are done with the task. Often an immediate answer is not needed. If approached and asked a question while working on a task, ask the individual to wait until you are finished or are at an appropriate stopping point.

# CONCLUSIONS

Reading this pamphlet is just the beginning. Now that you read through these various ideas and techniques you will need to practice them to make them effective. It can be helpful to find a partner to work with, and the good news is that pretty much everyone wishes their memory was better. Teaching these techniques to others is a strong way to increase your own ability to use them.



Consider just working on mastering one or two strategies at a time. Any sort of change in how you do things is also going to be a challenge and somewhat stressful. Give yourself enough time to work on the techniques and be patient with yourself. If a technique isn't working quite right for you, be creative and think about if there are any ways you can change it to make it effective for your situation. As you master a technique, then move on to the next.

As you begin to use these types of techniques on a daily basis you should notice that your memory lapses will become less frequent. Hopefully your stress levels will also improve as you find your memory more reliable. It is important to recall that stress itself has a very negative effect on memory. Besides these techniques, even basic stress management strategies, such as exercise or meditation, can help strengthen memory functioning. Besides reducing stress, there are many other things you can do to protect and strengthen your brain. These include exercise and physical activity, which strengthen blood vessels in the brain, staying socially involved for your emotional health, taking your medications, and getting regular medical check-ups.

One last word of caution. Please realize that even when you master these memory strategies, you are going to have occasional memory lapses and errors. When it happens, don't waste your energy becoming overly upset or frustrated. Instead, try to view it as a learning opportunity to help you determine where the technique failed and how you might fine-tune it for yourself. And of course, the most effective memory techniques you develop will be those you create on your own.

