

## Maximising your thinking and memory abilities



## About this handout

This handout is for anyone who is experiencing forgetfulness in their day-to-day life and who is interested in learning about mental techniques that can be used to help you remember things.

It may also be helpful for family and friends.

It describes:

- Tips for learning new information
- Tips to help you find 'buried' memories
- Information box: Learning names
- Other sources of information and support.

# Mental techniques to enhance your memory

## LEARNING NEW INFORMATION

### Pay attention!

First and foremost it is important that you pay attention to information you need to know and understand:

- Make sure that you are not distracted when you first hear or see new information. For instance, try to avoid crowded rooms with lots of noise in the background, as this can make it hard to hear and attend to what is being said.
- Sometimes, if you are very anxious, it will be difficult to pay attention. It may be helpful to try to calm down or use relaxation techniques before attempting to join a social situation or to learn new information.

### Add meaning

The hardest things to learn are those that are arbitrary or determined by chance, and in day-to-day life there are many such examples—new phone numbers or PIN numbers.

Sometimes it doesn't help to learn a piece of information that is somewhat arbitrary just by repeating it. It is often more effective to find ways to elaborate and add meaning to it. The more ways you add meaning the more likely you will remember it!

- **Simplify and organise it.** Just repeating may not be the best way to learn it. Instead, try to break it down into smaller meaningful parts. For example:
  - i. Put a list of things to remember into categories. For instance, you may find it helps to put your shopping list into categories such as 'fresh produce', 'dairy', 'meat' and so forth.
  - ii. Learn a long telephone number by putting it into groups. For instance, for the number '94454998' create two groups beginning with '4', the '445' and the '4998'. The first group is easy because the 4s are repeated. For the second group you can see that 98 is double 49.
  - iii. Look at the first letter of each word you need to remember. See if you can make it spell something easy to recall or if you can make up a catchy sentence.

# Mental techniques

## to enhance your memory

- **Ask questions, re-phrase it or visualise it**

Anything you can do to 'process' new information at a deeper level will help you to recall it later. For instance, asking questions about the information at the time you obtain it will help you to recall it later – try not to feel uncomfortable about asking more questions. It may also help to draw a picture or imagine what is being discussed.

Sometimes trying to explain what you have just learnt to someone else may also help you learn new information (e.g., try to explain to a friend what you learnt at your cooking class).

- **Relate the information to something you already know.** In order to understand and remember something it may be very helpful to try to relate it to something simple you already know.

## Avoid learning the wrong information

We all recall the wrong information from time to time, especially when there is a lot going on. For instance, if you thought a movie started at 8:00pm instead of 7:30pm, it may mean that you missed the start of the movie. You might have made that mistake because you confused the start time of the movie you wanted to see with the start time of another movie you had been thinking about. When we are struggling with memory and get distracted by incorrect information we may use up all our mental effort on the wrong thing! So it is especially important to try to avoid taking in or learning the wrong information in the first place. You may find it helpful to write things down as soon as you hear them. It may also help to ask close friends and family to assist you to learn 'the correct information' straight away whenever possible. This will maximise your chance of recalling the correct information later on.

## Keep testing yourself

Learning new information over a series of short occasions is often much more effective than trying to learn it all at once. After you have learnt some new information (e.g., a new PIN number) it may help to keep testing yourself, gradually increasing the time between each test. The biggest and most important test is being able to recall the information just a few minutes later. If you can do that usually you will be able to access it just as well after a day or two.

For instance, if you were trying to recall a PIN number you could try to test yourself:

- 1 minute later
- 2 minutes later
- 3 minutes later
- 10 minutes later
- one day later
- two days later
- and, finally, in a week's time.

If you can't recall it, you should keep re-testing yourself at the same time interval (e.g., every three minutes) until you get it right!

Another option is to ask a family member or friend to help you test your recall of the information.

# FINDING YOUR MEMORIES



It's a common problem...knowing you know something ... but not being able to remember the name for it. For example, you see an old friend at the movies but you just can't think of their name. It is embarrassing at the time, but the name comes to you three hours later, when you get home.

There are several things you can try to do to help yourself find 'buried' memories:

- Sometimes it helps to return to the physical environment in which the forgotten information came from. For instance, if you can't remember why you decided to go into your bedroom, go back to where you were last (e.g., the lounge room). Often just by returning to the original place you were in you will recall why you left ("Oh yes I remember – I was getting my glasses!").
- If you can't go back to the physical location, try to visualise the scene that you were in. The more detail you can add to the scene the better. For instance, it can help to think of any smells or songs that were present. It can help to think of what mood you were in or if you were unwell at the time.
- Try to think of anything at all which you associate with that object, person or place. For instance, if you can't think of someone's name, try to think about what they look like, how they talk, and if you like them or not. The more specific you can be about that person the more likely it is that their name will pop into your head. Notes, pictures or videos may also help.

## Remembering Names

It's one of the most uncomfortable social situations we face, and it happens over and over again. We see someone we've met once or twice but can't recall that person's name!

There are a number of things we can do to try to maximise the chances that we will recall a person's name:

### 1. **Pay attention!**

One of the problems is that often we meet people socially in places that are noisy or distracting. When we hear a person's name we may be paying attention to everything but that name. A simple thing you can do to avoid this is to repeat the person's name. Try to reuse the person's name several times:

- Repeat the name when you greet the person
- Use their name in conversation
- Use it again when you say goodbye.

### 2. **Think about the name**

This can help you process it and store it in long-term memory.

- Do you like it?
- Do you know someone else with the same name?
- Is there something unusual about it?
- Does it make you think of something else?
- Try to find a prompt or clue that will help you remember – a rhyme or picture?

### 3. **If all else fails, use study tactics!**

- Try to get hold of a photo with the person in it. Write the name next to the person.
- Write the name down and try to think of how a person looks. Try to picture their name and face again within a few minutes. Do this again at intervals, until you remember.
- It may help to write down the names and details of people you do not see often but want to remember in a diary or note book. The next time you are going to see them – refer to what you wrote down.

### 4. **Don't give up**

If, later, you are having difficulty recalling a particular name, you can use other techniques:

- Thinking of all of the facts that you know about a person (e.g., they live in town and their sister is Joan) can help you to find the name.
- Mentally going through the alphabet might also help. Did the name begin with "A" or "B" or "C"? You may find the name pops into your head when you get to the right letter.



## Other sources of information and support:

### **Books you may find helpful:**

Gates, N. (2016). *A Brain for Life: How to optimise your brain's health by making simple lifestyle changes now*. Sydney: ABC books.

Einstein, G. O., & McDaniel, M. A. (2004). *Memory Fitness: A guide for successful ageing*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Unkenstein, A. (2019). *Memory-wise: How memory works and what to do when it doesn't*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Valenzuela, M. J. (2011). *Maintain Your Brain: What you can do to improve your brain's health and avoid dementia*. Sydney: ABC Books.