

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 aids that can be used to help them remember things. It may also be helpful for friends and family.

It describes:

- Using a memory aid to help store information
- Tips to help you remember to remember
- Some ideas about household aids you can use
- Information box: taking medications reliably
- Other sources of information and support.

Using Aids to improve your day-to-day memory

Some people think that it is lazy to make too much use of memory aids, and that it would be better to keep practising using their mental abilities. However, experience shows that aids are usually more effective than other (mental) strategies to help improve actual daily memory function for older people. Bear in mind that no one will care how you remember something (e.g., your partner's birthday or doctor's appointment) as long as you do!

Your most important memory aids may be your partner or other family members. It is not uncommon for one member of a couple to have a better memory than the other and to become the 'memory bank' for that couple. If you are experiencing forgetfulness, it is okay to rely on your partner and family at times. However, the suggestions contained in this handout may be helpful to you as you try to maximise your independence.

These suggestions (e.g., a new diary), may take some time to get right. You may need support from family and friends while you are at the learning stage. However, using a new aid will be of benefit in reducing the number of memory mistakes you make in daily life.

Using a diary or calendar

Almost all adults use some kind of diary to keep track of their appointments, social activities and important anniversaries such as birthdays. This can be particularly important if a person is very busy. Some people think they won't be as busy when they retire and will no longer need to use a diary or calendar on a regular basis. However, many people find they are busier than ever when they retire! Regular use of diaries, calendars or reminder notes can be especially important if your memory is becoming weak.

Use a diary or calendar and 'home message centre'

- For effective use of a diary or calendar:
 - Try to write appointments and other notes down immediately in your diary – avoid using lots of little pieces of paper that can easily be lost
 - Get into the habit of checking your diary at regular times each day (e.g., after each meal); that way you will have several reminders about upcoming activities
 - Try to carry your diary with you wherever you go

Using Aids

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- Your diary could also be used by family and friends. Ask them to include notes about interesting conversations or visitors so that you can look back over what has happened that day or on previous days.
- Consider creating a special ‘home message centre’. It should be in a room that you visit regularly; ideally located near the front door. It is helpful to have all the important information you need clearly identifiable in one spot. For example, in this spot there could be a box or hook for keys, a tray for the diary, a tray for the phone index, a message section, and a whiteboard with a ‘to-do’ list.

Remembering to remember

One of the most difficult types of memory task that we face in day-to-day life is trying to remember something for later on. This happens when we promise to buy milk on our way home, but later forget to do this, or forget to take a pill one day because we were distracted by visitors.

It is hard to remember these types of things at the relevant time because, in many cases, there is no cue to remind us. For instance, you might not have anyone reminding you to take your book back to the library. Another reason we make these mistakes is because we think it will be easy to remember, yet forget how often we become distracted! The following strategies may be helpful in overcoming these problems.

Do it immediately if you can!

If you know your memory is not reliable, it is sometimes best to do something as soon as it comes into your mind.

Provide your own cues

- Sometimes writing things down can serve as a reminder. This can include making an entry in your calendar or diary or writing yourself a note. Alternatively, you could ask someone to remind you of something. The problem with these types of options is that you may forget to check your diary, or the person you have asked may also forget!
- The most foolproof way of reminding yourself to do something is to use a physical cue that you can't avoid seeing or hearing; the more ‘attention grabbing’ it is the better. It also helps to use a cue that directly relates to what you want to remember. For example, you could:
 - Tape a reminder note over the top of a bag that you will need and use later on
 - Put the thing that you want to take in the same place as your keys – that way you can't leave without being reminded
 - Place the cheque you want to mail by the door
 - Set an alarm (e.g., your mobile phone, oven timer or alarm clock) to check the oven or to remind you to leave for an appointment.

Household aids

Sometimes you can install simple solutions in your home to avoid common memory mistakes such as forgetting your keys, losing important things, or forgetting to turn things off. These include:

Finding things

- The simplest way to keep track of things around the house is to try putting them in the same place all the time. Create hooks for your keys and a place for your glasses and other important items.
- If you find that despite your best efforts you are often losing things around the house, a simple wireless tag for your keys (and anything else that you often misplace, such as the remote control) may be a big time-saver.



When you press a button the tag will beep – so you just need to locate the sound to find your keys.

Keeping appliances safe

- Try to buy appliances that automatically turn themselves off if they are no longer in use.
- Alternatively, purchase countdown timers or install a home automation system that will automatically switch off appliances – such as heaters or your iron – after a specified time.

Keys and locks

- Consider converting all your locks at home to a master key. It means you don't have to search through a bunch of keys to find the right one.
- You can safely store a spare set of keys outside your house in a security box, which can be opened by putting in a code. If you have lost your keys you will still be able to get into your house. In an emergency, family and friends who know the code will be able to access the key to your house.

Computers and mobile phones

- Mobile phones and organisers have the advantage of being able to include lots of important information that can be easily carried around with you. They also allow you to contact a friend or family member in an emergency.

Taking Medications Reliably

Sometimes we get so good at remembering to do things (such as taking medication) at a certain time each day that the action of doing those things becomes 'automatic'. This can be a problem if after days of taking medication you do it without even thinking about it. One day, perhaps when you are distracted by phone calls or visitors, you may find you are unsure about whether or not you have taken your medication. If you've already taken your medication but then take another dose for safe measure, you may be over-medicating. If you didn't take the dose but convince yourself that you did from memories of the previous days, you will miss the day's medication.

In order to avoid this problem, it is important to develop a system that records whether or not you have taken your medication. You can, for instance:

- Purchase a dosette medication box that has separate compartments for the different medications you take throughout the day for each day of the week. The presence or absence of the medication in the day's compartment tells you whether or not you have taken the medication
- Have a clock with day and date next to your dosette, to make sure you take from the correct day
- Use a daily calendar: when you take a medication tear out the day's page
- Ask your local chemist to make up a blister pack for your medications each week. (He/she will do this for a small charge.)

If you are still having problems taking your medications reliably or if it is really important that you take your medications at a specific time, you could consider purchasing an electronic pill dispenser. Available options include:

- The 'Pill Box Timer'. This is a round pill box with a timer in the lid. It has three alarm times. The clear display automatically resets to the next medication time after each alarm
- The 'Carousel' is a computerised medical dispenser containing 28 compartments, each of which can be programmed individually. At the set time an alarm sounds and the cassette rotates to expose the correct medication through an opening in the lid. Reminder alarms continue to sound for one hour or until the medication is taken.

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However:

- A challenge for an older person, especially someone with memory problems, may be learning how to use a mobile phone and remembering to keep it recharged!
 - If you are not very good at learning how to use new technology it is possible to purchase a very simple phone for emergency use. For example, the Vital Call Mobile Companion only has three buttons. Once set up, the press of a button will quickly dial a family member or the response centre.
- A computer can be used as a diary, can send you reminders and emails, and can be used to pay bills and transfer money:
- If you don't know how to use a computer and this is something you would like to learn, consider taking a class in basic computer use (your local council may run a course).



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.