

FEAT FACTSHEET

How to cope with memory loss

What is memory?

Memory is a complex business - a combination of different skills all working together. For example, remembering what someone has said involves a different type of memory skill from trying to recall someone's face.

It's widely accepted that our memory behaves as if it were organised into three kinds of 'stores':

- Sensory stores register information from the sense organs, for about five seconds.
- Short-term memory can hold information for 15 to 20 seconds. So, if you were to look up an unfamiliar telephone number, this would be kept in your short-term memory until you dialled it. Afterwards, you would probably forget it.
- Long-term memory is a more permanent store of knowledge. We usually remember things that happened many years ago more easily than what happened yesterday. This is partly because we have gone through these older memories over and over again, and also because they may be especially important to us.

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Telephone **01592 749880** or visit **www.journeytowork.co.uk**

What are the common problems affecting memory?

Memory can be affected by various mental health problems. Periods of unconsciousness, caused, for example, by head injury or electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), can also lead to memory loss and being unable to recall events.

Mental health problems

These include, depression and anxiety, as well as more severe problems. When someone becomes very depressed, they may find thinking and concentrating difficult. Many severely depressed patients withdraw into themselves and may not notice what is going on around them. So, they may not remember things, because they didn't notice them in the first place. Memory can improve as depression lifts.

Stress

Stress can make you more forgetful (and this may include being worried about having memory problems). Being under severe stress over a long period of time can cause memory loss that may be permanent. Sleep problems, which can be a cause or a symptom of mental distress, will contribute to the problem.

The menopause

Hormones may play a part. Women going through the menopause are known to face memory problems and behavioural changes. These have been linked to the effects of changes in levels of oestrogen on other brain chemicals.

Head injury

If you have a head injury, it may damage areas of the brain involved in memory. The injuries often recover over a long period of time and memory may also improve as a result.

Medical reasons

Other physical problems that can affect memory include high blood pressure, high cholesterol, viral infections, vitamin deficiency, liver disease, thyroid problems and blood disorders, such as anaemia.

Alzheimer's disease

The most common form of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which gradually attacks and damages the brain. Most people with Alzheimer's retain some long-term memory, to a surprising degree.

Drugs and alcohol

Alcohol in small quantities may actually have some beneficial effects, but drinking too much leads to memory problems. Heavy drinking can result in a specific form of dementia known as Korsakoff's syndrome. Certain sorts of drugs (prescription or street drugs) can also affect your memory.

How can I preserve my memory?

Studies show that environment and lifestyle are important factors. Eating a balanced diet, low in saturated fats, and with plenty of fresh fruit, vegetables and fish is important, as is taking regular exercise and getting enough sleep and rest. Avoid smoking (which reduces the brain's oxygen supply) and too much alcohol.

Have regular health checks. These can help you to sort out any problems with your health that may be affecting your memory (such as high blood pressure, cholesterol levels or blood sugar) and it can also help to diagnose more serious complaints early.

You may find that when you become more relaxed, this in itself may improve your memory. It may be a good idea to explore ways of relieving stress, including massage, yoga and aromatherapy. There is some evidence that aromatherapy using lemon balm may have a particularly beneficial effect on dementia. Exercise your mind as much as possible. Hobbies such as quizzes, crosswords, reading and learning passages or poems may help to delay the on-set of memory loss.

How can I improve my memory?

There's no magic way to get memory back or retrain damaged memory. Memory techniques can help your memory, although they can't upgrade your mind, as if it were a computer. The benefit comes through learning new strategies that make the best use of your mind as it is.

Try to organise routines whenever possible. Get into the habit of doing something before or after some daily event, such as a television programme or a meal. Create a routine place for your possessions. Put a hook on the wall for door keys, for instance. Put things away or file things carefully in their own place. Don't let clutter build up.

Change the way you approach tasks. A poor memory is sometimes the result of trying to do too many things at once. Try to concentrate on one thing at a time and don't let your mind wander. You will also learn best in a place that is relatively free from distractions. If you are interrupted while doing something, try to return to it as soon as possible. To help yourself focus, repeat things out loud. Say the name of the person you've just met or say aloud where you are putting something.

Adopt any tricks that can help you memorise a particular thing, such as the familiar rhymes used to remember the days in the month ("30 days hath September"). You can make up your own, by linking the thing you want to remember to a mental picture. For example, if you want to remember the name Nightingale, you could look at the person and think of the bird.

To help retain the material you want to remember, work out, first, what you need to remember for your purposes. Then, decide how much has to be in your head and what can usefully be stored in an external memory, such as a diary. Writing information down, in the right place, is better than having to scour your memory.

- Use a diary, note pad or wall chart for appointments and forward planning.
- Ask a relative or friend to remind you about things.
- Use alarms on your watch, radio or phone to remind you to do something.
- Pills are often packaged to help you check if you have taken them. You could also get a pill-organiser.
- Stick lists and notes in prominent places. 'Dry-wipe' message boards placed at key points around the house are helpful.
- Leave reminders, or anything you need to take with you, in a place where you are bound to see them, by the door (but out of sight of anyone looking in).
- Write down instructions for yourself when you first learn, or re-learn, a task, and keep the instructions in an obvious place.
- Keep a journal, to remember what you've been doing, who you have seen etc.
- Carry a tape recorder or Dictaphone around with you.
- Get a memory phone to help you dial frequently used numbers.
- Stick your name on your possessions, in case you mislay them. Use a remote-control sonic detector or alarm devices to help you locate your keys.

You may also find talking to a counsellor who specialises in this sort of problem very helpful. Your GP may be able to refer you, and can also examine you and run some tests. Depending on the problem, they can refer you to a specialist. There are also a range of support groups that can provide assistance and be a source of both strength and information. Being with others experiencing similar difficulties can be a great relief and bring a sense of peace.

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