Ideas to Improve Your Memory

How many times have you forgotten your password for something? Your friend's phone number? The address to the office? The birthday of your best friend or the name of that guy you used to know? Sometimes we forget where we put our keys or if we turned off the oven, and when we forget, that can really take us out of balance.

So here are some simple tricks to remember these things, despite our difficulties.
Forgetting Boring or Mundane Details

Problem: You tend to forget meetings, addresses, passwords and phone numbers, as well as historic dates and birthdays.

Don't take it hard. In a reality where we are flooded with huge amounts of information, the brain isn't able to process everything at once. Even though it has a folder called 'declarative memory' in which it plans to keep factual information of this kind, it isn't made to remember such things, and if we don't make a special effort to remember these facts, they will have a short shelf-life.

Solution: The only way to turn boring information into part of our long-term memory, is to store it right, so we can access it later. If we don't make a conscious effort, it will be gone. The best way to do this is to add meanings, as we are configured to remember such things. For example: If you connect a memory to something else you never forget, like a holiday. "My niece's birthday is 2 weeks after new years eve."

Another great way to remember boring facts and lists is to construct a short and simple story. For instance, if you need to remember a list of numbers, break them down to a few numbers and give each a part of the story. So, say you need to remember the number 821576 (as a password or code), you can imagine a story in which an 82 year old grandfather has 15 grandchildren and is married to a 76 year old named margaret (you can use Margaret, but we came up with it first!). The more details you give the story (his name is Jack and he is a retired race car driver), the easier it will be to recall these numbers.

Forgetting to Carry Out Automatic Tasks

Problem: You don't remember if you turned the stove off, turned on the washing machine or made sure no lights are left on in the house.

While we do these automatic tasks, we use the 'Procedural memory', the memory we use to store chains of actions (a simple one would be to first check if any lights are on, then to turn them off). This type of long term memory is used to carry out action chains we learned, like riding a bicycle, tying our shoelaces or making coffee. Because of the automatic nature of this action, we usually don't really concentrate on doing it, and just let our body go through the motions.

Solution: In most cases we think we forgot to do something like this, you probably
DID remember to do it. But, if you find yourselves constantly doubting yourself, attach another action to the action you're obsessing about, and use it to make sure you remember doing it. For example: Every time you turn off the stove, say loudly: "I turned off the stove" to yourselves, or take a long sip of water. Any action that will be easy to remember will help. Then when you doubt yourself it will be much easier to remember if you have something else to remember.

Forgetting People's Names

**Problem:** You run into someone you met a few days ago, but you already forgot their name! You're not alone, this is one of the most common memory problems. The problem could be in the storage of the memory (you didn't pay much attention when you met the person) or in retrieval (you can't get out the name when it counts), or just a combination of both.

**Solution:** Most people learn visually instead of orally, which explains why we usually remember faces but are quite bad with names. Next time you meet someone new, look at them really well and repeat their name for yourselves at least 3 times. Use it in the conversation, as we tend to remember those better than just names. Try giving the name meaning, or rhyme it. For example, if you meet a man named Mark, you can secretly call him: "Mark of the Ark", or imagine him marking a paper. We know it sounds silly, but the more extra meanings you give to a word, the easier it will be to remember it! Remember just a bunch of sounds is much harder than trying to remember an association.
You Get Distracted

**Problem:** You go into a room and you forget why you did so. You were looking for something, got distracted by the dog or something on TV, and then suddenly you can't remember what it was!

**Solution:** Get a mental image of the thing you are looking for before you go look for it. If need be, associate that object with other objects or a logical chain of actions. So for instance, if you are on your way to the storage room to find your old bathing suit, think on your way of summer, pools and sunshine. This type of mental organization makes these associations easier to your current situation, and when you get there, you will not lose track of what you were doing.

If you do still find yourself in that situation, ask yourselves: What was the chain of actions that brought me here? The little things you were doing just before this will give you a clue as to what you are doing there.

Losing Daily Items

**Problem:** You don't remember where you put the keys, wallet or your sun glasses. This is usually an attention problem. When we go into the house in a huff, while lost in thought or maybe talking on the phone, our mind wanders and we might place objects in various places without remembering where. As usual, if we don't make it clear to the brain that we must remember these things, it will let them disappear.

**Solution:** This is a very similar problem to forgetting the lights on. Try not to put anything down while doing something else, and try to add an action to the putting down. Say: "This is where I'm putting my keys, on the armchair of the sofa." or "I'm putting my glasses in the blue box." Then you don't have to remember the exact location, just what you said, which is much easier and even if you don't remember it exactly, it will give you important clues of where to look.

Another and perhaps even better way, is to stick to your habits. This is the one of these rare times when obsession actually pays off. Religiously place your items in the same place, over and over again. Designate an easy to reach place where everything goes, and later sort them from that place into their rightful places. For instance, you can keep a big bowl next to the entry door, where you put keys, wallet, glasses etc. When you are not busy and can pay attention, go back to the bowl and put everything in its rightful place. Now that you are paying attention,
you'll probably remember where they are.

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**Having trouble Remembering...ahh...what was it? Oh yes - Words.**

**Problem:** Having a hard time remembering words, names of books and play, names of actors, old tunes etc. This is a universal problem and it gets worse the older we get. It doesn't matter how much we pressure ourselves and try to remember by force, it just won't happen if our mind is preoccupied.

**Solution:** First, let go of stress, it is the killer of memory. The second worst thing for memory is multiplicity, or concentrating on a few things at once. Clear your head and focus only on the words you are trying to find. Sometimes, the word seems to be right on the tip of our tongue, but we can't get to it. Don't worry, it happens all the time and it is actually a biological process. Sometimes the actual biological pathway in the brain to that word may be blocked, and you have to find a way around.

The best trick is not to think of the word itself, but think of a word that rhymes with it, or a word that has similar associations, or a word that is similar in meaning.

For example: We're trying to find the word 'University', it's right on the tip of our tongue, but we can't remember it exactly. Try to think of: 'college', 'student', 'place of learning', 'municipality' etc.

When the path to the brain is blocked, no amount of 'trying to remember' will help. The best way is to take an alternative route, and remember similar words. These will help approach the word from a different direction or path.
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