

Mind Your Mind

Andrew Rader, LAc, MS

For those who are over the age of 40, there are often concerns about decline in cognitive function and memory loss. Forgetting names and appointments, misplacing keys, forgetting the reason why one has walked into a particular room, and other such instances of memory lapse fuel the belief that the mind is degenerating. These types of memory lapses generally are not indications of serious neurological disorders and are not to be worried about. However, if someone experiences disorientation when in a familiar place, forgets important appointments, is confused about what location they are in and what time of day it is, forgets names of common objects, or experiences significant changes in personality, artistic or musical ability, this may signify more serious problems and should be followed up by a neurologist.

What affects our memory as we age? In short, everything -- energy levels, sleep habits, nutrient status, levels of toxic load, medications, coping skills, emotional state, degree of spiritual harmony, attitudes and beliefs, levels of physical activity, media consumption, and electronic device habits (computer, cell phone, video, TV, etc.). Did I leave anything out?

The implication here is that we can, by working with the above factors, make measurable improvements to our cognitive status.

Ten Steps to Memory and Cognitive Enhancement

1. Get plenty of sleep.
2. Get plenty of exercise.
3. Eat organic food and greatly reduce toxins from dietary sources. Cleanse thyself.
4. Check your medications: significant numbers of medications affect cognitive ability, including memory.
5. Learn coping mechanisms, and reduce stress. Take media holidays.
6. Get in touch with your emotions. Get emotionally intelligent!
7. Get a spiritual life.
8. Take specific nutrients/supplements/herbs to enhance memory and cognitive function.
9. Practice neurobics.
10. Don't worry, be happy!

Since I have written about many of the above steps before, let's focus on step nine: how to train the mind. Neurobics is a phrase coined by neurologist Lawrence Katz, meaning aerobics for the brain. What is it about aging that is associated with cognitive decline? When we are very young, everything is new and exciting. Watch kindergartners take a walk down the block. Everything is so interesting to them that it takes 20 minutes just to walk three blocks! How many cracks are in the sidewalk? Why does the flower look sad? Do worms live under this rock? For the teenager or college student, wonder and new experiences still abound. Travel, new friends, learning how to manage a checking account, a

first job, voting, etc., all are new experiences. With each new experience, new neural pathways are instigated.

The older we get, the more we get that "been there, done that" feeling. We do the same rituals day after day. We eat the same foods, watch the same TV shows, hear the same radio shows, see the same people, shop at the same stores, and travel the same routes. If we move beyond our comfort zone and do things such as trying new foods, turning off the TV and radio, reading a novel that we might not ordinarily choose, taking different routes, traveling, taking public transit, frequenting new shops and restaurants, putting ourselves in new situations, and forcing meetings with new people in new contexts, the mind/body will have to get off of autopilot and start working again, making new connections and creating new pathways. This goes a long way to keeping the mind young and fresh.

Another aspect of aging is information overload. There is no doubt that the amount of information and phenomena we encounter today is much greater than at any previous time in human history. On top of this, ironically there is increasing human isolation. Friends and family are not located close by. The TV and computer become the closest companions, and connections with others who have shared our lives with us are disappearing.

In the old days, people would come together and share stories about their day and about their past that would help rekindle other memories. Sharing stories about our past is one of the human activities that is being lost, and it carries a great cost. The more we relive an experience, the more we reinforce the pathways and processes that help us with our memory. Everything we have learned is tied to an experience. Remembering the experience helps to reinforce the connections to the information taken in during that experience. If you have the opportunity to share stories with friends or relatives, then by all means use it.

Vera Birkenbihl, a memory consultant extraordinaire, suggests a timeline activity to sharpen the mind and enhance memory. On a very wide piece of paper (you can tape normal letter-size paper together horizontally), make a long line, about two feet long. On the far left, mark your birth year; on the far right, note the current year. Mark off increments of five years. Above the line, at the appropriate year, note historical events that you remember; such as the Kennedy assassination, landing on the moon, Sputnik, etc. Below the line, put in landmarks to your personal history, such as graduating from high school, starting first grade, moving, getting married, a child's birth, etc. In a separate notebook, you will fill in the details of a particular memory, such as that day in sixth grade when the teacher asked you to stand up and recite last night's assignment and you drew a blank... or when your little sister stepped on a piece of glass when your parents left you in charge of your younger siblings for the first time. These particular incidents and stories with their vivid details, sights, smells, and emotions are to be written in this notebook. The nonspecific landmarks of your life (both personal and shared) are posted on the time line. Working with the timeline helps trigger vivid memories and visa versa.

Take this work in bite-sized sections. Spend about 15-20 minutes at a time and work on one decade at a time. In the beginning your memory might be sparse and thin, but as you go, one recollection will help trigger others.

Ms. Birkenbihl also suggests an easy and fun activity that strengthens memory called knowledge lists. Take a topic, such as animals, professions, countries or rivers, and alphabetically start naming what comes to mind (Amazon, Brahmputra, Colorado, etc.). Creatively cheat if you can't name a river that starts with Q or X. Say "Klondike" for Q since it has the same sound, or "Extra-long Nile" for X. The

purpose is to fill the slots so that associations start pouring in. If you do this regularly, and build concurrent alphabetical lists, then the unconscious mind will magically toss up many more associations and connections so that those instances of a word being "on the tip of my tongue" become much less frequent. Creativity is also maximized by having these knowledge lists current.

These memory games help bring to the surface many connections to the web of memory that have been lying out of reach below the surface for many years. The act of recall, when practiced, becomes easier and faster the more we do it. There are many more activities that specifically enhance our capacities for memory and creative thinking that cannot be addressed in this short article. Feel free to contact me, and I will be happy to show you where to find out much more.

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