

Fife Clinical Psychology Department



Coping With Memory Problems

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Memory is not one skill

Memory is made up of different parts, such as:

- Taking information in and concentrating
- Finding information stored in your memory
- Short-term memory e.g. what happened in the last hour
- Long-term memory e.g. about your childhood
- Memory for routines that you regularly practice
- New learning
- Memory for written and spoken words
- Memory for pictures, directions, music etc.

If you have memory problems, some parts of your memory may be affected, while others may not.

Memory is affected by many things

Your memory can be affected by:

- Normal ageing
- Tiredness
- Depression
- Stress & nerves
- Illness & Disease

Thus, assessment of memory involves usually a medical specialist and a psychologist assessing different areas of the brain, but also your health and wellbeing.

You are not crazy or stupid

Memory problems can make you feel:

- Shocked
- Angry & frustrated
- Alone & sad
- Confused
- Stupid & embarrassed
- Worried & anxious

As a result you can feel less confident and less like talking to people. You can give up socialising or doing things you enjoy.

Experiencing these emotions is understandable. It is a normal part of trying to cope with the change and loss memory problems can bring. It does not mean you are 'stupid' or 'crazy'.

Making life easier

There is no simple cure for memory problems.

There are, however, ways of coping with the problems to make life easier. Many kinds of aids and adaptations can be used. This is not 'cheating'. It is important to make use of anything that will help, including the following:

1. Using memory aids
2. Adapting your surroundings
3. Following a set routine
4. Improving your general well-being

You can combine several strategies, so if one strategy fails, you have a number of back ups.

1. Memory Aids

Memory aids take over some of the tasks that our memory would do. They also reduce the amount of things that have to be remembered. Here are a few:

- Diary/ electronic organiser
- Calendar
- Pill box
- Post-it notes/ write note on your hand
- Pin board or wipe clean memo board/ wall planner
- Notebooks (make notes of important conversations, phone calls)
- Make lists of things you have to do (tick when task is completed)
- Tape recorder/Dictaphone (for important conversations, make notes from them at the end of the day)
- Alarm clock/watch/timer (can be reminder to look at diary etc)
- Electronic pager/mobile phone (ask others to remind you)
- Filing system (to keep notes need for long term use in order)

Choosing the right memory aid

Some people prefer a large diary, others a small note book, others tape recordings. Experiment to see which is best for you.

Everyone uses them

Some people find using memory aids embarrassing. They worry that they will stand out. However, we all need some type of aid. They can make people look well organised and conscientious.

Practise makes perfect

The one problem with memory aids is that you can forget to use them! So it may take you a while to practise using them. You may need family or friends to remind you to use them. We all need help to allow us to be more independent so do not be afraid to ask. Adapting your surroundings may also help (see below).

2. Adapt your surroundings

Make simple changes so that you are less dependent on your memory:

- Keep a notepad by the phone, bed or favourite armchair
- Get a pin board to put important information on
- Designate a logical 'special place' where you will always keep certain objects such as, keys, glasses or wallet, and return them there after use - a place for everything, everything has its place
- Create strong associations between items and their location eg pills next to your toothbrush, keys next to the door.
- Attach important objects, such as keys/glasses, to your body or clothes
- Label cupboards/wardrobes/containers as a reminder of what is within them

3. Following a Set Routine

- By establishing the same routine every day or week, you can get used to what to expect. It reduces the demands on your memory. Make a note of regular events in your diary/ calendar.
- It can also help with using memory aids if you look at them at a set time every day or after a habit that you already have e.g. looking at the calendar after you brush your teeth.
- Routine changes may be prepared for well in advance, with family & friends providing regular spoken and written reminders
- For things that are important to remember, a good rule is: 'LITTLE & OFTEN'. Break things down into small chunks. Routinely try & memorise them over short, frequent sessions.

4. Improving your well-being

Express your feelings

Talking about the feelings that can arise from memory problems can help, especially if others show understanding & reassurance. Some people will find it difficult to understand, so it is important that you try & explain your difficulties & how they make you feel.

Reduce stress & worry

Stress can make your memory worse so try and minimise it:

- Have a warm bath with scented oils
- Listen to your favourite music
- Distract yourself e.g. go for a walk
- Deep abdominal breathing
- Tell someone about it
- Enjoy the moment - don't dwell on the past/future
- Slow down, take a break
- Don't expect too much of yourself – you're only human!
- If you forget something don't try too hard to remember - accept it, take a break, you can come back to it later

Remember your strengths

- Focus on your strengths - what you can do; your personal qualities; your skills and expertise; what your family and friends like about you
- Develop new enjoyable activities that do not rely on memory
- Plan to do something enjoyable every day - so you have something to look forward to
- Break down difficult tasks into more manageable steps
- After doing a chore give your self a treat e.g. cup of tea, chocolate, rest etc
- Make sure you get enough sleep, food and exercise

These kinds of approaches can help with the emotional and practical consequences of having a memory problem or caring for someone with a memory problem.