

Maintain Your Brain: Tips to Retain Concentration and Memory

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This question from E.T. in Bridgehampton: Last week you wrote about depression and you mentioned trouble with concentration, my dad has trouble with his memory and concentration but I don't think that he's depressed. Any ideas?

Many of us, in the "49 and holding" crowd joke about "senior moments."

But when they start happening to you more often, they're not funny at all. Instead, they're frustrating, embarrassing and perhaps even worrisome especially to your kids who immediately have visions of nursing homes and diapers. Have you ever walked into a room — and forget what you went in to get? Run into someone you haven't seen lately — and can't recall their name? (I can never remember names.) Misplaced your glasses, your house keys or your car? It's ironic. Just when you've got life almost figured out with all of this wisdom and experience under your belt, your brain is no longer "old reliable." You never know when it's going to trip you up, frustrate you, embarrass you, or make you wonder if you're starting to lose your marbles.

So what's a dad to do? Researchers at Harvard have been doing extensive studies in this area, lest they suffer the same fate as us mortals, and have dutifully been [reporting their findings](#). Aside from stress and the myriad distractions of daily life, they have concluded that there are both structural and functional reasons for our brain faux pas.

Once we become an (AARP) card carrying member of the "49 and holding" crowd, structural changes become evident in our brain. Oxidative damage and the accumulation of toxins cause damage to the protective myelin sheath which makes our nerves short circuit a bit thus causing "data loss."

Furthermore, as we age our levels of neurotransmitters and brain hormones, decrease causing a functional slowing of the transmission of information. The pharmaceutical industry has responded with drugs like Provigil, Aricept and Namenda to name but a few. These drugs try to close the gate after the chickens already flew the coop by manipulating neurotransmitter levels.

From a more pro-active perspective there are some natural supplements that have proven themselves to be helpful. Phosphatidylserine restores the brain's supply and output of acetylcholine, the neurotransmitter so important to memory, and so may turn back the clock in an aging brain. Alpha-glycerolphosphorylcholine, or Alpha-GPC is a cholinergic brain supplement that increases the synthesis and secretion of the neurotransmitter acetylcholine, which is the brain's messenger responsible for sending signals across the brain and to the muscles of the body. And Acetyl L-Carnitine (ALC) is basically a fat soluble amino acid that has the ability to cross the blood-brain barrier and get to the brain blood circulation, where it acts as a powerful antioxidant, which helps in prevention of the brain cells' deterioration. Its supplementation has been shown to be neuroprotective in instances of cerebral ischemia and may be useful in treating peripheral nerve injury. There are numerous supportive supplements ranging from blueberries to ginkgo and vinpocetine, to name but a couple.

Back to our friends at Harvard who put together 10 research-proven tips for a better memory:

1. Believe in yourself. Middle-aged and older learners do worse on memory tasks when exposed to negative stereotypes about aging and memory, and better if exposed to messages about memory preservation into old age.
2. Economize your brain use. Take advantage of calendars and planners, maps, shopping lists, file folders and address books to keep routine information accessible. Designate a place at home for your glasses, keys, and other items you use frequently.
3. Organize your thoughts. New information that's broken into smaller chunks, such as the hyphenated sections of a phone or social security number, is easier to remember than a single long list.
4. Use all your senses. The more senses you use when you learn something, the more of your brain will be involved in retaining the memory.
5. Expand your brain. Widen the brain regions involved in learning by reading aloud, drawing a picture or writing down the information you want to learn (even if you never look back at your notes).
6. Repeat after me. When you want to remember something you have just heard or thought about, repeat it out loud. For example, if you've just been told someone's name, use it when you speak with him or her: "So John, where did you meet Camille?"
7. Space it out. Instead of repeating something many times in a short period, as if you were cramming for an exam, re-study the essentials after increasingly longer periods of time — once an hour, then every few hours, then every day.
8. Make a mnemonic. Mnemonic devices are creative ways to remember lists. They can take the form of acronyms — such as the classic "Every good boy does fine," to remember the musical notes E, G, B, D and F on the lines of the treble clef.
9. Challenge yourself. Engaging in activities that require you to concentrate and tax your memory will help you maintain skills as you age. Discuss books, do crossword puzzles, try new recipes, travel and undertake projects or hobbies that require skills you aren't familiar or comfortable with.
10. Take a course. Memory-improvement courses are becoming more common. Choose one run by health professionals or experts in psychology or cognitive rehabilitation. Stay away from courses that center on computer or concentration games, which generally won't help you with real-life memory problems. Select a course that focuses on practical ways to manage everyday challenges.

Send in your questions and be well.