



MINDING YOUR MEMORY

We all experience occasional mental blips. The brain's wires cross and drop a name or forget a detail. The good news: It's not always a sign of something serious. Read on to find out what's going on inside your head—and what you can do to stay sharp.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHELSEA McNAMARA TEXT BY SALLY WADYKA

THERE ARE CERTAIN scenarios that seem to become all too familiar with age. You walk into the kitchen full of purpose—only to forget what you need once you get there. You go to greet an acquaintance, and suddenly her name vanishes off the tip of your tongue. Or you leave the house without your phone—for the third time in a week. These sorts of memory lapses may get more prevalent with age, but we also notice them (and worry about them) more. “It’s somewhat paradoxical that we remember the few things we forget each day but fail to acknowledge how many things our brains succeed in remembering,” says Sandra Bond Chapman, Ph.D., founder and chief director of the Center for BrainHealth at the University of Texas at Dallas. And memory, while perhaps the most noticeable, is just one piece of the puzzle.

HOW THE BRAIN AGES

“Memory relies on our capacity to sustain attention and acquire and process information,” explains Cynthia Green, Ph.D., founder of Total Brain Health, a provider of social-based brain training in Upper Montclair, New Jersey. And even though tests have concluded that some of these skills start to decline as early as our mid-20s, it’s not until around age 40 that we start

to notice the impact on our ability to retrieve information, recall a conversation, or remember a name. That's because there's a lot happening in the brain, with incremental shifts that are subtle but cumulative. "As we get older, the neural pathways shrink, connectivity between synapses slows, and brain metabolism and blood flow are reduced," says Chapman. But it's not all out of our control; recent research indicates that we can regain brain losses, strengthen synapses, and increase blood flow. "Even an older brain is not a fixed thing," says Green. "We can foster neurogenesis at any age."

WHY YOU FORGET THINGS

While there may be all kinds of changes going on, it's the memory mishaps that people are most aware of—and concerned about. And there is no one explanation for why the mind seems less sharp than it once was. "Memory is a very complex system that is influenced by numerous factors, such as stress and information overload, to name two," says Chapman. Here are a few other key factors that may be hindering your ability to remember.

LACK OF SLEEP "It is well known that disrupted sleep, including sleep deprivation, tends to impair normal memory consolidation," says Masanori Murayama, Ph.D., a researcher at the Riken Brain Science Institute, in Waco, Japan. Studies have also found a connection between various sleep-inducing medications—both over-the-counter and prescription—and impaired

memory (and even increased risk of dementia).

MULTITASKING Doing two (or more) things at once may seem like the most efficient way to operate, but the brain disagrees. A 2014 study by researchers at the University of Texas found that trying to remember multiple items simultaneously can actually weaken our ability to retain information.

TECHNOLOGY "It is not all good or all bad when it comes to brain health," says Gary Small, M.D., director of the University of California, Los Angeles, Longevity Center and coauthor of *Two Weeks to a Younger Brain* (Humanix Books, 2015). "But when we overdo screen time, it becomes a distraction that interferes with focus, attention, and ability to remember."

ALCOHOL You already know that having too many drinks isn't good for you, but a recent study provides evidence that it can also affect your memory more as you get older. Researchers from the University of Florida, Gainesville, recently found that after the equivalent of a couple of cocktails, subjects aged 55 to 70 showed greater declines in short-term memory than did a group of younger subjects.

WHAT HELPS BOOST THE BRAIN

The best news for your brain's well-being is that it can be improved at any age. "When you



adopt healthy brain-lifestyle behaviors, you will notice improvements," says Small. "The effects of aging on the brain are, to some extent, reversible." Start by focusing on these proven habits and your mind and memory will reap the benefits.

HEALTHY DIET The acronym *MIND* stands for Mediterranean-DASH Intervention for Neurodegenerative Delay, and studies have shown that the adults who most closely follow the *MIND* diet score as much as seven and a half years younger than their chronological age on cognitive tests. The plan calls

for a focus on consuming vegetables, including deep-green varieties, as well as beans, whole grains, mixed nuts, omega-3-containing seafood, poultry, extra-virgin olive oil, and one daily glass of wine (if you already drink alcoholic beverages), and for limiting red meat, cheese, butter and stick margarine, pastries and other sweets, and fried and fast foods. In addition to eating well, you'll want to stay at a healthy weight. A 2016 study

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at the University of Cambridge, England, found that brains of overweight and obese people had a smaller volume of white matter (the nerves and myelin sheaths around them that let areas of the brain communicate), on par with those of lean people 10 years older.

EXERCISE A workout “is a proven way to boost brain health,” says Chapman. “In our research, we’ve found significant memory gains emerge when individuals engage in aerobic exercise for 50 minutes three times a week.” Exercise benefits the brain in various ways—by augmenting the amount of blood, oxygen, and nutrients the heart pumps to the brain, and by increasing the circulation of a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which helps grow new neural circuits. And if you need to remember something important, try doing an intense workout four hours after you learn it. A recent study published in *Current Biology* found that this strategy (versus exercising

immediately after learning new information, or skipping the workout altogether) can improve memory consolidation.

YOGA Another recent study, published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, looked at the effects of a weekly yoga class and meditation routine on cognitive function. After 12 weeks, subjects' depression had diminished, and communication between the parts of the brain that control attention improved. Other studies have found a correlation between mindfulness meditation and improved memory, executive function, processing speed, and general cognition.

STAYING BUSY While multitasking may be associated with distraction and impaired memory, having a busy lifestyle seems to have a more positive effect. Researchers at the University of Texas Center for Vital Longevity discovered that busyness was associated with better processing speed, working memory, episodic memory, reasoning, and crystallized knowledge.

Is it Alzheimer's?

► It's a fear that pops up every time we forget something, but there are many differences between the ordinary, albeit aging, brain and a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease. “Some forgetting is normal for all of us, but if it starts interfering with everyday life and is beyond typical for you, that can be a sign that something's wrong,” explains Ruth Drew, director of family and information services at the

Alzheimer's Association, in Chicago. And memory isn't the only thing to take notice of—changes in your ability to solve problems, perform complex tasks, or exercise good judgment can all be red flags.

If you're concerned, see your physician (and then a neurologist, if needed) for a diagnostic process that can include tests of brain function, a thorough health history, blood work, and brain scans to look for other causes

of dementia-like changes, such as tumors, evidence of stroke, or buildup of fluid. “The top warning signs of Alzheimer's can also be indications of other things—such as depression, anxiety, nutrient deficiencies, dehydration, and thyroid disorders,” says Drew. Bottom line: If you're concerned, see your doctor. For more information, visit alz.org/10-signs-symptoms-alzheimers-dementia.asp.