

Maximize Your Memory

Improve your memory to present better, work more efficiently, and lower stress.

By Marlene Caroselli

In your brain are a hundred trillion nerve cells. Neural pathways connect your ears to your left temporal lobe and your eyes to your occipital lobe. From the occipital lobe, stimuli are sent to the hippocampus, where your memories are stored. The hippocampus analyzes the input and determines whether it's worth keeping.

For an experience to be encoded in

your memory, multiple neurons need to fire often and strongly. You can control that with your own efforts, says Dr. D.P. Devanand of Columbia University's Memory Disorders Center. With practice, you can ensure the transfer of an event into short- or long-term memory. You will impress others with your remarkable mind and work more efficiently.

Assignment

Gather a group of seven or eight co-workers and ask each for his or her most memorable trait. As each person talks, decide on an association for the trait. The more ridiculous it is, the easier it will be to recall. For example, you might envision Ted, who prides himself on his sensitivity, as sitting with his children in a darkened movie theatre, watching *Bambi* and weeping. Throughout the day, repeat each person's traits out loud. See how many you can remember at the end of the day. Once you've mastered one trait, assemble a new group. This time, ask each person for two traits.

Researchers disagree about how memory functions. Devanand believes that the brain's cortex serves as a cranial hard drive, storing "back-up files" in case the hippocampus fails. Different parts of the cortex seem to hold different kinds of memory, including

- episodic or declarative memory (personal experiences)
- semantic memory (general knowledge)
- explicit memory (a specific name or fact)
- implicit or procedural memory (an instinctual memory that works without conscious recall).

All of those are known as retrospective memory because they recall already acquired knowledge. Another kind of memory, prospective memory, helps us remember things that will occur in the future—for example, a meeting held later in the day.

The need to enhance memory goes back thousands of years. From Mnemosyne, the Greek goddess of memory, comes *mnemonics*, the use of devices that help us remember. What mnemonic devices do you currently use?

Assignment

What set of facts or numbers do you want to remember? Work out a mnemonic device for doing so. Consider drama, acronyms, rhyme, alliteration, visualization, or any other method that works for you.

Input tips

If you're not paying attention to what information is trying to enter your brain, you won't retain it. But you shouldn't retain everything. To avoid information overload, use filters: Screen incoming ideas for relevancy. As you take in information visually or aurally, train your eyes and ears to filter out the unimportant and catch only what you need.

Assignment

Study a paragraph for one minute. Skim and try to grasp only the key words. Then write those down from memory and attempt to re-create the essence of the passage. Do this repeatedly throughout the day. Assess your own progress.

Here are additional input tips.

Make immediate use of incoming information that you wish to retain. The faster you use it, the more of it you'll remember.

Develop your listening and concentration skills. One way to practice is to listen to someone speak while another person whispers in your ear. You should be able to repeat the first speaker's key points. Or, watch a cable news program of a reporter speaking while banners run along the bottom of the screen.

Remove barriers that prevent the information from entering your brain—for example, noise in the environment or judgments about a person. To help with the first, isolate yourself as much as possible or use a white-noise machine to di-

minish distracting sounds. To prevent the second, remind yourself that everyone has valuable information to share.

Sharpen your powers of observation. One way to do that is to write down all of the details you can remember from the face of a dollar bill. The first time, you'll probably remember only a few specifics. Try again a few weeks later; repeat until you can recall almost all details.

Repeat what you've heard and seen. It may be a cliché, but what's repeated is remembered.

Storage tips

The essence of memory development is association. To illustrate, draw from memory the shape of Austria. Now, draw the shape of Italy. Why was the second illustration so much easier to draw? It's be-

Assignment

List five work terms that you can never remember how to spell. Now write the troublesome part of each word in capital letters. For example, if you can never remember if *accommodate* has one *m* or two, write it as *accoMModate*. After your brain has seen the word written like that 30 times, the visual association will be frozen in your cerebral cells.

cause of the association we have with Italy as boot-shaped.

Here are additional storage tips.

Do several short run-throughs instead of one long session to commit information to long-term memory. Experts recommend reviewing 3 x 5, 3 x 5—three to five times a day for three to five days.

Develop synesthesia. Use other senses to help you intensify an experience, thus enabling more efficient recall later. For example, to remember a phone number, you can remember the tones of the digits being dialed in addition to the numbers.

Cluster data. At first glance, the number

192,014,921,956,255,075 seems impossible to remember. But if you cluster the numbers into sets—1920 1492 1956 25-50-75—the task is much easier.

Retrieval tips

Here are a few tips for helping you recall information.

Combine tasks. For example, while you wait for your computer to boot up, review your to-do list.

Put things out of place so you'll notice them. If you need to remember to take a file home, put it with your car keys rather than back in the file cabinet.

Prod your memory. If you can't remember a specific name, for example, start going through the alphabet. Often, you can trigger the recall.

Develop your ability to concentrate to aid input and output. To improve Tiger Woods's concentration, his father would attempt to startle the golfer as he focused on his shot. In time, Earl Woods failed to

Assignment

Ask a colleague to attempt to distract you at least once a day for several weeks. Practice ignoring the disruptions.

disturb Tiger because he had become injured to the distractions.

An improved memory is a career enhancer. It will save time, lower stress, and enrich your training and speaking. If you can remember to practice, you'll be well on your way to a maximized mind.

*Marlene Caroselli is an international speaker and corporate trainer for Fortune 100 companies, government agencies, educational institutions, and professional organizations; <http://hometown.aol.com/mccpd>. This article is adapted from her book, *Maximize Your Mind*, co-authored with Robin Wilson. To order, call 800.876.4636.*