

9 strategies to improve memory

Normal age-related changes in the brain can slow some cognitive processes, making it a bit harder to learn new things quickly or to ward off distractions. The good news is that, thanks to decades of research, most of us can sharpen our minds with proven, do-it-yourself strategies. Here are some ways to boost your ability to remember as you age.

1. 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.

2. Organize your thoughts.

New information that's broken into smaller chunks, such as the hyphenated sections of a phone number or social security number, is easier to remember than a single long list, such as financial account numbers or the name of everyone in a classroom.

3. 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. For example, odors are famous for conjuring memories from the distant past, especially those with strong emotional content, such as the scent of your grandmother's freshly baked cookies.

4. 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). Just forming a visual image of something makes it easier to remember and understand; it forces you to make the information more precise.

5. 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?"

6. 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. Spacing out periods of study is particularly valuable when you are trying to master complicated information.

7. 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. For older learners, a particularly helpful system is a story mnemonic — that is, a brief narrative in which each item cues you to remember the next one.

8. 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.

9. Take a course.

Memory-improvement courses are becoming more popular. If you decide to try one, choose a program 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.

Improve your memory with a good night's sleep

Sleep is essential for memory consolidation as well as overall health. Research suggests that six to eight hours of sleep a night is ideal for most people. Perhaps even more important than the amount of sleep is the quality of sleep. For better sleep *and* memory, try the following:

Establish and maintain a consistent sleep schedule and routine. Go to bed at the same time each night and wake up at the same time each morning.

Plan to do your most vigorous exercise early in the day. Exercising in the hours immediately before bedtime causes physiological changes that interfere with sleep.

Avoid coffee and other sources of caffeine (e.g., chocolate, many soft drinks, some brands of aspirin, many types of tea) after midmorning, because caffeine is a stimulant that can keep you awake for hours afterward.

Avoid napping during the daytime. Napping can disrupt your natural sleep cycle and prevent you from feeling tired enough to fall asleep at night.

Don't take sleeping pills unless nothing else works. If you do take a prescription sleep medicine, work with your doctor to use it effectively but only on a short-term basis.

Don't try to sleep if you're not tired; otherwise you'll set yourself up for tossing and turning. If you're still awake after about 20 minutes in bed, get up and read awhile to relax.