



Will You Remember This?

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You've just been introduced to a few people at a business event. Within seconds, you've already forgotten all their names. You're delivering a presentation to your colleagues and are suddenly at a loss for the words you had practised and were planning to say next. You're asked to find some information that's stored digitally, but you can't remember where you filed it. So frustrating!

Most people face similar predicaments on a regular basis, and our inability to recall simple things is a concern for many of us. We worry there might be something medically wrong with us, or we fret that we're already facing the inevitable decline of our cognitive faculties. But surely we're not THAT old yet, are we?

While it's true that memory difficulties do increase as we approach old age, they're also a fact of life for most of us well before we reach our middle years. Living in such a busy world of constant change isn't helping, of course, and there just seems to be way too much to store in our heads on any given day.

However, there are a few specific issues that affect our ability to remember that we can recognize and learn to manage:

NO INTEREST

When we're not especially intrigued by something, our thoughts will invariably wander off and latch on to other topics that seem more appealing.

While the left side of the brain (the one that deals primarily with logic) is doing its best to focus on the serious material at hand, the right side of the brain (the one that's responsible for creativity) is inviting us to have a little brain party. "C'mon!" it says, "Let's have some fun!" And it's pretty tempting to do that, isn't it? Just think about some

fun stuff for a little while, right?

So we suddenly realize that we haven't really been listening to the person who's speaking to us. Or it occurs to us that we can't remember a thing from the last few paragraphs we've been reading. It's like our minds have been on auto-pilot.

This is a tough obstacle to overcome, but simply being conscious of the danger of this kind of mind drift will help deal with it. Better yet, making a decision to set aside intruding thoughts until later on can be helpful. Make a list (mental or otherwise) of intruding thoughts and entertain those more interesting ideas afterwards.

NO ATTENTION

Our brains work at an extremely fast pace and are capable of attending to many, many thoughts at one time. But that doesn't mean that pushing them to multitask is necessarily a good thing.

An area in the front of the brain, called the prefrontal cortex, spans and uses both sides of the brain and is triggered when we need to focus our attention. Scientists at the Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM) in Paris recently discovered that asking study participants to perform two separate tasks at the same time, however, forced the two sides of the brain to

work independently of each other. When a third task was added to the mix, the participants had a difficult time remembering one of the tasks they'd been asked to perform. So even by focussing on the task in hand, or in this case, two tasks, adding a third task which requires equal attention can sometimes be difficult to manage.

And then there are all those distractions we're faced with throughout the day. Researchers at the University of California at Irvine suggest that the average office worker in the US is interrupted or distracted every three minutes, and it takes an average of 23 minutes to return to a task after being interrupted.

So what to do? Again, self-awareness is necessary to change the way we work, and we must make serious efforts to regulate and control all those internal and external diversions that interfere with our ability to focus on one task at a time. Turning off our phones at certain times of the day and hiding or closing some windows on our desktops would be a good start. Putting an end to answering email messages during meetings, reading text messages while listening to others speak, and web browsing while talking on the phone wouldn't be such bad ideas either.

NO EFFORT

This might seem kind of obvious, but one of the main reasons we forget information so often is that we routinely don't make much of an effort to recall names, facts and figures in the first place.

In other words, we too often rely on what we think is our natural ability to store information

...continued on page 21

continued from page 20

in our heads—but that’s not how our brains work, and we need to get into the habit of preparing to remember things ahead of time.

So we might want to brush up on some of those study skills that got us through school years ago and relearn techniques and strategies that store details in our minds. We need to plan to remember people’s names before being introduced; tackle reports the way we used to approach textbook chapters we would be tested on later; read actively by highlighting, underlining and marking up material when we can; and listen as carefully and intently as possible when others are speaking to us.

And, lastly, there’s this: researchers at the University of Reading a few years ago made the discovery that having a few glasses of champagne each week may help improve performance on simple memory tests. The experiment was done on rats, of course, but still...



Brian Thwaits is a professional speaker specializing in ‘brain training’. You can visit him online at www.brainspeaker.com and follow him on Twitter @brianthwaits.

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