

A LINE ON LIFE

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Helping Your Memory *

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Did you ever forget to keep a commitment? I have. Even though we might not want to forget our commitments, we sometimes do. As we get older, our memory slips even more. Take the joke about the elderly couple. The husband told his wife that he wanted pancakes for breakfast. He asked her to write his request down, so she wouldn't forget. She said she would have no problem remembering his order. About 15 minutes later, she comes to the table with bacon and eggs. With a smug look on his face, the husband declared, "*I knew you would forget! Where's the toast?*" What can we do to remember better?

- **Write notes to yourself.** (This would have helped both the wife and the husband in the joke.) Put these notes where you won't miss seeing them, like on the bathroom mirror or the inside of your front door. (The refrigerator door is a good spot in our home. The dashboard is a good place in our car.) For short-term reminders, you can even write a note on your hand.
- **Put objects in eye-catching places.** If you have to take a book to the library or your shoes to be repaired, put them some place where they will be noticed when you leave the house. Just inside the door of the house or the front seat of your car are good places.
- **Use a daily calendar.** As commitments are made, write them down on the calendar. Then check the calendar every morning. (I have one in my pocket and another on the inside of the closet door where I keep my jacket. Each year, when I change calendars, I make sure to take all the birthdays and anniversaries on the old calendar and transfer them to the new one.)
- **Ask some reliable person to remind you.** The other person might compensate for your memory lapses. Even if they don't, having told another person fixes the commitment better in your mind, so you are less likely to forget.
- **Make lists for each day.** List items you want to purchase, things that need repair, assignments, phone calls, activities, appointments and so on. As each is completed, check it or cross it out. If you cannot finish all the items on your list, put the remainder on the next day's list.
- **Set an alarm.** If something has to be done at a particular time, set an alarm as a reminder. Just as you can set an alarm to remind you to wake up, you can do it for other things. You could also use a kitchen timer. (Personally, I often use an alarm on my wristwatch.)

- **Integrate repeated activities into your everyday routine.** When you have to start taking medication, work it into your lifestyle. If you take pills with your morning juice, leave the pills near the juice. (However, if there are children in the household, don't forget that the medication has to be kept away from them.)

A particular problem for me is remembering people's names. As a teacher, I had to deal with 150-250 new names each semester. Remembering names indicates to students that they are distinct, worthwhile individuals, so I *try* to remember their names. Here are some suggestions that help me. I hope they help you too.

- **Pay attention when you first hear the name.** Many times, it's not a case of "forgetting." We have never learned the name in the first place.
- **Use the name immediately.** You can say something like, "*Hello, Mary Smith is an unusual name, isn't it?*" Rehearse the name by saying it several times out loud while talking to her.
- **Associate the name with some feature of the person.** Try to find some physical trait that can assist your memory. Or you could dream up some crazy mental image to help you remember.

Even though these hints will help, they will never guarantee a perfect memory. So if you still can't remember, don't get upset, just laugh it off and keep trying. A joke about my last hint can clarify how things can go wrong. In remembering Mr. Kelly's name, a student linked it with his big belly – "*belly-Kelly*." Several days later, upon seeing Mr. Kelly again, the student gave the confident greeting, "*Hello, Mr. Blomach*," ("*stomach-Blomach*").

* Adapted from Diane Papalia and Wendkos Olds' *Psychology*, McGraw-Hill, 1988, page 223.