

LINE ON LIFE

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"Remember What's His Name?" *

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When we forget, we often worry that our intelligence is declining or we are becoming senile. Why do we forget at times? Is this a sign of memory loss or thinking problems?

Psychologists Ulric Neisser and Douglas Herrmann have conducted much research on forgetting. They surveyed over 200 people about lapses in memory. The most frequently reported problem was being introduced to someone and forgetting that person's name a few moments later. Next was waking up in the morning and not being able to remember anything about the dream you just had. Another is being in a conversation – thinking about an important point you need to mention – but forgetting to do so. Less likely lapses were going somewhere and forgetting to bring something along or having to ask someone what the date is.

Everyone has memory lapses.

These lapses occur with *every healthy person*. According to these researchers, we probably complain about how bad our memories are, because we have no idea how frequently others have memory lapses. Forgetting is more common than most people realize.

Some memories can be very long lasting. Psychologist Harry Bahrick of Ohio Wesleyan University studied 1000 people who had learned Spanish in high school or college. Most of what they forgot was lost in three to five years after taking the courses. Of the remaining Spanish memories, little was lost – even over the next 25 years. This contradicts studies that indicate a gradual continuous memory loss as times passes. According to Dr. Bahrick, *"If you retain knowledge for five years, it seems you'll remember it for another 25."*

In contrast to other types of information, memory for names and faces seems to last well. Bahrick found that – even 35 years after high school graduation – people could still remember 90% of their classmates. After 50 years, they could still identify 70-80% of them. However, facts like this are not merely learned – they are **overlearned**. Even after the original learning, the facts are gone over again and again. So to help your memory when introduced to people, repeatedly use their name in your conversation while looking at their faces.

The ability to maintain **prospective memories** – remembering to do something at the right time – seems to be relatively unaffected by aging. These memories are just as important as **retrospective memories** – recalling things that have happened to you. There has been recent research on prospective memories.

In a study that dealt with remembering to make a telephone call, volunteers aged 65-75 did better than a group of college students. Only one person forgot to call in the older group, while 14 college students did not call. This seems to be the result of older people organizing their lives a little better. They learn to rely on memory aids like writing notes to themselves. Younger people tend to be *"a little cocky"* about their memories, but they are more likely than older people to complain about remembering things. Most commonly, they complain about forgetting things they had promised to do.

"There is a tendency for those who trust their memories and make comments such as 'I've got an internal alarm' to be more likely to miss an appointment."

As long as we organize things to fit our natural habits, we can remember them well. Even though some people seem to have haphazard piles of books and papers on their desks – if it fits their scheme of organization – they will typically be able to find what they want.

Sometimes what is viewed as a memory problem really involves **perception**. Many of us misplace something only to find it later. Often you find it in a place where you had previously looked, but you did not even notice it the previous times. This failure to notice "*lost*" objects is more frequent with older people. This suggests that perceptual deficiencies occurring with aging may cause elderly people to think that their memory is worse than it actually is. As an older researcher comments –

"When I look in a file and can't find what should be there, I always go back and look again. If I find that I missed something the first time because it didn't look the way I expected it to, I saw it, but I didn't recognize it."

Much of our forgetting occurs when we get **nervous**. A psychologist verified this by using tape-recorded conversations with his clients. Before forgetting, most clients demonstrated signs of increased nervousness. In two-thirds of the instances, they remembered the forgotten thought with a minute. However, if they couldn't remember within two minutes, they rarely remembered the thought at all.

In everyday life, researchers have problems in studying memory. They cannot merely ask people how good their memory is. Those who have excellent memories are so bothered by their few lapses that they exaggerate their frequency of forgetting. On the other hand, people with poorer memories tend not to report it, because they forget that they have forgotten. So – if you are one of those who worry about your memory lapses – wait a while. Maybe you'll forget about your memory lapses too!

* Adapted from Daniel Coleman's "Forgetfulness Is Seen Causing More Worry Than It Should," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1986.