

MEMORY

IMPAIRED MEMORY

Impaired memory is one of the universal problems of people with head injury. Why doesn't my short-term memory work? Well, let's quickly review how the brain works. We know the information flows in through the middle of our brain and branches out like a tree. Before that information goes to different areas, it goes through a channelling / filtering system. It's almost like a mail room, this information goes into this box, and that letter goes into that box.

When the brain is injured, these middle areas get pressed upon because of swelling (pressure pushes down on the brain). The middle sections of the brain are also resting on the bone of the skull. Because of forward and backward movement of the brain in an accident, they get sheared or torn. A problem develops when there is a large flow of information coming in which the brain can't process, or when information is not being sent to the right place. So the mail room of the brain is not doing its job.

There is also a second type of memory problem. Once information is stored in the brain, the brain has a hard time finding it. For example, you saw a movie but you can't recall the name of the actor in the movie. You can visualise who the actor is, but can't come up with his name. People typically describe a "*tip of the tongue*" type of thing; "*I know what I want to say but I just can't get it out*".

It's almost as if the brain is saying, "searching, searching" and not finding. Several minutes later, it just comes to you. So think of it as a library in some sense. If I take a book on history and I just put it anywhere in the library, I'm going to have to search that whole library to get that one book. So there are basically two kinds of memory problems: storage problems and retrieval problems.

WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY MEMORY?

Work with a Specialist in Memory

One of the most important things is to get help from people who specialise in head injury. In most cases, a Speech Therapist can teach memory strategies. For some people, one type of memory may be impaired (verbal recall) but another type may be intact (remembering visual information). If I know that my verbal memory is not very good, I write things down and encourage visual memory systems to work. Specialists can help you pick out the best memory strategies to help you. Once you find an effective strategy, keep working on it. Think of memory like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets.

Get Organised

We learn better if we are organised. After a head injury the ability to organise gets really messed up. One symptom of not being organised is when someone says, "*I've started 50 projects and haven't finished one of them.*" If you organise information, it tends to help you recall it. For example, if you are constantly losing

your car keys or constantly forgetting where you put your wallet, there's one simple technique to use. Put things in the same place. Always put your car keys in one spot on the dresser. Always put your purse in one spot in the house and nowhere else. Being organised helps your memory and you will be less likely to lose things.

Break It Down

Another thing that we can do to help memory is to break it into small bits. If you have something really tough to learn, try to break it down into small bits and then learn each one little bit at a time. Some people call this "chunking;" you are memorising little "chunks" of information. The wonderful folks at Bell Labs (they invented the phone) figured out that people will learn a 7 digit phone number if you group 3 digits together and then group 4 digits together (a "chunk" of 3 numbers and a "chunk" of 4 numbers).

Using Association

Association is really important for retrieving important information. For example, you are taking a literature course and you need to remember a famous essayist, Francis Bacon. You might associate the image of a piece of bacon with the name of this person. So if you're trying to think of this explorer, an image of a piece of bacon will come to you. This approach is particularly helpful with learning names. Remembering names is a difficult task for most people in the world; it is especially hard for most people with a head injury.

Get a Daily Planner

Probably one of the best things you can do to help your memory is to use a daily planner. This brings up two important points:

- The First Rule of Memory - write everything down in one spot (your daily planner).
- The Second Rule of Memory - write it down when it's fresh in your mind.

For example, you go to your doctor's office and you are asked to return for another appointment. Many people have a calendar stuck on their refrigerator or on a wall at home. By the time you get back home, you've forgotten the date or lost the appointment card. Next time, bring a planner to the doctor's office and write your appointment in it just after the doctor tells you the date. Get a medium size planner or something called an organiser. Don't get something that's too small--you're going to be doing a lot of writing. Write complete notes! Some people make notes so short that they later can't figure out what the note means.

Make A "To Do" List

In addition to a planner, make a "to do" list. For example, you may have a number of chores to do around the house but none of them in any particular order. What you can do is get a small pad of paper and write down the things that they have to do. Once you have this list, decide which task to do first, second, third, and so on. This will work if your list doesn't get too long. If the list gets too long, you're going to run into problems.

Make a "Modified To Do" List

I commonly hear the same problem, "*I've got 50 projects going but I haven't finished any of them.*" This is a combined problem of memory deficits and organisational deficits. One solution is to buy a small dry-erase board and put it up in the home. On the board, you are only allowed to list five items on the "To Do" list. You cannot add another item to the board until you have completed one of the items already on the board. Make a "Modified To Do List" and put it somewhere in your house where the whole family can see it. Family can also offer suggestions to help you to get projects organised. This will in turn help family members get a better understanding of what the head injured person has to deal with. When you get organised and use the Planner/To Do List, you'll feel better about yourself because you will accomplish things.

THINGS THAT CAN AFFECT MEMORY

Fatigue and Sleep

Memory can be affected by a number of things. Some of these influences can affect even people without a head injury. If you do have a head injury, these effects are multiplied. For example, if you're tired, your memory tends to be poor. If you have to learn something really important, it's best to learn it when you're fresh. Generally, most people with head injuries learn better in the morning than in the late afternoon. So if you've got something really important (a test for school), studying the night before the exam may not be very useful. The best time to study is in the morning. In addition, people with head injuries commonly have sleep disorders. It's very important that you talk with your doctor about getting your sleep pattern back to normal. If you wake up tired, you're going to make memory problems worse.

Strong Emotions

Very emotional situations will distort your memory. If someone comes into a bank and waves a gun at you, this will create a very emotional situation (intense fear). Even though there are five people looking at the same person, you will get five different descriptions of the robber. Being afraid, mad, or anxious will alter your memories. What should you do in emotional situations? You can't always control your emotions, but there are situations where you will need to recall important information. For example, going to a doctor's office can be a very emotional experience (many people are afraid or anxious). Most head injured people find this a very stressful situation. One approach is to bring a family member or friend along. Another approach is to tell your doctor of your memory problems and ask the doctor if you can write down important information.

Certain types of medications (pain killers, for example) can affect memory. In the hospital, people can be on fairly significant amounts of pain killers because they have broken bones or other injuries. Some medications can make you tired, which in turn makes your memory worse. It is important to have an ongoing dialogue with your doctor about your medications. People have told me, "*I'd rather be in a little bit pain so I can be more alert.*" Sometimes the goal of pain medication is not to get rid of all the pain, but to control it. Talk with your doctor about your medications and the possible effect of medications on memory.