

Contents

Acknowledgements1

Introduction.....2

How Memory Works3

Factors Affecting Memory10

Improving Your Memory.....16

Why Remember?21

Memory Tips and Tricks.....26

Side Effects of Medications30

Aftermath of a Seizure.....31

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Suggestions for Further Reading

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Executive Memory Techniques, Jon Keith, Dell, 1989.

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Introduction

You reach into your pocket or purse for the keys and they are not there. You run into someone at the grocery store who obviously knows you, but you have no idea who they are, or you do recognize them but can't remember their name. You get up in the morning and can't find your glasses. You remember your 2:00 o'clock appointment at 3:00 o'clock. You praise a book you finished last night but cannot remember its name.

There is a black hole in our mind that swallows things--names, birthdays, appointments, keys, glasses, wallets. Important things and trivial things can all vanish into the black hole and disappear like a stone in the water.

We say this is because we are getting older, or have too much on our minds, or blame it on our medication. There are always handy excuses. Sometimes they are true.

Age and medications are handy excuses. In our general worry about aging, we just assume that is true because we worry more about the effects of aging than we used to. We think, "I forgot because I'm getting old," instead of simply saying, "I forgot," and letting it go. Maybe it's age, but more likely it is lack of attention, stress, lack of sleep, anxiety, or simply the distractions that flood us every moment of our busy lives.

The Epilepsy Association of Virginia has had many requests from people who need information about memory and forgetfulness. This booklet is intended to help meet those needs.

How Memory Works

The word memory can describe many processes. Tying a shoe is not like remembering a name or a face, but both involve memory. A multiple-choice test asks only that we recognize the right answer, a fill in the blank test makes us remember the correct answer and write it down. Again, both involve memory, but call on different memory processes. Some people seem to remember everything, some of us are so absent-minded that our friends joke about it. In spite of these differences, the stages of memory are the same for all of us. Information is received, it is stored, and it is retrieved.

The Three Types of Memory

There are different kinds of memory: immediate or sensory memory, short-term memory, and long-term memory. Sensory memory and short-term memory help get us through the day. Long-term memory tells us who we are. Short-term memory will let us remember a new person's name for the few moments we may spend with them. If the memory does not get transferred into long term memory, when we see the person again, their name will be gone. Short-term memory lets us remember a telephone number long enough to close the phone book and dial the number. Ten seconds or ten minutes later it is gone. Long-term memory recognizes your house.

Sensory memory

Sensory memory is the first step in the process. We get our information from the senses: touch, taste, hearing, vision, and smell. We feel the hardness of the chair we sit in, the texture of the rug under our shoe.

No one remembers everything, few would want to. We make choices about what is important enough to remember and what can be forgotten. Much of what we sense is lost almost immediately. You may see a hundred people on a busy sidewalk or see a hundred cars drive past. Unless there is something noticeable, memorable, about one or more of them, they will be forgotten almost instantly. If there is something that draws our attention to somebody or something, it will pass into our short-term memory. It stays as long as we are aware of it.

Short Term Memory

If something makes an impression on us, if we notice it, it is in our *short-term memory*. Short-term memory holds conscious thoughts, but only for the moments that we think them. It holds new information and perceptions, as well as the fleeting thoughts of past experiences or future expectations. During the moments that you are conscious of them, they are in your short-term memory.

Short-term memory can hold no more than six or seven things at once. So it is fairly easy to look briefly at a short number and remember it long enough to write it down. Remembering a longer number is harder. 7895594 may be too much for short-term memory to handle. Break it into chunks - 789-5594 - and it becomes a telephone number that may be a little easier to recall. Break it into smaller chunks, 789-55-94, and it is even easier.

It is harder to make the memory last longer than fifteen or twenty seconds. Information needs to be repeated or concentrated on to stay in the short-term memory.

You repeat the telephone number to yourself as you walk to the telephone. If the line is busy, you may have to look up the number again five minutes later. Not everything in short-term memory gets transferred to long-term memory.

Long Term Memory

The storage capacity of long-term memory is almost unlimited. It holds an amazing variety of facts, ideas, and knowledge, important and trivial. It holds language, words and grammar, as well as:

- ! your name
- ! the names, faces, and lives of your family
- ! your address
- ! what your face looks like
- ! your language
- ! how to ride a bicycle
- ! how to tie your shoes
- ! the smell of your grandmother's kitchen.

Long-term memory refers to any information that is no longer in conscious thought that is stored for future recollection.

The Transfer to Long Term Memory

The long-term memory is like a library or the hard drive of a computer. It holds a vast amount of information, some trivial, some important. Most remembrance is based on association. Association works like cross-referencing in a library's card catalogue. The more associations or cross- references there are, the easier it is to recall the information.

New facts are likely to be associated with and supported by old facts. Information without associations, the memory of a single moment, for instance, can be easily forgotten unless it has some emotional significance. A shocking or surprising moment can be recalled complete with all its details. These vivid and complete recollections are called *flashbulb memories*.

People can remember exactly where they were and what they were doing when they learned that Stalin was dead, that John Kennedy had been shot, or that the space shuttle had crashed into the ocean. These are flashbulb memories.

Remembering: Coding and Retrieval

Remembering is the process of learning and storing information so that it can be retrieved in the future. Two steps are necessary to successfully remember something:

the information must be coded, that is transferred solidly into the long term memory, and

you must be able to retrieve it when you need it.

Coding

Coding is the process of transferring information into the long-term memory. Coding may involve paying close attention to something, thinking it through, associating it with something you already know, consciously wanting to remember, or adding details. Or coding can happen unconsciously.

This is easier to describe by example:

Molly likes animals. Any animals, she is not a fussy child. Yesterday we saw a woman walking a little brown puppy. Molly asked what its name was and what kind of dog it was. The woman said he was a beagle named Fred. Molly said, "My uncle's name is Fred, too," and sat down on the sidewalk to play with the puppy. She petted it, felt its fur, its teeth, listened to it bark, and watched it play. When she got home she told her mother all about the beagle puppy named Fred she met. She remembered all this because she liked the puppy, paid attention to it, and associated its name with her uncle.

This can be done intentionally. You can consciously make an association to help your memory.

Attention

Paying attention is one of the most important steps in getting information into your long-term memory. At any given moment your senses are aware of all of the sounds, sights, and smells around you as well as whatever you happen to be thinking about. The feeling of the breeze on your face, the colors of the street, grass, and sidewalk, what you want to do when you get home, what you did yesterday... All of these things are competing for your attention. Paying attention to one specific thing can take a conscious effort.

Association

Association is connecting one piece of information with another. The more connections there are, the easier it will be to remember. Much association is done unconsciously, but you can make a conscious effort to remember something by associating the new information with old information. Little Molly associated the name of the puppy with her Uncle Fred, so she remembered it.

Retrieval

Someone asks you for the capitol of Canada. You think, "Montpelier? No, Montgomery? No, that's not it either. I can't remember." It is on the tip of your tongue, but you can't quite get it. This happens all the time as the mind searches for information that it has, but cannot retrieve.

Retrieval is the third and crucial stage in the memory process; information that cannot be recognized or recalled when needed, will do you no good at all. Recognition and recall are the two most important ways to get at the information in your long-term memory.

Recall is intentionally searching your memory for information: "I needed to get three things at the hardware store--glue, tape and something else." You think for a minute and then remember nails.

Recognition is realizing that you already have the information. You see someone on the street and immediately know that it is your neighbor Mrs. MacGregor.

Recognition is much easier than recall. Ask any child. They would much rather have a multiple-choice test than a fill in the blank test. One is based on recall, the other on recognition.

Forgetting

No one can remember everything. No one would want to. There are many theories that try to explain why people forget. Research is still going on. Memory and forgetting are still not fully understood. Normal memory loss is not a complete loss of recall, simply a failure to remember some past events and the things associated with them. Some of the reasons people forget are:

The information never got transferred to long term memory. Why not? You were not paying attention. You didn't hear it correctly. You didn't understand it. You didn't need to remember it. You were thinking about something else.

One memory can be submerged in similar memories. "My memory is so bad, I can't even remember coming to work this morning." If you go to work the same way every day and nothing unusual happened, the trip may be buried in the memory of every other trip to work.

There was no context for the information. The morning news, dateline Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. "President Compaore has been reelected." If you have never heard of either the man or the country, you will have no background for the information and there will be no associations for it. It may be forgotten in minutes.

Some information may be remembered only when something unusual reminds you of it. The names, faces, and events you thought you had forgotten years ago might come flooding back when you hear an old song on the radio.

Factors Affecting Memory

Certain factors are known to affect the memory for people of all ages. The impact of some of the factors listed below may be greater for older people, but they affect all people.

- ! Lack of attention
- ! Low expectations
- ! Stress
- ! Anxiety
- ! Depression
- ! Grief
- ! Inactivity
- ! Lack of organization
- ! Exhaustion
- ! Drug and alcohol abuse
- ! Illness and medications

Problems with Attention

If you need to remember something, paying attention is the first step. The simple test below will show how important it is to pay attention.

Add up these numbers while repeating the days of the week:

3
4
1
8
4
9

Didn't do very well did you? If you did not get 29 do not worry about it. If you try to do two things at once, you will not do very well at either of them. If you are daydreaming, not paying attention, or trying to do something else when someone asks you to do something, chances are you will "forget" to do it. If you are worried about the gravy stain on your necktie when you meet someone, chances are that you will not remember their name.

Distractions

Short-term memory can only hold a few things and it cannot hold them for very long. Any new thought, sight, or sound can distract you and replace whatever is in the short-term memory. We have all been victims of this kind of absent-mindedness.

We get up to go into another room for something. When we get there we can't remember what we wanted. We leave umbrellas on the bus. We miss a turn on a road we drive every day.

These things happen to all of us. They cannot be eliminated altogether, but they can be minimized by recognizing the limitations of short-term memory and consciously trying not to be distracted.

Low Expectations

If you have convinced yourself that you have a memory like a sieve, you will forget things. Instead of listening, or paying attention, you will be saying, "I'll never remember all this stuff." This is called a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If you think you will forget it anyway, you will probably put less effort into remembering, do less that requires memory, and worry when you do have to remember something.

Be aware of your self-defeating thoughts. Instead of saying to yourself, "I'll never remember this," say, "I will try to remember this."

Stress

Stress, anxiety, pressure, or simply being rushed is by nature distracting. All of these emotions can interfere with paying enough attention to new information, concentrating on things you want to remember, or concentrating long enough to recall something. If you are under stress, for whatever reason, remind yourself that stress is a distraction that affects memory. It is bad enough to be under stress without the added stress of worrying about your memory.

Anxiety

We are all prone to anxiety at times. We all worry sometimes. This is perfectly normal. Chronic anxiety is a different matter and can seriously affect our lives. Some of the symptoms of anxiety are:

- ! fear
- ! nervousness
- ! panic
- ! short attention span

- ! dizziness
- ! stomach aches
- ! insomnia
- ! irritability
- ! increased heart rate
- ! sweating

Depression

Occasional depression, like occasional anxiety, is a normal part of life. Chronic depression is a clinical condition that can affect every aspect of life. Symptoms of chronic depression can include:

- ! changes in appetite
- ! anxiety
- ! fatigue
- ! sleeplessness
- ! difficulty making decisions
- ! despair
- ! hopelessness
- ! inability to concentrate

Chronic depression can rob a person of their motivation, concentration, and affect their perception of themselves and their world. All of these factors can influence memory.

Grief

Grief is most often associated with death, but it can also be associated with many other events in a life. Moving, illness, loss of hearing or sight, retirement, any major change or loss. The effects can be similar to those of depression.

Inactivity

Memory, like any other talent, must be exercised. Lack of mental stimulation, lack of social interaction, and the lack of physical activity, all seem to have a negative impact on memory. Inactive, unstructured life seems to go together with deteriorating mental processes. This can be a particular problem for the elderly and for shut-ins.

Disorder

Some people are more organized than others. Though the old saying about a place for everything and everything in its place can be carried to extremes, in general, things do not get lost in orderly places. Having a particular place to keep bills, lists of appointments, glasses, car and house keys, etc. can eliminate many of the frustrations of losing things and forgetting to do things.

Keeping lists is a fine thing to do only if you know where to find the list. Many people keep the shopping list on the refrigerator door, their glasses on a bedside table, the keys on a hook by the door. If you always put something in the same place, you do not have to worry about where it is.

Exhaustion

Tired brains do not work very well. Mental and physical skills deteriorate, attention decreases, judgment suffers, and accident rates go up.

If you must do something requiring all of your mental and physical powers, try to schedule it at the time of day that is best for you. If evening is your lowest time of the day, night classes may not be a good idea. Try to schedule them in the morning or afternoon.

Drug and Alcohol Abuse

Drugs and alcohol have an immediate impact on the state of mind and the mental processes. That is why people abuse them. Obviously, memory is one of the mental processes that will be affected. If a person is drunk or stoned, his or her mind is not working at its best. Long-term alcohol abuse can cause permanent memory loss.

Illness and Medications

Illness and/or the medications used to treat them can affect memory. They can aggravate already existing memory problems and cause problems where none existed before.

Certain diseases may cause memory problems. The problems may or may not be permanent.

- ! infection
- ! fever
- ! heart disease
- ! lung disease
- ! thyroid problems
- ! anemia

- ! diabetes
- ! Parkinson's disease
- ! Alzheimer's disease
- ! epilepsy

If you think that you have memory problems as a result of illness or medication, talk to your doctor. Problems with side effects may be solved by changing medications or changing the times you take the medication.

For example, if drowsiness is a problem, some medications may be taken at bedtime instead of during the day. Again, if you have a problem with medication, discuss it with your doctor.

Improving Your Memory

No one remembers everything. Who would want to? The frustration comes when we forget things that are important and remember things that are absolutely trivial. Do we really need to remember the words to all of those songs we heard on the radio or all of those advertising slogans?

Unfortunately, advertisers and songwriters have learned that repetition is one key to memory. The more often we see or hear something, the more likely it is that we will remember it, whether we want to or not.

However, sometimes we do want to remember things. There are a great many tricks and techniques to improve your memory. Not all of them work for everybody because not everyone remembers in the same way. Some people remember best by listening, others by reading, still others by writing things down. Not all of these techniques will work for you. If one does not work, try another.

Will these tricks and techniques improve your memory? No. That is something you need to do for yourself. The tricks will help, but you need to train your memory to work systematically.

General Rules to Improve Your Memory

Though there are many specific tricks to improve your memory, there are a few basic strategies you can use whenever you want to remember new information.

Positive attitude. This all by itself will improve your memory. Think about the benefits of successfully remembering. The easiest way to get a positive attitude is to examine your goals. If you are going grocery shopping, think about the results -- in this case a better meal. Learn a new skill at work and you may get a raise or a promotion.

Observation. Notice your surroundings. Be aware of where you are and what you are doing. Your world is much more interesting, entertaining, and memorable if you pay attention to it. When you go to work tomorrow, try to remember five things that you see.

Picture it. Visualize it. The mind is like a camera. The next time you want to remember something, picture it. Close your eyes and try to see the telephone number or the name written on a piece of paper.

Concentration. Think about remembering it. Pay attention to what you want to remember. If you are doing something for the first time, think about it, ask yourself questions, go over the steps, and review it in your mind.

Organization. Organized facts are easier to remember. If you want to remember what you need at the grocery store, organize the items. Group them in some logical way. First get everything you need for the soup, then get the ingredients for the salad, next get the fixings for dessert.

Review it. The best way to review new information is to say it out loud. If you want to remember a new person's name, use their name while you are talking to them. If you need to stop at the bank on the way home, say, "Stop at the bank on the way home."

Natural association. If something new reminds you of something you already know, concentrate on that association.

If you meet someone named John who looks like your Uncle Charlie, make the association. You might even say to the person, "You look like my Uncle Charlie, but your name is John." They may think you are a little eccentric, but you will not forget their name, and they will probably remember yours.

If you did not notice, the first letters of these general rules spell the word **Popcorn**. These are the **Popcorn Rules**, developed by Jon Keith, a professional memory trainer. He used a simple device to remember them: he made the initial letters into a word. This can be an easy way to remember a list.

It is a standard memory technique to make a word out of the first letters of things you want to remember. It is simple and useful. Remember **Homes**? That is how you learned the names of the Great Lakes-- Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior.

More techniques are described below.

Association

This was mentioned briefly earlier. Association is the process of consciously connecting something you want to remember with something else. A friend could never remember starboard and port. She simply could not remember that left was port. Finally she learned the secret-- left-handed winos drink port. Now whenever someone says port, she thinks "left-handed winos."

Tim has nicknames for everybody he knows. Billy Bright Socks, Happy Henry, Myrkle the Firkle, and so on. I once asked him why. He said he started doing it to remember names and it became a habit. Bill, for instance, was wearing slime green socks the day he met him, Henry was smiling. He has no idea what a firkle is, but it rhymes and is easy for him to remember. These are associations that he intentionally made to remember the names. (Some of the nicknames stuck. Everyone who sees Bill now checks his socks.)

Observation

Take the time to consciously look at things that you want to remember. If it is a person's face, what color are the eyes, the hair? Is the face round or oval? Short or long hair? Curly or straight? Small mouth or wide? Things and people are more interesting and more memorable if

you look closely at them, notice details, and think about them.

That little gray bird you saw this morning, did you notice whether it had a crest on its head or not? Was it bigger than a robin? Could you describe it? Is the tree in front of your apartment house an oak or a maple?

If you want to remember something, look at it. If it is a photograph or painting, look at it. Notice the colors, how the shapes are arranged. Think about it. Ask yourself questions about it. How many people are there? What are they doing? What are they wearing? Where are they? Why are they there?

Exaggeration

Exaggeration is an extension of observation. If you don't pay attention to details and differences, you will not notice anything to exaggerate.

You meet someone named Ann. She has a round face, exaggerate it. Make it as round as an apple, color it red. Now she is Apple Annie and you won't forget her. Zoe has pink cheeks, make them red--Rosey Zoe. Tony is an active kid, he runs, he climbs, and he is never still. Now he is Tony the Tiger.

Exaggerations can be silly. (Richard Nixon's nose really did not look like a ski jump.) Silly is good, it makes them easier to remember. Unless you are cartoonist, you are the only one who knows about them.

Need to remember to get bread on the way home? Exaggerate it. Visualize a huge loaf of bread sitting in the middle of the road in front of the store. Bread and soap? Imagine a huge soap sandwich in the road. Need to stop at the cobbler, too? Exaggerate a shoe. Imagine it huge. Step on your soap sandwich.

Visualize

Imagine a picture of what you want to remember. Make a picture of it in your mind. If you take the time to imagine a picture, you are more likely to remember it.

If you are learning how to do something, picture yourself doing it. If you are trying to remember a telephone number or address, close your eyes and picture the number or address on a piece of paper.

The pictures can be movies. Make an imaginary movie of the route from where you are to where you are going to be picked up. In a big parking lot, make a movie of the route from the car to the store.

Why Remember?

Do you need to remember everything? Of course not. Why remember the ten things you need at the grocery store? Write them down, make a list. Why remember complicated directions? Write them down. Why remember where you put your glasses or the house keys? Put them in the same place every time you put them down. Why remember to take your morning medication? Train yourself to take it with breakfast. If you ate breakfast, you took your pill.

There is no reason to worry about forgetting something if there is a simple external reminder. We all have enough to do without trying to remember everything. The alarm clock that wakes you up can also remind you to call your mother at 8:30. The cookie timer can remind you to put the laundry in the dryer, or to take it out.

Notes remind us to do things, bells and buzzers do, too, so do physical changes like crossed fingers or bags of trash in front of doors.

Written Reminders

Shopping lists are the most common. Why try to remember that you need salt when you can write it on a list? Stick it to the refrigerator door with a magnet. Need to remember to go to the store? Tape the list to the front door, you will see it on the way out. Tape it to your purse, tape it to your glasses case. Remember that magnets can also hold lists in the car. If you smoke, write a list on your pack of cigarettes.

Calendars and appointment books are easy ways to remember things. Carry a little notebook and write down things you need to remember.

If you have trouble remembering who you met, what you did, or where you went, write it down in a notebook or pocket diary. If you sent a birthday card to your cousin, write it down. If you forget and begin to worry, go back and look. If you have an appointment with your doctor next Tuesday morning, go to next Tuesday's page and write it down. You may even put a reminder on next Monday's page--"Doctor tomorrow."

Notebooks, journals, and pocket diaries are a very easy way to remember things. They are much better than writing little notes to yourself and then losing them. Day Runner and Filo Fax make notebooks that hold calendars, to do lists, address pages, even business cards and calculators.

If you work with a computer, use the calendar. (In Windows, it is in the "Accessories" group.) The calendar has a built in alarm that can be set to ring as often as you like. The only drawback is that it is not portable.

Bells, Buzzers, and Noise

These can be as simple as alarm clocks and cookie timers. If you want to remember to do something at a certain time, use an alarm clock as a reminder; if your favorite program starts in twenty minutes, set the cookie timer.

Electronic watches often have built in alarms and stopwatches. Some watches have multiple alarms that can be set to go off at various times. These can be very useful ways to remember to take medications or to go to appointments.

Casio and Seiko make a wide range of watches that include timers and alarms. Timex has a new watch that can keep track of appointments, lists, phone numbers, and can be set to ring five times a day. It can even transfer the information to your computer.

Telephone answering machines are also handy. They are not just for people calling you. You can use them, too. If you want to remember to do something at home later, call and leave a message on your answering machine.

Physical Changes

The easiest way to remember to take the trash out is to put it directly in front of the door. If the bag is small enough, you can even hang it on the doorknob. If you have to remember to go down and get the laundry out of the dryer, leave the basket in the middle of the floor. (Or set the cookie timer.) To remember to call someone, put the phone in the middle of the floor. The books that need to go back to the library? On the floor in front of the door.

Talk to Yourself, Repeat Directions

Talking to yourself feels silly, but it forces you to pay attention. If you always worry about whether or not you locked the door on the way out, say out loud, "I am locking the door now," as you lock it. To really remember, look at the door again and say out loud, "I locked the door." Or you can say, "I turned off the coffee maker, the computer ... whatever." This technique is good for routine things, things that you do often, but can't always remember doing. Things like feeding the cat, like taking out the trash, or mailing letters. Do it, say you are doing it, and then look at it and say you did it. You will not worry about it later.

This also works for directions. The directions may say to go three blocks down Elm St., turn left onto Main, and turn right at the second light. Repeat the directions as you hear them. Then repeat them as you go. "I am turning left onto Main, I am turning right at the second light."

If the directions are long and complicated, write them down. If you do not have a pencil, concentrate on the first two or three turns and then ask someone else. Short-term memory is limited.

Lumping and Splitting

These are simple techniques to help remember lists of things. They work particularly well for numbers and lists of items.

Lumping involves groups similar or related items. If you are having a party and need to remember to invite a large group, break the list down into lumps of related people. Instead of one long list to remember, you may have three groups to remember--family, neighbors, and co-

workers. For a shopping list, lump related items together. Think of the list as salad, dinner, and desert.

Splitting is a related technique. Like lumping, it makes little ones out of big ones. 4017895594 is a bit too long to easily remember. 40-17-89-55-94 is a little easier. 401-789-55-94 turns it into a telephone number that may be more easily recalled. Area codes and exchanges are fairly easy to remember because they are familiar. Dividing the last four digits into two separate numbers makes them easier to remember. If you divide a ZIP Code, 06073 for example, into two numbers, 060 and 73, you may find it easier to remember.

Make a Word or a Sentence

Remember HOMES from earlier, Lakes Huron, Ontario, etc.? The word is made from the first letters of the Great Lakes' names. This can also work with things you think of when you do not have a pencil and paper handy. If the first letters do not make a word, maybe you can make a sentence out of the initials. Granted, this is a cumbersome process, but it can be useful.

In grade school we learned that Many Very Early Men Just Saw us do something that began with P. Those were the planets: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Pluto, and maybe one more. Grade school was a long time ago. Remembering that much of it for over forty years is a pretty good endorsement of the technique.

Every Kid Juggles Nine Fine China Rings Before Class. Those are the presidents since Truman--Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton. The sentences made this way are odd enough to be memorable.

The same technique of using initial letters works for groceries, steps in a process, or names. Apples, cheese, sauerkraut, and bananas can be rearranged and remembered as CABS.

Memory Tips and Tricks

Have confidence in yourself. If you convince yourself that your memory is bad, you may not even try to remember. If you are thinking, "I'll never remember all this," replace that thought with, "I may not remember all of it, but I will remember what is important."

Decide what you want to remember. Get mentally organized. If you are juggling six different things, you will probably forget one or two of them. Concentrate on what is important to remember. Do not try to remember everything.

Focus on what you want to remember. Pay attention to it, think about it. Pay special attention to landmarks when you are driving or walking. This will help sharpen your awareness.

Eliminate distractions. Recognize the limitations of short-term memory. If you have trouble remembering what you read, turn off the radio or television.

Don't rush. Give yourself time to think about what you are doing and what you need to do. Give yourself time to learn and to remember.

Use all your senses. Use as many senses as you can when you want to remember something. Say the words out loud, listen to them. Write it down and look at it twice. If you want to remember the size and shape of something, do not just look at it. Pick it up, feel it, weigh it in your hand. Smell it, taste it.

Organize yourself. Train yourself to put things in the same place every time. If your purse is always on the kitchen counter, you will not have to look for it. If the keys are on a hook by the door, they are not lost. If you always take a pill with breakfast, you will not need to wonder whether or not you took it.

Relax. Anxiety, tension, and stress interfere with memory. If you worry that you have forgotten something, you may become too anxious to recall it. Relax, breath deeply, it may come back to you.

Use your memory. Give it some exercise. Think about the people, places, and things that you have enjoyed. remember three things you see on the way home tonight.

Cross Your Fingers. If you are someplace where you can't write your self a note, concentrate on what you want to remember and cross your fingers. This simple trick works surprisingly well. Write yourself a note as soon as you can.

Names and Faces. If you are supposed to know someone and can't remember them, ask questions. "How are you?" "What have you been doing lately?" "Bring me up to date on your comings and goings?" If they talk long enough, they will almost certainly say something that will identify them as the woman from the hardware store, your neighbor's brother, whoever.

If you are with two people whose names you can't remember, get them to focus on each other. Say, "You two know each other, don't you?" If they do, one or the other of them will almost always say, "Oh, I've known so and so for weeks." Or they might say, "John and I are neighbors." This will get them talking to and about each other. They may say enough to remind you who they are.

Use Labels. If you cannot remember what kind of plant is on your windowsill or by the sidewalk, who gave you what for your birthday or anniversary, or the names of the people in photographs, label them. If it is a book, write on the flyleaf, "From cousin Sally, Birthday, 1996." If it is a plant, put a label on the pot. Write names, occasions, and dates on the back of photographs-- Mary, Sarah, and Nathan. Mary's first Communion, May 3, 1996. If it is a sweater, get a permanent pen and write on the label.

Birthdays and anniversaries. Put them in your address book under the names. Also put in the names of children, the husband or wife, and any other information you want to remember--illnesses, deaths in the family, special interests, where they went on vacation, their dog's name, anything that is special to them.

Copy the birthdays and anniversaries into your calendar. (You need a calendar, everybody needs a calendar.) Every year when you get a new calendar, transfer the birthdays and anniversaries.

Appointments and meetings. Put these into your calendar along with the birthdays and anniversaries. Write them in red or green ink so they will stand out. Ask your doctor or dentist's secretary to call you the day before your appointment. They will thank you for it, and remember you for your thoughtfulness.

Cars, stoves, and toasters. Keep a file for appliances, cars, heaters, air conditioners, furnaces, fans, anything that is likely to break down or need maintenance. File the sales slips, manuals, instructions, and any maintenance that has been done. Hang a tag on the furnace or air conditioner with instructions on changing the filter. Note on the tag the last time you changed the filter. Keep a maintenance record in the glove compartment to remind you to change the oil or check tires, radiator, or windshield washer.

Flowers and gardens. Keep a garden notebook. Write down what you planted, when you planted it, when it flowered or bore fruit, and any comments about how well it did. Next year you will not have to remember just exactly which variety of tomato or bean you had such success with.

Medications. Count out each day's pills ahead of time and separate each day's dose. Compartmentalized pillboxes can organize your medications by the day or week. All you need to do is look at the box. If the compartment is empty, you took the pills.

Calendars, Address Books and Pocket Organizers. There are huge varieties of pocket organizers. Some, like Day Runner and Filo Fax are small notebooks, others, made by Casio, Sharp, Rolodex, and Seiko are computerized. These will help keep track of appointments, meetings, birthdays, anniversaries, errands, and many of the other details of your life. Some of the electronic organizers can be programmed to buzz and show reminders, as well as holding names, addresses, notes, phone numbers, birthdays, anniversaries, appointments, and showing the time and date. There are voice-powered organizers that will hold up to 100 reminders, and 400 numbers, and 100 names. Need a phone

number? Say the name.

Features and prices range from \$25.00 to three or four hundred dollars. The best way to select one is to go to an office supply or electronic store and try them out. Be careful not to get one that is too complicated to be useful.

Notebooks. Take notes about things you want to remember. Do not worry about how it looks, it looks efficient.

Tape Recorders. If you have trouble remembering speeches, lectures, or instructions, record them. As a courtesy, you should get permission before taping anyone. You can also tape messages and reminders to yourself.

Side Effects of Medications

The following is general information and is not intended to apply to an individual. If you have questions or concerns about medications you may be taking, discuss them with a doctor who is familiar with your specific condition and medications. You may be able to change medications or schedule them to minimize the side effects.

Most people do not have problems with side effects. There may be a slightly higher rate of side effects with anti-epilepsy medications, but most people do not suffer serious side effects. Memory loss after a seizure is a specific and different issue and must be addressed in a way to meet the specific individual's need.

Some people do have side effects from antiepileptic medications. They usually involve mental speed, motor speed and coordination, short-term memory, and attention. Sometimes they involve the ability to retrieve and use information. Drugs such as phenobarbital, Primidone, and phenytoin, tend to cause side effects more often than Carbamazepine or valproate.

Valium and Klonopin are sedatives and can cause behavior problems in children. The most common side effect is hyperactivity.

The influence of antiepileptic drugs on learning and behavior is complex and varies with the individual. If you are concerned about side effects, discuss them with your doctor.

Aftermath of a Seizure

Aimlessly wandering,
unaware of my own lostness,
I recognize nothing.
Yet, I'm not afraid.

All others are strangers,
all are equally familiar.
Why not think everyone a friend?
I have no reason not to.

"What's your name?"
"What's the matter with you?"
"Are you on drugs or something?"
"Answer me!"

"Where do you live?"
"Is there someone I can call?"
"Talk to me."
Still no response. Then. . .

"What day is it?"
"What time is it?"
"Where am I?"

"My dad died several months ago.
don't you remember? You went to his funeral."
No doubt I did. . . But didn't.
The memory of it is gone.

Memories.
Such fragile things.
To be cherished. Treasured. And Kept.
If only you can keep them.

Mine are gone.
All of them? No.
Some of them? Yes.
Many of them? I don't know.

Yearning for lost memories,
missing pieces of my life,
I sense the incompleteness of Self,
unfinished puzzle that I am.

As reality sets in,
I start to cry.
A torrent of silent tears.
Inside.

Disoriented, I have a desperate need to know.

"How long did it last?"
"Did I take my medicine?"
These are the questions I always ask.
I don't even know I'm asking them.

My questions are needless.
What does it matter, how long I was out?
As for the medicine, I'm bound to have taken it.
I always do.

Tired afterwards, I rest.
Refurbished, I go on.
Life gives every appearance of normalcy,
That is, until the phone rings.

My husband says, "Did you do as I asked?"
I reply, "What did you ask me to do?"
"Nothing that can't wait."
He could see I'd already forgotten.

I encounter a friend,
inquire about a family member,
and come off as being callous -- even hard hearted --
rather than concerned.

"I give up."
"Why keep trying?"
"What's the use?"
Perhaps there is none.

In despair, my spirit dies.
But not forever.
I rise from the ashes.
A phoenix. Immortal. Renewed.

Timidly, yet determinedly,
I venture forth.
Wanting. . . trying. . .
to do all I can.

The earth continues in orbit,
day becomes night becomes day,
and life goes on.
I have no choice but to go on with it.

I do.

David Lassiter