

TOTAL RECALL



WHAT IF YOU HAD AN INCREDIBLY SHARP MEMORY?

keeping track of facts and experiences. "It also helps make everyday actions feel seamless, from organizing your kitchen to typing or creating a spreadsheet," says Charles A. Weaver III, Ph.D., professor and chair of the Department of Psychology and Neuroscience at Baylor University. Give your memory a boost and you'll also help your everyday productivity, focus, and problem-solving. Get ready to take a stroll down memory improvement lane.

You might imagine a world where everyone's name rolls off your tongue and you never wandered around a parking lot in search of your car again. But memory affects more than just

BOOST YOUR BRAIN POWER: 4 KEY WAYS

Strengthening memory is all about making sure your brain is working at full capacity—and that's actually pretty simple. "Research shows that little lifestyle habits can make a huge difference in your memory now and keep it from going downhill in the future," says Gary Small, M.D., coauthor of *2 Weeks to a Younger Brain* and director of the UCLA Longevity Center. "You can see improvements pretty quickly—often within a few weeks." So what are the most important habits? Start with these four:

1 GET YOUR HEART RATE UP.

Aerobic exercise stimulates the creation of neurons in the hippocampus, a key area for long-term memory, says Wendy Suzuki, Ph.D., author of *Healthy Brain, Happy Life* and professor of neural science and psychology at New York University. A good guideline to follow is the American Heart Association's exercise recommendation: 150 minutes per week of moderate exercise (brisk walking, jogging, biking) or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise (running, cycling class). But know that just one hour of cardio improves your ability to focus for up to two hours afterward. If you need some extra motivation to pound the pavement, try the Spotify running app, which detects your pace and chooses music to match.

2 HAVE A DRINK (OF COFFEE, THAT IS).

Caffeine goes beyond giving you a wake-up call: It can also enable you to store memories better. "Our theory is that caffeine blocks a receptor in the brain that could impair memory," says Michael Yassa, Ph.D., associate

professor of neurobiology and behavior at University of California, Irvine. The optimal amount is 200 milligrams a day—about what you’d get in one to two cups of coffee. Just remember to have it before 2 p.m.; otherwise you run the risk of disrupting sleep, a crucial component to memory.

3 KEEP STRESS IN CHECK. It’s no coincidence that during tense times you feel more forgetful. High levels of cortisol, a hormone your body produces when you’re stressed, make it tougher to recall things. “Chronic stress shrinks the hippocampus, one of the memory centers of the brain,” Small says. But many daily healthy habits—exercise, spending time with friends—help counteract cortisol’s negative effects. If you’re looking for a fun way to relax, DVR your favorite comedy. Just anticipating a future laugh can lower cortisol levels.

4 BECOME A CHATTERBOX. Social butterflies, pat yourselves on the back. Research shows that people who are social throughout the day tend to have better executive functioning skills, which includes working memory. Even 10 minutes of stimulating conversation with someone in your daily life—a coworker, your barista—can help give your memory a boost.

MAKING A MEMORY: WHAT REALLY HAPPENS?

▪ **STAGE 1: ENCODING** As soon as you learn a piece of information—a date, a name, directions—your brain breaks it up into chunks, and each fragment gets encoded, which happens by strengthening connections between neurons. You can enhance the encoding process by writing down the info, repeating it to yourself in your mind, or creating an image associated with it (more on that in “Mind Tricks” on page 136).

▪ **STAGE 2: STORAGE** Not everything you encode sticks around forever. Your brain stabilizes the memory, then moves it into long-term storage. Sleep is crucial here since that’s when you have a long stretch of downtime with no new information coming in. Two things that can disrupt the storage: Drinking too much alcohol (it prevents you from entering the deep sleep stage) and multitasking, which interrupts the process.

▪ **STAGE 3: RETRIEVAL** To access information you’ve encoded and stored, your brain activates the same patterns that were created during the encoding and storage stages. Your brain pulls the stored fragments together and fills in any gaps. If this sounds imperfect, it is. You can “remember” things that never happened if the gaps get filled in incorrectly.

1-MINUTE CHECK

Look at this list for 20 seconds, then look away and write down as many words as you can remember.

- THREAD
- PIN
- SEWING
- SHARP
- THIMBLE
- HAYSTACK
- HURT
- INJECTION
- EYE
- PRICKED

Compare your list with the one above to see how you did. “The majority of people will only recall about half of the words,” Dr. Weaver says. “And one of the most interesting things is that half the people will incorrectly remember *needle* being on the list, which it isn’t.”

SOURCE: Roediger, H. L. & McDermott, K. B. (1995). “Creating False Memories: Remembering Words Not Presented in Lists.” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 21, 803–814.

food for thought

What you eat matters! Consider working these foods into your regular rotation to help strengthen your memory.



SALMON AND WALNUTS: They’re particularly high in fatty acids, which are central to brain function. “Eating omega-3 fatty acids will promote healthier brain tissue and strengthen and maintain your memory,” says Preston Estep, Ph.D., author of *The Mindspan Diet* and director of gerontology at Harvard Medical School’s Personal Genome Project.



DARK LEAFY GREENS: “Lettuce, spinach, kale, collards, and other dark leafy greens are especially good sources of vitamin K and other nutrients that have a positive effect on your brain health,” Estep says.



BERRIES, RED WINE, AND CHOCOLATE: Your brain requires a huge amount of blood flow to operate, and these foods are all high in polyphenols and other compounds that help improve circulation, Estep says. “That’s why anything good for heart health is also good for your brain.”

“Activities that work your memory—a crossword puzzle, playing bridge—won’t hurt, but there’s no good proof they help with memory skills needed most in daily life.”

”

—CHARLES A. WEAVER III, PH.D.

THE TECH CONNECTION

To-do lists, appointment books, tying strings around your fingers: These are all little ways to jog your memory, aka retrieval cues. Now those tools are in one place on your smartphone. Here’s how to make the most of your phone.

NOTES

The note itself serves as a reminder, but pausing long enough to enter it also catalogs it into your brain, Dr. Weaver says. You might not even need to pull up the note later!

PHOTOS

Need to remember the address of your doctor’s office or the perfect gift for your husband you spied in a store? Snap a pic!

REMINDERS

The sound of an alarm jolts you into remembering what you need to do at that exact moment, but silent reminders that show up on your screen do the job, too.

mind tricks

Jotting down information is a great way to help your brain store it, but creating a quirky visual in your mind can be even more powerful. “Coming up with unique images associated with facts activates both the left and right hemispheres of your brain,” says Luis Angel Echeverria, a memory coach and author of *How to Remember Names and Faces*. “As a result, you focus more on exactly what you need to recall.” So how does this actually work?

The weirder the mental image, the better. **Try these tricks if you need to remember:**

▪ **A NAME** Let’s say you need to remember the name of a man named David Taylor. Imagine his face on Michelangelo’s statue of *David* with a tailor measuring him for clothes.

▪ **WHAT TO BUY AT THE STORE** Look around the room you’re in and visualize the

items you need to buy interacting with your surroundings. So if you’re sitting in your office and need to buy milk, pasta, and laundry detergent, imagine milk and pasta spilling all over your laptop, and you trying to clean it up with laundry detergent. That odd story will make sure you pick up everything on your list.

▪ **YOUR PARKING SPOT** Most big lots have location markers, so create an image using the number and letter. If you parked near C1, imagine a cat holding a pencil vertically so it looks like the number one.

▪ WHERE YOU PUT YOUR KEYS

Visualize your keys doing a dance as you put them down—maybe they do a kick line on their way to the dish they’re going in. If you need a little extra help, try the Tile tracking device (\$25; thetileapp.com)—a little GPS tracker you hook onto your key chain. Open the app, and the tracker beeps and shows when you’re getting closer. ■

