Memory and Brain Injury

The University of Washington TBI Model System and the University of Washington Medical Center

What is memory?

"Memory" is your brain taking in, keeping, recalling, and using information. A brain injury can affect any of these areas of memory. A brain injury can also make it hard to learn and remember things.

Why does a brain injury affect memory?

A brain injury often damages parts of the brain that are needed for taking in, storing, and retrieving information. A brain injury also can make pre-injury memory problems worse. But some of these new memory problems will improve with time.

What happens with memory problems?

Some people with brain injury have a hard time remembering past events such as a telephone message or conversation. It can also be hard to remember future events such as an appointment. People might forget things they need to do during the day. While everyone forgets some things sometimes, people with memory problems forget things more often. They may also forget specific types of information. Most times, long-time memories about family and childhood are not affected.

What can make memory problems worse?

- Lack of sleep or being tired.
- Poor health.
- Some medicine side effects.
- Stress or illness.
- Strong emotions, such as anxiety, depression, or anger.

When should I ask for help with memory problems?

Talk with your health care provider if:

- You have a sudden change in your memory.
- Your memory is getting worse.
- Your memory problems make you unsafe.
- Your memory problems are affecting your work or home life.
- Your memory problems are affecting your ability to care for yourself or your family.
- Your memory problems are affecting your health.
- You feel like you need help from a memory specialist.
- Family or friends are noticing you have a memory problem.

What can I do about memory problems?

Try a suggestion from this list and see how it works for you. Give it a good chance to work before you try a new idea.

Use reminders:

- Write information in one place, such as in a journal or calendar. Little sticky notes can get lost easily.
- Make a journal or photo album to help remember things that have happened in the past.
- Make a daily log of the things you have done each day.
- If you live with other people, label items that are yours so you can find them more easily.
- Keep a “cheat sheet” of important information in your wallet.
- Use signs, labels, or cue cards to remind you where objects are located.
- Use a checklist to remind you of the steps of a task, or a list of items, such as what you need to take when you leave the house.
- Use checklists to help you remember what you have done.
- Focus on one thing at a time.
- Buy appliances that shut off automatically.
- Use a pill organizer to organize your medicines.

Set a routine:

- Have a plan for each day and each week so you remember important things like taking your pills and going grocery shopping.
- Have one place for each thing in your house and always put it there.
- Use a calendar and post it where you will see it often. Check it every night before you go to bed so you know what you are doing the next day.
- At the end of the day, check off the day on your calendar to help you remember what the date is.

Let someone else remember:

- Ask your bank to automatically pay your bills or get a protective payee to help handle your money.
- Use different kinds of signals throughout the day to remind you of appointments or other activities. For example, use a TV or light timer, program an electronic organizer or cell phone, or use a beeping watch.
- Have a family member take notes during meetings with your doctor or health care provider.

Learn more effectively:

- Break down new information into small parts. Learn the small parts instead of trying to learn everything at one time.
- Think of ways to connect new and old information.

Where can I learn more about memory?

Ask a professional:

- Your doctor or health care provider.
- Your psychologist.
- An occupational therapist or a speech and language pathologist. They can give you ideas on ways to make the most of your memory.

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