

Rocky Mountain Memory Center

Strategies for Everything

Strategies for Better Recall, Emotional Control and Living Life

Most people think that good memory means good retrieval. But actually, that's putting the cart before the horse. Good memory and emotional control starts with use of strategic learning tools that build healthy habits and daily routines.

A. Strategies for Improved Working Memory

- **Stabilize daily routines:** Maintaining a regular schedule of daily activities, including timing of sleep, meals and medications is critical to maintaining one's cognitive and emotional well-being. Developing daily habits can facilitate brain recovery by reducing some of the burden on the working memory.
- **Cut down on irrelevant information.** Retention problems can be reduced if staff and family members would keep their talking points brief, clear and specific. It's also a good idea to write down information in a power point style, with major header followed by 3 sub points. Imagine you're giving a presentation to a busy executive. You have eliminated the filler although not necessarily the complexity level.
- **Know your strong suits:** Observe whether you may have greater difficulty at certain times of day depending upon fatigue or pain-related issues. Some people with working memory issues seem to do better in the morning for these reasons. Therefore, it may be helpful to schedule more demanding tasks in the morning.
- **Multimodal presentation:** Combine verbal instructions with visual cues, demonstrations and hands on guidance when introducing new material. A multimodal presentation reduces the burden on the working memory.
- **Be aware of distractions:** If you find you tend to become distracted easily, try rescheduling important activities that we can't afford to make a mistake to when we can be guaranteed peace and quiet.
- **Avoid multitasking:** Perhaps the best advice to reduce the load on our working memory is to avoid multitasking or doing more than one task at a time. A common, though misguided, belief is that we are being time efficient by completing two tasks at the same time. In reality, multitasking involves switching our attention rapidly between two tasks which is not the same thing as simultaneous performance. It is only successful to the degree that only one task requires our attention or that both tasks are familiar or well practiced.

It's a balancing act that does not allow for our attention and limited working memory to be drawn away by competing environmental distractions or internal preoccupations, such as feeling anxious, worried or depressed.

B. Behavioral Strategies for Better Recall

When we are tired, distracted, anxious or angry we are not mindfully engaged. These bits of negative thoughts and emotions pile up and crowd out the limited space available for encoding new

memories. Information that is not rehearsed or in some way actively encoded will fade in as little as 10 seconds.

How to learn to go with the flow

If you find that it is difficult to adjust to a new situation or if you see that you tend to get stuck in seeing a problem the same way, you might benefit from some of these suggestions:

- **Recognize that letting go of the reins can be hard:** Everybody likes some predictability in life. However, change can be more difficult for some than others. Unfortunately, aging tends to further deplete stores of neurochemicals that allow us to shift mental gears and go with flow. Be aware that for those who may have always struggled with adaptability and life resiliency, a change in health, lifestyle, and relationships can cause significant internal resistance and distress. Be patient and go slowly in making adjustments.
- **Don't overdo:** Resist the urge to overdo. You run the risk of depleting your body and it will take you longer to complete a goal.
- **Stay present in the moment:** Keep your attention on the here and now. Stop looking in the rear view mirror and for fires on the horizon.
- **Have a mental map for your day:** Check your electronic schedule or day planners at the beginning and end of each day. Being able to anticipate the sequence of daily events, as well what needs to be tweaked tomorrow based on the outcome of today's events, can help you feel more in control and prepared to deal with life's changing scenarios.
- **Head's up:** Prominently display a calendar or whiteboard in a communal area. Make sure family members get into the habit of putting appointments, regularly scheduled activities or planned events that involve you on the board. Having adequate time to prepare reduces frustration and anxiety. A friendly reminder of an upcoming event doesn't hurt either.
- **Timers:** Try using a timer on your computer, watch or cell phone to alert you to the passing of time. Having a nice Gregorian chime to signal that you need to change focus from one task to another can be all you need to stay on course throughout the day.
- **Time out:** For those who tend to be more emotionally sensitive, schedule rest breaks, leisure activities and exercise into the day. Be mindful that each task carries different demands. High demand tasks, which may be new, complex or stressful, should be alternated with more routine, self-motivating or meditative type activities.
- **One thing at a time:** Attention involves both the ability to keep focused on the information you want to keep active as well as the ability to avoid becoming distracted by worrisome, irrelevant thoughts. Sometimes simply writing a fleeting thought or concern down in your day planner will allow you to refocus to the task at hand.

How to manage your emotions

Our emotions broadcast to ourselves and others what we are experiencing. For some people, emotions can change as rapidly as the Colorado weather forecast; sunny and breezy one minute, stormy the next.

- **A, B, C's:** It is frequently more helpful to focus on the *antecedents*, or triggers, of certain *behaviors* than to focus on the *consequences*. Trying to avoid certain thoughts or limiting contact with certain people or situations that we know will upset us can be easier than dealing with runaway emotions "once the horse is out of the barn".

- **Put down the power saw when you're tired:** Recognize that when you're tired you are not in control of your frontal lobe. You will not be able to access the necessary strategic problem-solving skills to successfully navigate your way through the mine fields of an emotionally charged thought or situation. Rather than stew about, or impulsively decide to "set the record", you should immediately head over to your day planner and make an appointment with your higher self. By setting an exact time and jotting down just a few notes, you can release it for the moment and not harm yourself in the process. You can get back to it when you are better able to access your higher order reasoning skills.
- **Don't take things personally:** Try to keep in mind that nothing others do is because of you. What other's say and do is a projection of their own reality; you're just the movie screen. You can prevent needless suffering when you become immune to the opinions and actions of others.
- **Release the need to be right:** If you are a secondary character in other people's story then what others may say or think about you is a projection of their reality. Another's point of view or truth does not have to be yours. Let it go.
- **Always do your best:** Accept that your best is relative to circumstances outside of your control. Your best is going to change from moment to moment. It will change due to aging, emotional duress or physical illness. By promising yourself to simply do your best, you can avoid self-judgment and regret.
- **Increase organization and predictability in your living space:** De-clutter the environment to limit distractions. Less organized and unscheduled settings create confusion and unnecessary stress. Take a critical appraisal of your resources including time, energy and money. Prioritize your activities and commitments accordingly.
- **Hit the pause button:** Learn delay strategies such as counting before responding, terminating conversation, or leaving a situation to cool off.
- **Recognize your own warning signs:** Identify behaviors which can tip you off that you are angry or upset. Like a thermometer, rank the intensity level of your smoke signals. Recognize when you get into the "red zone" and identify specific "stop and think" methods to diffuse your feelings in the moment.
- **Establish clear boundaries:** Set clear rules and behavior expectations for yourself and others. Knowing in advance what is and is not acceptable behavior may provide a sense of predictability and feeling of control over the situation. In turn, it will help you recognize warning signs sooner so you can put your counter action in place.
- **Build a support network:** Identify friends, family or a clergy member with whom you can talk about a situation that provokes feelings of sadness or anger. Have someone who can provide constructive feedback and an alternate way of looking at and handling a problem. Individual therapy can provide another beneficial avenue, so ask your doctor for a referral.

How to train your brain to get going again

- **Mental inertia is not laziness or depression:** It is important to distinguish between mental fatigue, personality traits and an actual psychiatric problem. Mental inertia results from neurochemical changes to the brain associated with any number of issues, including aging, cardiovascular disease, infections, a sleep disorder or the use of pain medications. It is not a matter of not wanting to do something as much as it is "brain fog" and mental fatigue.
- **Stabilize daily routines:** Maintaining a regular schedule of daily activities, including timing of sleep, meals and medications is critical to maintaining one's cognitive and emotional well being. Developing daily habits can facilitate brain recovery by reducing some of the burden on the working memory.

- **Anchor points:** Daily routines can be very helpful for those who may have trouble “getting going” with their day or starting on a task. Establishing habitual activities can serve as an anchor for the brain from which one can “hook” on other activities. Lack of scheduled activities makes it very difficult to get anything accomplished.
- **Sleep habits:** Begin preparing for a successful day by establishing evening routines. The brain consolidates information into well organized and formed memory during sleep. Sleep is essential towards reducing thought processing problems and mood disorders. Set a regular time to go to bed every night. You should aim for 8 hours of sleep. If your regular sleep time is 10:00 pm, you should be thinking of wind down activities by 8:00 pm.
- **Not knowing where to start:** Problems with initiation can frequently be related to feeling overwhelmed with the task. Tasks that seem too big or lack organization are more likely to be avoided. Breaking tasks into smaller, more doable steps, prioritizing the steps and organizing them onto a timeline can reduce this sense of not knowing where to begin.
- **Daytime drowsiness:** Try to increase overall level of arousal with frequent short breaks including power walks, stimulating music, group interaction, housework chores, or some variation in pace or outside stimulation to restore attention.
- **All tasks are not equal:** It is important to appreciate that different tasks are inherently more interesting, fun or easier to complete. Tasks that are self motivating or well understood may require less external prompting.
- **To do lists:** Some people benefit from a “memo to self” as an external cue to begin an activity. Keeping a binder or “cook book” with lists of steps can guide you through an activity and make sure you don’t forget that essential ingredient.

C. Strategies for Life

Encoding your memories for easy recall requires being well organized. *The reality is well organized people will have fewer problems with remembering intentions.* All of us, whether we’re at increased risk for attentional failures or not, could benefit from putting more effort into being mindful, planning ahead to identify memory cues and practicing these new habits. It may require some lifestyle changes. Remembering is a skill; a skill you can learn, relearn or improve at any age.

Planning

How do we actually accomplish long range goals? You have heard the familiar saying, “Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans”. This may be true; but, having a road map before jumping in the car will increase the chances of reaching your destination (or at least come close before running out of gas). Whether your goal is to get your home office better organized or plan a trip to Italy, you will encounter fewer setbacks by outlining your purpose and how you will accomplish each step in your new venture in advance.

- **Budget:** Always begin any project by knowing how much money, time and energy you have to invest. If you plan on relying on another’s assistance, make sure you get their input at this stage. How much are they willing to commit to your goal? Make sure you include them in every stage of the decision making process to prevent communication snafus.
- **Clearly state what you want to accomplish:** How can you recognize success or failure without a description? Even more important, if your last project turned out less than successful, what changes do you need to make during the initial planning phase to ensure a better outcome?

- **Identify essential tasks:** Sometimes referred to as a “to-do” or a “punch list”. A project will be better understood and run more smoothly if you break it down into smaller, more doable chunks before starting.
- **Prioritize:** Use a simple outline to layout subtasks and steps. Begin with a major header to identify each subtask. Follow up with a series of critical steps. Next, rank the steps you wish to be completed in sequential order.
- **Establishing timelines for meeting target points.** Include a deadline for the overall project, as well as timelines for each subtask or step of the project.
- **Project evaluation:** Identify ways to keep a record of your performance and objectively measure your progress.

How To Do Anything Better

- **What’s the question?** Before you know where to begin, you have to make sure you know what is being asked of you. Are you sure you heard the speaker correctly? It’s a good idea to clarify the directions before making any move: write them down word for word so you don’t forget.
- **What’s the point?** Make sure you know the objective or purpose of the activity. What is it you are supposed to be doing? Make sure you can verbalize the concept in your own words: Write it down. Sometimes we can confuse where we have been with where we are going.
- **Consider all of your options:** Step back and take your time. Analyze things and look at patterns before you make a move. That’s why all the best coaches look at training tapes before game day. Can you see any relationships between the items to help form your assumptions?
- **Narrow down your options:** Can you rule out any choices? Increase your odds of being right by carefully eliminating options.
- **Identify your game plan:** So what will your strategy be? Write it down. Life is fast paced; sometimes we can forget our game plan when tired, bored or confronted with distractions. It’s a good idea to have something in writing to refer back to in order to prevent slipping off track.
- **Don’t jump to conclusions:** Were you right? Does your response confirm your hypothesis or do you still need more data? Understand the difference between *correlation* and *causation*. Just because your response resulted in one positive outcome, it could have been a lucky guess. Keep tabs on your strategy: It’s only a solution if it gets you the results you want in each situation.
- **Identify a cause:** Were you wrong? No big deal. Take a time out. Don’t feel pressured to try something else immediately. Before you jump right onto plan B, you should be able to pinpoint why your initial assumption was off base.
- **Check your assumptions:** Are you framing the problem correctly? If you start out with the wrong premise, the answer can be right in front of your nose and you could still miss it. You just didn’t see it from that angle.
- **Stay optimistic:** In life we frequently will need to try a lot of strategies before we hit on the right one. You know what they say: “You have to crack a lot of eggs to make an omelet.”
- **Go back to the drawing board.** Try another option: Write it down. It’s important to keep a list of what options you have tried in the past so you don’t pick up the wrong tool again.

Becoming a Master Juggler

Have you ever wondered how some people become a master juggler? Not the flaming torch, bowling pin or knife wielding sort of juggler, but a skillful puzzle master, piecing together different roles in their life. These yeti masters will tell you the trick is taking the time to figure out your day the night before. By reviewing your day planner, making necessary changes and getting your stuff together, you won't feel so overwhelmed the next day.

- **Morning review:** You are encouraged to begin your day by taking your *emotional temperature*. It will help set a productive tone for the day. Check in with yourself and assess your physical and mental state. If you woke up feeling fatigued, out of sorts, or if you need to juggle for some unforeseen obstacle, this is the time for triage. Can you reschedule something or ask a family member for help? The first step in learning to be kind to self is to give yourself permission to adjust to changes in life circumstances.
- **Power hour:** Most people are aware that certain times of day make us feel more alert and energetic. However, we can also experience similar rhythms in moods. Learn to recognize when you feel most positive, creative and optimistic. Then, schedule tasks that require higher order problem-solving into these time slots. Recognize that these hours are precious and fleeting; you will need to save them for tasks that are of the highest importance to you.
- **Wind down time:** Begin preparing for a successful day by establishing evening routines. Remember, it is just as important to establish evening habits as it is to have early morning routines...sometimes more important. What you do the evening before can help you plan for a successful day. Wind Down routines could include listening to relaxing music, reading or listening to books on tape, drinking tea or engaging in evening meditation exercise.
- **A good night's rest:** The brain consolidates information into well organized and formed memory during sleep. Sleep is essential towards reducing worry and other mood disorders. Set a regular time to go to bed every night. You should aim for 8 hours of sleep. If your regular sleep time is 10:00 pm, you should be thinking of wind down activities by 8:00 pm.

If you have trouble sleeping, analyze what you are doing before bed. Avoid working on physically, emotionally or cognitively demanding activities after dinner. Instead, get into a habit of writing your worries down on a To Do list or journaling thoughts and events before bed. You can release them knowing you have a plan for the next day.

Tips for a Balanced Lifestyle

Keep these pointers in mind when scheduling daily activities:

- **Prioritize:** By carefully selecting a limited number of activities, you can increase the likelihood of a successful outcome. Try selecting just one activity each day from your project list.
- **Balance:** Alternate high demand, new or complex activities with low demand, rote or well rehearsed daily routines. Factors that can make a task more demanding include learning something new, complex or lengthy. Tasks that require planning, organization and attention to detail can also be more draining. Any of these factors can result in increased risk for inattentive errors.
- **Pay attention to environmental demand:** An environment that is noisy or involves pressure to perform quickly and under tight deadlines will take more of a toll on us. It is important to identify tasks in which we are more likely to make careless errors. If we can't afford to make a mistake, then we need to reschedule the task when we can be guaranteed peace and quiet.

- **Multitasking:** While low demand tasks like housework or cooking may leave us fatigued, they are not as mentally taxing. Because we don't have to direct as much attentional energy to the task, we frequently pair these tasks with trying to perform another activity. Multitasking is only successful if you perform two low demand tasks. For example, cooking an easy recipe and doing the dishes. However, if you are making a new or complicated meal and have a lot on your mind, guests in the kitchen or commotion going on in another room, then don't be surprised if you leave out an ingredient in your meal.
- **Variety:** Like your diet, you want a balanced selection of activities that include high and low demand, exercise, meditative and social stimulation. Imagine you are at a buffet line and have been given a dessert plate instead of a platter. Your goal is to select the 3 most satisfying items from all the yummy things being offered. Remember, it is okay to go back for more once you have finished your initial serving.
- **Commitment:** By scheduling the time for a specific activity into your calendar, you increase the likelihood that it will become a reality.
- **Be realistic:** By viewing your family, work and personal commitments at the same time, you can determine what will realistically fit into your week.