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A neurologist's tips to protect your memory

There are many stumbling blocks in life that can make you more forgetful. But there are also exercises to help bolster your memory

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As we age, our memory declines. However, according to Dr Richard Restak, a neurologist and clinical professor at George Washington Hospital University School of Medicine and Health, US, decline is not necessarily inevitable.

According to Restak, working memory, which is tied to intelligence, concentration and achievement, is the most critical, and exercises to strengthen it should be practiced daily. But bolstering all memory skills, he added, is key to warding off later memory issues.

Restak points out many stumbling blocks that can lead to lost or distorted memories. Ultimately, “we are what we can remember”, he said. Here are some of Restak’s tips for developing and maintaining a healthy memory:

Pay more attention

Some memory lapses are simply attention problems. For instance, if you’ve forgotten the name of someone you met at a cocktail party, it could be because you were talking with several people at the time and you didn’t properly pay attention when you heard it.

“Inattention is the biggest cause for memory difficulties,” Restak said. “It means you didn’t properly encode the memory.”

One way to pay attention when you learn new information, such as a name, is to visualise the word.

Find everyday memory challenges

There are many memory exercises that you can integrate into everyday life. Restak suggested composing a grocery list and memorising it. When you get to the store, don’t automatically pull out your list (or your phone) — instead, pick up everything according to your memory. “Try to see the items in your mind,” he said, and only consult the list at the end.

If you’re not going to the store, try memorising a recipe. Restak added that frequent cooking is a great way to improve working memory.

Those who drive can also get in the car and navigate through the streets from memory. A 2020 study suggested that people who used GPS more frequently showed a steeper cognitive decline in spatial memory three years later.

Play games

Games such as bridge and chess are great for memory, but so are simpler games. For instance, Restak’s “favourite working memory game” is 20 Questions — in which a group (or a single person) thinks of a person, place or object, and the other person, the questioner, asks 20 questions with a yes-or-no answer. Because to succeed, he said, the questioner must remember all of the previous answers in order to guess the correct answer.

Beware of technology

Among Restak’s “sins of memory”, two are associated with technology. First is what he calls “technological distortion”. Storing everything on your phone means that “you don’t know it”, he said, which can erode our own mental abilities.

Secondly, technology often takes our focus away from the task at hand. “In our day, the greatest impediment of memory is distraction,” Restak wrote.

Many modern apps have been designed with the aim of addicting the person using them. As a result, we are often distracted by them. People today can check their email while talking with a friend or walking down the street. All of this impedes our ability to focus on the present moment, which is critical for encoding memories.

Work with a mental health professional

Your mood plays a big role in what you do or do not remember.

Depression, for instance, can greatly decrease memory. Among “people who are referred to neurologists for memory issues, one of the biggest causes is depression”, Restak said.

Your emotional state affects the kind of memories you recall. The hippocampus (or memory entry centre) and the amygdala (the part of the brain that manages emotions) are linked — so “when you’re in a bad mood, or depressed, you tend to remember sad things”, Restak said. Treating depression — either chemically or via psychotherapy memory.

— also often restores