

The seven common causes of forgetfulness

Written by meg sibal, m.d.
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WHILE annoying but essentially harmless age-related memory impairment is common, pinpointing the cause isn't easy — however, considering common and often reversible causes of memory problems could lead to a more productive discussion with your physician, says the June 2015 issue of the Harvard Medical School Harvard Men's Health Watch.

"Anyone concerned about memory should talk with a doctor for further evaluation," says Dr. David Hsu, a geriatric psychiatrist with the Center for Alzheimer Research and Treatment at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Women's Hospital.

"Having an honest discussion about memory and getting tested may help open up discussions about other areas of health too."

These common causes of forgetfulness are offered to help in the evaluation of memory slips:

1) Fatigue — Simple fatigue can dull your memory and the root cause may be a medical condition, says the health letter. Although everybody gets pooped out from time to time, persistent serious fatigue is not normal — perhaps an existing medical problem needs more attention or that an evaluation for a new condition is warranted.

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2) Medications — Medications can affect memory — especially those that cause sedation — including tranquilizers, antidepressants, medications for urinary problems, and over-the-counter sleep aids.

3) Lack of restful sleep — This can also make you more forgetful. Knowing the nature of the sleep disturbance is important because it determines the remedy — for instance, do you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep?; do you sleep a normal period of time but still feel tired and unrefreshed the next morning?: Tell your doctor.

4) Exercise — It's obvious that a physical workout that gets your heart pumping and oxygen-rich blood flowing to the brain leaves you alert and mentally sharp. Also, studies found preliminary evidence that regular, moderate exercise stimulates brain regions involved in memory function — which may explain why individuals who exercise regularly experience less memory loss with aging, although research on this question is ongoing.

5) Stress — Mood disturbances can also have a big impact on memory — for instance, persistent and bothersome stress or anxiety impairs memory because it makes it harder for you to concentrate and lock new information and skills into memory.

6) Clinical depression — Memory impairment is a common symptom of clinical depression, along with sadness, lack of drive, poor concentration, and less pleasure in things that you ordinarily enjoyed. If you have any signs of serious depression, talk to a doctor.

7) Alcohol — Alcohol reduces memory performance — at the same time, tolerance for drinking may drop with aging, so consider cutting back a bit if your typical alcohol intake leaves you impaired, says the health letter.

These simple but proven tricks can aid your memory recall:

- Follow a routine — Leave your wallet, keys, mobile phone, glasses, etc., in the same places every day.

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- Write it down — A pocket notebook or small digital voice recorder can take the burden off your brain to remember details, especially names and dates.
- Do one thing at a time — Multi-tasking is a myth because the brain can really only do one thing at a time — overtasking leads to forgetfulness.
- Seek silence — Noisy or busy environments can make it harder to understand, memorize and recall new information.
- Learn it twice — Memories become more durable when you circle back and lock the same information another time.
- Create cues — The classic example of this memory trick is to put your prescriptions next to your toothbrush to prompt you to take morning or evening medications.

Since a perceived change in your memory performance may simply be due to the well-documented slowdown in thinking speed with aging, give your brain a break and take a little more time to recall facts and to commit new ones to memory — getting frustrated with memory slips won't make them stop; actually, it could make it harder to remember things, the health letter concludes.