



# MEMORY

Everyone has experienced at some time the frustration that results from not remembering where the car key are, where the car is parked, or the name of a familiar person. And as we grow older we develop a greater tolerance for more frequent “memory lapses.” What is important to recognize, however, is when memory loss requires special attention. Usually, when forgetfulness begins to affect a person’s ability to carry on normal daily activities, it becomes a cause for concern.

There are many reasons why memory can be impaired. Minor factors, such as alcohol, depression, medication, vision and/or hearing loss, often can be controlled or eliminated. Major factors usually include brain injury due to an accident, stroke, or tumor; dementia; and Age Associated Memory Impairment (AAMI).

**Age Associated Memory Impairment**, referred to in the literature as AAMI, is a term health professionals use to describe memory difficulties that occur with age. AAMI can be more noticeable when a person is under pressure, and later when the person is more relaxed the forgotten material is easily remembered. It is important to realize that treatment cannot reverse the underlying impairment. But learning strategies such as using association, using reminders and notes, allowing more time to remember, and saying messages or names over and over out loud can be helpful.

**Dementia** is not an inevitable part of the aging process. It is an actual disease process that causes increasing difficulty in the ability to use

words, manipulate numbers, solve problems, and use reasoning and judgment. In contrast to other types of memory impairment, compensatory strategies can be a temporary benefit with dementia, but eventually are of no use.

Memory problems can be caused by injury to the brain. There are several structures within the brain that are involved with memory and damage to any of these can impair memory performance.

**Amnesia** is a term that is often associated with a memory impairment. It literally means “without memory”. Realistically, however, no one forgets everything so it is used to loosely define some failure in the memory system. When the brain is severely injured, usually in a traumatic way there are terms used to describe the symptoms of amnesic condition:

- Retrograde amnesia is memory loss of events following a brain injury
- Antegrade amnesia” is memory loss of events just prior to a brain injury.
- Post traumatic amnesia” is usually a temporary failure to create new memory and learning after a brain injury.

Memory impairment can become a major obstacle in the rehabilitation process, so careful study and testing of it is important. Testing can decide what strengths and weaknesses exist for remembering different types of information. For example, can a person remember visual information such as printed words and people’s faces? Or auditory information such as verbal directions, names, and musical tunes?

Testing also describes how functional the memory is for remembering past events called “long term memory”, and for recent or immediate events called “short term memory”. In most cases memory for events that happened a long time ago is

better than for what happened yesterday. And memory for skills that were practiced a great deal, such as playing the piano or driving a car, may be better than remembering a schedule for the day.

It is useful to remember that there are three stages involved in the memory process. The learning stage is when and how new information is processed. The storage stage is when and how the information is filed away in the brain for later use.

The recall stage is when and how the stored material is later called up for use. Problems can occur at any and all of these stages. It is known that improving the storage stage is very difficult, but working on the learning and recall stages can have positive results.

## HINTS FOR CAREGIVERS

1. Though some people cannot remember for “psychological reasons”, this is rare. For most people with memory problems it isn’t that they will not remember, it is usually that they cannot remember.
2. Reassure your loved ones that memory problems do not mean senility or lack of intelligence. No one’s memory is perfect.
3. Sometimes by simply reducing stress and anxiety there can be a positive effect.
4. Learn the facts about the patient’s type of memory impairments. Then emphasize what can be learned and what works, rather than what doesn’t work.
5. Being “oriented” can make a person feel more secure and confident. Rehearsing the date, day and hour (orientation of time), where one is (orientation of place), and who frequent and familiar people are (orientation of person) can improve memory.
6. Help improve concentration, as this aids new learning. Reduce competing forms of

input, like TV and radio, so that the mind doesn’t wander.

7. Simplify information we expect the person to remember. Explanations and directions can be reduced to essential information.
8. Use two forms of input, not just one. Sometimes showing a person something, along with a verbal or written explanation, can reinforce a concept.
9. Reduce the amount of things that must be remembered.
10. Make sure the person understands the material to be learned by asking to have it repeated. Material that does not make sense to the individual cannot be learned effectively.
11. Help the person link new information with what is already known. It might make better sense.
12. Organize information to be learned into categories, sequences or lists that can be referred to often.
13. Do not demand an immediate response to questions. Allow extra time for processing. By supplying information too quickly, there is no chance to exercise compensatory strategies like “scanning” and “searching”.
14. Learn from a therapist how the patient can best be “cued” or given hints to help themselves. Cues must be given at the right time and in the right form to be effective.
15. Using aids and devices can relieve the stress of “keeping everything in your head.” Tape recorders, calendars, memory books, and sophisticated day planners can be helpful when used correctly.