

# EXERCISE TO IMPROVE SHORT-TERM MEMORY

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**Brain Coach Answers: How can I improve my short-term memory? Is there a daily exercise I can do to improve it?**

**Q: How can I improve my memory? Is there a daily exercise I can do to improve it?**

**A:** The most important component of memory is **attention**. By choosing to attend to something and focus on it, you create a personal interaction with it, which gives it personal meaning, making it easier to remember.

Elaboration and repetition are the most common ways of creating that personal interaction. **Elaboration** involves creating a rich context for the experience by adding together visual, auditory, and other information about the fact. By weaving a web of information around that fact, you create multiple access points to that piece of information. On the other hand, repetition drills in the same pathway over and over until it is a well-worn path that you can easily find.

One common technique used by students, is actually not that helpful. Mnemonic techniques of using the first letter of each word in a series won't help you remember the actual words. It *will* help you remember the order of words you already know. The phrase **My Very Energetic Mother Just Screamed Utter Nonsense** can help you remember the order the planets in our solar system, but it won't help you recall the individual planet names: **Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune**.

These techniques do help you improve your memory on a behavioral level, but not on a fundamental brain structure level. The main reason it gets harder for you to learn and remember new things as you age is that your brain's processing speed slows down as you get older. It becomes harder to do more than one thing at the same time, so it's easier to get confused. Your brain may also become less flexible, so it's harder to change learning strategies in mid-stream. All these things mean it becomes harder to focus. So far, there's nothing you can do to change your brain's processing speed, but there are techniques you can use to increase your learning performance, even if your processing speed has slowed.

## **Focus**

Alertness, focus, concentration, motivation, and heightened awareness are largely a matter of attitude. Focus takes effort. In fact, most memory complaints have nothing to do with the actual ability of the brain to remember things. They come from a failure to focus properly on the task at hand.

If you want to learn or remember something, concentrate on just that one thing. Tune out everything else. The harder the task, the more important it is to tune out distractions. (If someone tells you they can do their homework better with the TV or radio on, don't believe it. Any speech or speech-like sounds automatically use up part of your brain's attention capacity, whether you are aware of it or not.) In other words, it can be hard to do more than one thing at once, and it naturally gets harder as you get older. The solution is to make more of an effort not to let yourself get distracted until you've finished what you have to do.

**Strategy:**

When you learn something new, take breaks so that the facts won't interfere with one another as you study them. If you've ever been to a movie double feature, you know that you'll have a hard time remembering the plot and details of the first movie immediately after seeing the second. Interference also works the other way. Sometimes when your friend gets a new telephone number, the old one will still be so familiar to you that it's hard to remember the new one.

**Engage**

Your brain remembers things by their meaning. If you spend a little effort extra up front to create meaning, you'll need less effort later to recall it. When you read or hear a word you don't already know — for example, "phocine" — your brain has to work harder. First, you have to remember how to spell it long enough to look it up in a dictionary. There, you'll see it means "seal-like" and it's pronounced "fo-sine." Now picture a seal in your mind and repeat the word aloud. Even say "Fo! Fo! Fo!" aloud like a seal barking. The sound of the word, its spelling, the image of a seal, and the barking all work together to form memory links. The more links the better to help you trigger the word later on, when you want to use it to describe, say, a sunbather in a black one-piece.

**Strategy:**

Say you're on vacation in Maui, staying at a beachfront hotel in room #386. How do you remember that? Method number one: Pause for a minute to take a mental snapshot of your room door viewed from an outside vantage point. Then, when you return to that same vantage point, you'll know which door is yours. Method number two: Stop and think for a minute. You're on the third floor, which is the top floor of the hotel, so the number 3 is easy. Now for the 8 and the 6. The expression "to eighty-six" comes to mind — as in to get rid of, do away with, or throw out. As in what your boss will do to you if you decide to spend an extra week in Maui. Done.