

CAPSULE

Children of Aging Parents Newsletter

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How to Remember More, Longer, and Make Your Memories Easier to Access

By Barbara E. Friesner



As a generational coach and because of the my mother's dementia, I'm often asked by people who are concerned about their "intellectual pauses" if there's anything they can do to remember more, longer, and make their memories easier to access.

Please know that I'm not a "brain specialist." Nothing written here should imply a diagnosis or a way to prevent Alzheimer's or any of the dozen or so other types of dementia. However, based on information I've learned through research and personal observation and experience, I say Yes!

How We Make Memories

The brain is an incredibly complex organ composed of billions and billions of microscopic neurons, or brain cells. All the physical and mental tasks we perform (walking, singing, tying your shoes, and thousands of other tasks) are carried out when these cells communicate with each other. This communication is accomplished by a chemical manufactured inside the cell that jumps the tiny gap between the cells, called the synapse. The chemical connection (think of a microscopic hair) creates a memory.

Memories are made through our five senses. Every time we hear, see, taste, smell, and touch, we're making a "memory connection". In addition, the brain actually creates a new memory connection for every sensory experience. If you say 1 word 10 times – you've actually made 10 connections for that word. You probably have millions of connections for your name.

Our earliest memories are created through the sense of touch, which has two parts. The first is tactile; the way something feels (a caress, the texture of a blanket – or a hot stove). The second is kinesthetic, sometimes called "muscle memory." We make

kinesthetic memories the same way you get to Carnegie Hall...practice, practice, practice! It's how pianists play without looking at the keys, how dancers remember routines, and how we remember how to tie our shoes.'

Sight is our strongest sense for short term memory. In fact, 73 percent of our short-term memory is through what we see.

Hearing, on the other hand, is the least reliable of the senses. We may have great memories for music or the sound of someone's voice but most of what we hear are abstract "facts" such as names and numbers which lack an emotional context.

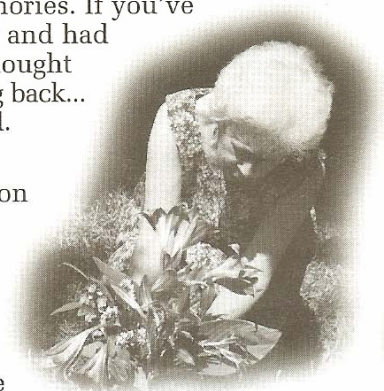
If you've ever tasted something and asked yourself what's missing, it's because of a taste memory. A few years ago, some restaurants started featuring "comfort" food (such as meat loaf and macaroni & cheese). It sounded like a good idea but

it didn't work because the food didn't match the memory of the way "Mom used to make it."

While sight is the strongest sense for short-term memory, the sense of smell is the strongest and most vivid for long-term memories. If you've ever smelled something and had memories you hadn't thought of in years come flooding back... thank your sense of smell.

And, each of the senses makes its own connection even for the same experience! When you see a rose and stop to smell it, you've doubled your memory of it!

Researchers also believe that our brain processes and stores memories of emotion differently from the way it stores memories of fact and that we remember emotional memories far longer than fact memories. The memories of Thanksgiving dinners, lullabies



your mother sang to you, your wedding, your child's first words, the first time you successfully rode your bike without training wheels, your old boyfriend's aftershave, your first kiss, flowers on Valentine's Day are all made stronger because of the combination of the senses plus the emotional connection.

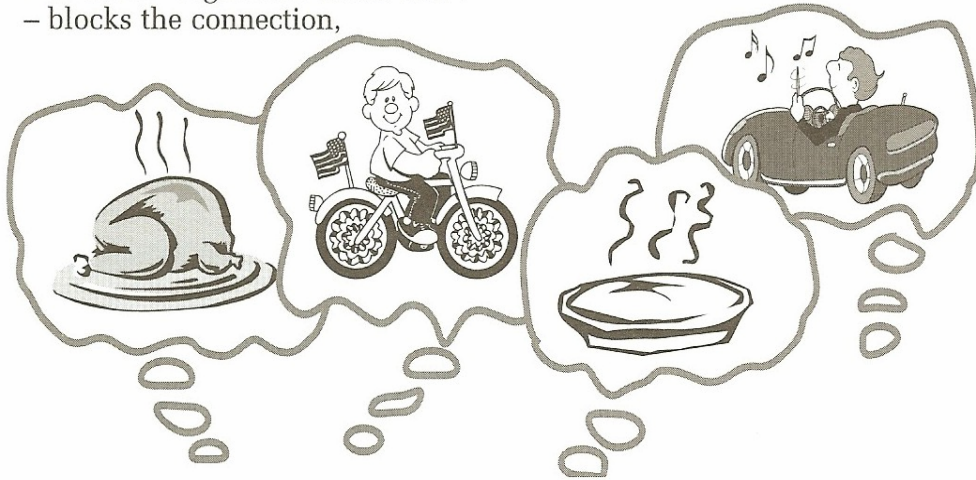
How We Recall Memories

We make memories through our senses and it's through those same senses that we recall or "trigger" these memories.

Dementia – regardless of the cause – blocks the connection,

preventing one cell from communicating with another, the way an accident blocks traffic on a highway. The more connections you've made for an experience, the more alternate routes you'll have to recall or trigger that memory.

My mother has very advanced dementia but she can still remember dozens of old songs when the music triggers her memory. My great grandmother died when I was 5 years old, but to this day, whenever I smell lilacs, I have vivid memories of her and the lilac sachets in her lingerie drawer.



If I can't remember a phone number, I place my fingers on a phone key pad and let my fingers "remember" for me. The smell of the sea air, the sound of the wind, the taste of your mother's meatloaf, the sight of a sunrise, the feel of a baby's skin are all triggers we created through our emotional and sensory experiences.

In addition, every time we think, write, and/or talk about an experience, we make even more memories – and more triggers by which to recall them.

Your "Better Memory" Assignment

When doing routine tasks, challenge yourself to be aware of all of your senses like the taste, feel, smell, and sound of brushing your teeth.

Consciously add additional senses to your experiences. For example, revel in the taste, smell, look, and feel of eating something delicious and when you turn on some music, get up and boogie!

Make a point to explore new things and/or do things you haven't done in years. Go for a walk and notice the feel of the ground under you feet, the warmth of the sun, the cold winter air, the color of the sky, and the sound of the birds, or pull out that musical instrument you haven't touched for years and give it a go!

And include your family and friends. Not only will it create fuller memories for you, it will give them wonderful memories, too. ■

*Barbara E. Friesner is a generational coach and hosts seminars on *Is It Simple Forgetfulness or the Real Thing*© among others. Her web site is www.AgeWiseLiving.com.*

