

## **IMPROVING YOUR LEARNING AND MEMORY SKILLS**

The following are simple, basic strategies for persons who are experiencing normal age-related changes in memory and learning skills. These strategies can help one sharpen memory and learning, and help compensate for minor problems in these areas.

### **STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION**

Follow a basic routine and always try to put objects in their proper place when finished with them. Make notes, keep lists and be sure to write down all appointments on a calendar. Try to keep all your important papers (financial documents, bills, etc.) in one place. Use a filing system to organize and identify these papers.

### **USE YOUR SENSES**

Since we receive most new information through our eyes and ears, make sure that your vision and hearing are as good as they can possibly be. Consider using devices such as a hearing aid, phone amplifier or magnifying glass to compensate for remaining deficits. Auditory prompts (a watch alarm, cooking timer, etc.) are helpful. Use all your senses. Take time to look, listen, touch, taste and smell as appropriate.

### **ATTENTION, PLEASE!**

Listen carefully and pay attention to what is being said. Try to concentrate on only one task at a time.

### **FIND A GOOD LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

When trying to learn something new, find a quiet place, away from distractions such as the telephone, TV or the conversations of others. A comfortable room temperature and work area are essential.

### **TAKE YOUR TIME**

Your memory is like a file cabinet. The older you are, the more information you have stored, and it will likely take you longer to retrieve a specific memory or bit of information. Feeling anxious about this will further inhibit recall. Likewise, allow yourself enough time to learn something new. Feeling rushed for time will defeat your purpose.

### **“I THINK I CAN...I THOUGHT I COULD”**

Just like the “Little Engine That Could”, self confidence and a positive attitude about your skills are a great help.

## **PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT**

Repetition and review is essential to learning new material. Read and repeat aloud if possible. Compose a rhyme (ie. “I before E except after C”) or a mental image about the thing you are trying to learn or remember. Practice retrieving information previously committed to memory. Just like learning a foreign language, new material is more easily forgotten if it is not periodically reviewed and used.

## **EXPERIENCE COUNTS**

Use expertise and familiarity to learn new things. For example, your new microwave oven may have many more “bells and whistles” than your old one, but it probably performs all of the same functions. Use your familiarity with the old oven to help you learn to operate the new one. Also, the ability to reminisce allows us to connect new information with an old memory. When a new person’s face or name reminds us of someone we knew in the past, we are more likely to remember that person.

## **BE SELECTIVE**

There are limits to the amount of information we can learn and remember. If you try to learn or recall all the trivial and irrelevant information connected with a subject, you can overload your memory. Remind yourself that it’s OK not to remember everything.

## **USE IT OR LOSE IT**

Memory problems may be related to inactivity. Your memory gets rusty with disuse. Staying mentally active and challenging your skills with activities such as card games, crossword puzzles and taking classes can help sharpen memory and learning skills. A website: <http://www.gamesforthebrain.com/> has a variety of interactive “brain games” that can be played on line.

## **HEALTH AND LIFESTYLE FACTORS**

Take care of your physical health, eat a well-balanced diet, and try to get sufficient sleep. Avoid alcohol and unnecessary medications. Routine physical and relaxation exercises also help one’s learning abilities. Depression and anxiety affect thinking and memory. An evaluation by a mental health professional can alleviate these problems.

**Section of Geriatrics & Gerontology  
Department of Internal Medicine  
University of Nebraska Medical Center  
Omaha, Nebraska**