

Information on memory



Memory is the ability to take in information, store it and use it when you need it. Some things are easier to remember than others: names, facts, personal memories, pictures, routes. Things that are interesting are easier to remember than those that are not. Some take a lot of going over to get them properly “stored away” in your mind. Information can be on the “tip of your tongue” but the more you try, the harder it is to recall. It often pops up later when you stop trying. A photograph or a word or a smell can bring long forgotten events to mind. Most people use things to help them remember, for example, diaries, lists, calendars.

After a brain injury there may be a “blank spot” of a few hours to a few days or weeks around the time of the injury. (The ‘blank’ just before the injury is called **retrograde amnesia** and the ‘blank’ or ‘hazy’ period after the injury is called **post traumatic amnesia {P.T.A.}**.) This can feel strange and sometimes worrying, but it is a normal part of your recovery. Coming out of P.T.A. can feel quite odd. You might have strange or confusing thoughts. As your day-to-day memory gets better you may, for example, now remember who visited yesterday and what you ate for lunch.

Making and storing memories involves many different parts of the brain. Your memory difficulties will depend on the areas damaged. Even though you may remember a lot from the past, it is common for you to find it harder to learn new things: names, faces, places, news. The easiest things to learn will be those that are most important to you. Your memory should gradually improve, however, especially in the first year after your brain injury but it may take longer than any broken bones. You may also have to work more actively at remembering things.

What you can do

There are several things you can do to help your memory:

- **Routine:** Get into the habit of keeping your belongings in the same places. Do your regular activities at the same time of the day or week
- **Memory Aids:** Diaries, notebooks and lists are useful to help anyone's memory. This works best if you only write in what is important
- **Repetition:** Don't be afraid to ask people to repeat information if you've missed some of it. You could also write it down as they tell you
- **Association:** Make links between things you need to remember and things you already know, for example, "this person's name is the same as my nephew's"
- **Imagery:** Make a picture in your mind's eye of what you want to remember
- **Relaxation:** Try not to panic if you can't remember something. Information can come to the surface more easily if you relax.

What others can do

There are several things that you can do to help with someone's memory problems:

- **Routine:** Help the person to stick to a routine by doing tasks at the same time each day, keeping things in the same place, and so on
- **Memory Aids:** Remind him or her to use the diary, notebook etc.
- **Repetition:** 'Saying it over' can help the storing

process and help ensure that he or she has the message straight.

- **Association:** Make him or her aware of similarities and links between things he or she already knows and the new information
- **Relaxation:** Try to wait until he or she is relaxed when giving information. Encourage him or her to stay relaxed when you are asking for information, for example, "we'll have a think about it and I'll ask later."

Where to get more information

Both the clinical psychologist and the occupational therapist will be able to provide you with further help and information.

Neurorehabilitation Unit
Astley Ainslie Hospital
2008