The experts
Ageing

How to improve your memory: 10 easy, enjoyable expert tips – from reading a book to getting more sleep



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Use it or lose it … experts say engage the mind to increase its longevity. Illustration: Guardian Design/Guardian Design, Photographer/Agency

Relying on technology can make us forgetful, but there are some simple ways to sharpen your recall. Memory experts describe the tricks and habits that can help

Memory can worsen as we age, but it is often possible to do something about it. Here, memory experts share their advice on how to improve your power of recall.

Retrain your brain

"Memory is a buildable skill. You can train it, just like learning how to ride a bike or drive," says Sania Alam, the founder of Futuristic Learning, which provides memory-training education. Alam, based in the US, has coached many athletes who have broken six Guinness World Records. But in the times we are living in are not conducive to maintaining a strong memory. "We are in an age where we are bombarded with information," says Alam. "At the same time, AI has come in, and social media is growing. All of these things are ageing our brains. You see people at a very young age who are beginning to have memory issues." How can we tackle this? "My suggestion would be to get your hands on any course that teaches you memory techniques, so that you can start using your own brain instead of relying on gadgets, because these days we can't even memorise our own number, let alone an emergency contact."

Keeping our brains active through learning keeps them functioning better for longer' … boost your brain with a challenge. Photograph: Posed by model, Kathrin Ziegler/Getty Images

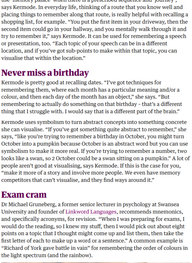
Learn something new

"The best way to improve your memory is to keep your brain active by learning new things and engaging in cognitively stimulating activities," says Barbara Sahakian, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Cambridge and co-author of Brain Boost: Healthy Habits for a Happier Life. "Find something that you would enjoy, but haven't tried yet," she says, suggesting chess, a new language or instrument. In 1995, Sahakian published an article in the British Medical Journal with Martin Orrell, emphasising the need to learn new things to reduce the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's – in other words "use it or lose it". "Keeping our brains active through learning and remembering, we drive the neural circuits and keep them functioning better for longer," she says. "Studies with medical students studying for exams and black-cab taxi drivers learning routes in London have shown that the hippocampus actually increases in volume. So, remember to use your brain through education and other challenging activities, so that you can keep it fit and functioning better for longer."

The best way to improve your memory is to keep your brain active by learning new things

Read more

Reassuringly, you don't have to sign up to a complicated course to improve your memory but can simply open a book instead. "Reading something that interests you, whether it is fiction or nonfiction, has a positive effect on the brain, cognition and mood," says Sahakian. "Several studies have shown that reading can reduce the risk of cognitive decline and dementia with ageing."



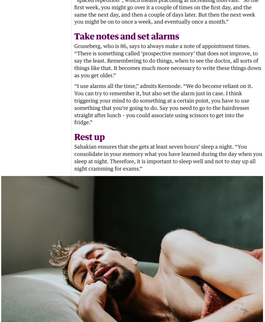
Studies have shown that reading can reduce the risk of cognitive decline. Photograph: Hero Images Inc./Alamy

Avoid distractions

Another way that tech can disrupt memory is through its impact on our ability to focus. "We are rapidly switching our attention from one thing to the next," says Sahakian. "This makes it difficult for people to then focus their attention and concentrate when they need to accomplish a goal. Experiments have shown that students who have mobile phones in class do not perform as well in tests; even having a mobile phone that was off next to you acts as a distractor of your attention."

Take your brain on a journey

"We have to use these specific techniques. It's not magic," says Katie Kermode, a memory champion from Manchester, who started competing in 2008 and set the world record for remembering names, and numerous other titles since. When trying to memorise something, Kermode advises using the journey technique, which she learned when she was nine to memorise the order of the planets in the solar system. "A thermometer breaks, and the silver Mercury goes everywhere. The goddess Venus clears it all up and puts it into a bag and throws it. It lands on the Earth … It goes on like that, making each planet into an object or a person, and making them into a story, so they link from one to the next," says Kermode. "In competitions we memorise thousands of digits, which I couldn't just naturally do by sitting and repeating them to myself. You have to work a little bit, but it really helps you to memorise anything that you want to."



Find something that you would enjoy, but haven't tried yet' … learning helps the mind function longer. Photograph: Posed by models, Ronnie Kaufman/Getty Images

Similarly, you can create a "memory palace", which has its roots in the work of the Ancient Greek poet Simonides of Ceos and was more recently popularised by the memory expert Tony Buzan, who died in 2019. "I tend to use 'memory palace' when there is a prescribed sequence and 'journey'," says Kermode. In everyday life, thinking of a route that you know well and placing things to remember along that route, is really helpful with recalling a shopping list, for example. "You put the first item in your driveway, then the second item could go in your hallway, and you mentally walk through it and try to remember it," says Kermode. It can be used for remembering a speech or presentation, too. "Each topic of your speech can be in a different location, and if you've got sub-points to make within that topic, you can visualise that within the location."

Never miss a birthday

Kermode is pretty good at recalling dates. "I've got techniques for remembering them, where each month has been a theme meaning and/or a colour, and then each day of the month has an object," she says. "But remembering is actually do something on that birthday – that's a different thing that I struggle with. I would say that is a different part of the brain."

Kermode uses symbolism to turn abstract concepts into something concrete she can visualise. "If you've got something quite abstract to remember," she says, "like you're trying to remember a birthday in October, you might see October into a pumpkin because October is an abstract word but you can use symbolism to make it more real. If you're trying to remember a number, two looks like a swan, so 2 October could be a swan sitting on a pumpkin." A lot of people aren't good at visualising, says Kermode. If this is the case for you, it's worth trying a story and involve more people. We even have memory competitors that can't visualise, and they find ways around it."

Exam cram

Dr Michael Gruneberg, a former senior lecturer in psychology at Swansea University and founder of Linkword Languages, recommends mnemonics, and specifically acronyms, for revision. "When I was preparing for exams, I would do the reading, so I knew my stuff, then I would pick out about eight points on a topic that I thought might come up and list them, then take the first letter of each to make up a word or a sentence." A common example is "Richard of York gave battle in vain" for remembering the order of colours in the light spectrum (and the rainbow).

'Spaced repetition' … for an exam, practise memorising facts at increasing intervals. Photograph: skynesher/Getty Images

Kermode swears by slides. "For each different subject, like history or geography, have a different slide deck on PowerPoint (or similar), and then each subtopic within that could be its own slide. Choose a background for the slide that represents that topic. It should be related to it, and it should be quite detailed, so you can imagine things happening inside it. For instance, for GCSE biology, one of the topics is platelets. I thought of pilates, and I thought of a dinner table. So I had a picture of a dinner table with lots of plates of food, and then all the things that relate to that topic on the slide, including clotted cream as a reminder that platelets clot blood."

Flashcards can be helpful, says Kermode. "But I think what people miss is using the techniques to help them memorise information in the first place, because flashcards just help you review things at certain intervals. You have to put in the effort to memorise it in the first place." In a lesson or lecture, Kermode writes down the key points and facts that she wants to remember, and lays them out as a mind map. "So you're not just writing a list of points, but have your key topic as the central image, and then that branches out to each subtopic."

Practice makes perfect

Make sure you keep running over whatever it is you want to learn, to ensure it stays in your brain. "If it is a short-term list, then you just need to do it once or twice, and you have probably got it," says Kermode. "If it is something you want to learn more long-term, then you need to review it regularly because otherwise we naturally forget." Kermode suggests trying "spaced repetition", which means practising at increasing intervals. "So the first week, you might go over it a couple of times on the first day, and the same the next day, and then a couple of days later. But then the next week you might be on to once a week, and eventually once a month."

Take notes and set alarms

Gruneberg, who is 86, says to always make a note of appointment times. "There is something called 'prospective memory' that does not improve, to say the least. Remembering to do things, when to see the doctor, all sorts of things like that. It becomes much more necessary to write these things down as you get older."

"I use alarms all the time," admits Kermode. "We do become reliant on it. You can try to remember it, but also set the alarm just in case. I think triggering your mind to do something at a certain point, you have to use something that you're going to do. Say you need to go to the hairdresser straight after lunch – you could associate using scissors to get into the fridge."

Rest up

Sahakian ensures that she gets at least seven hours' sleep a night. "You consolidate in your memory what you have learned during the day when you sleep at night. Therefore, it is important to sleep well and not to stay up all night cramming for exams."

'You face a lot of brain fog when you've not slept' … sleep more to stay sharp. Photograph: Catherine Falls Commercial/Getty Images

"Sleep is really important for your brain to work in an efficient way, especially if you're trying to memorise something fast," agrees Kermode. "If you're tired, it's not going to work." After competing, Kermode often feels exhausted. "There was one competition I won, and I got back home and was trying to get some money out at the ATM, and I couldn't remember my pin because my brain was frazzled."

"You face a lot of brain fog when you've not slept," says Alam. "Your mind isn't working at its top speed, and that is because your body has a circadian rhythm that is designed around sleep. Sleep at the time you need to, so that you can stay sharp." When trying to commit something to memory, Alam recommends taking regular naps, "so that you can give your brain that time to process the information, put it where it needs to be placed, and then it will be handy when you need it".

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