

# How to Cope with Memory Loss



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## How does our memory work?

Memory is an important skill in everyday life. It helps us during every day tasks at home by reminding us to take our medications, turn off the stove after we have used it, or to keep us on track to pay our bills. As well, it helps us at work to meet deadlines, or to keep track of activities or projects that we need to do.



To remember successfully, a number of steps are involved:

**Encode ⇒ Store ⇒ Retrieve**

1. **Encoding** - where we prepare the information in order to store it
2. **Storage** - where we hold the information for later use
3. **Retrieval** – where we call upon the stored information when we need it.

These steps must happen in the correct order for our memory to work properly. This process is like storing information on a computer.

- The “file” (or information) needs to be stored properly so you can find and use it at a later time.
- If a “file” is not stored correctly, we may lose this information.
- Sometimes information is lost for only a short time and, other times, we may lose information forever.

Memory problems can occur at any step in the Encode – Store – Retrieve cycle. Sometimes we can remember things with a hint or after some time has passed. Yet, other times we may not remember them at all. This shows us the step at which the memory breakdown occurred.

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Also, we may naturally find that some things are easier or harder to remember. Perhaps you can remember events from the past more easily than recent ones, or you have better memory for faces than names.

Our memory can be affected by a number of medical conditions. These include:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Stroke
- Traumatic brain injury
- Other neurological disorders such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease, dementia including Alzheimer’s disease, etc.

Signs of memory loss include:

1. Forgetting information such as appointments or important dates
2. Misplacing objects
3. Forgetting to turn off the stove or kettle

If you or your family notice changes in how well you remember, it is important to talk to a member of your healthcare team to find out what would help you best. Sometimes our memory can improve with certain brain exercises or therapy or we can learn new ways to cope with and manage our memory loss.

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## **How can memory loss affect me?**

### **Types of Memory in Every Day Life:**

To help you learn how to cope with memory problems, it is important to learn about the types of memory in daily life. There are many different types of memory that we rely on for our safety and well-being. These can include:

- Short-term memory (sometimes called “working memory”)

Short-term memory is where information is available to us for a short period of time (a few seconds to a few minutes).

- For example, think about looking up a telephone number in a phone book. You dial the number and then, most times, forget the number after you make your call. In this instance, we may use methods such as rehearsal to keep the information active in our minds in order to use the information and dial the number.

- Long-term memory

Long-term memory is when information is available to us after a long time has passed from when the memory was made.

- Sometimes our memory for events that happened before an illness or injury (such as a stroke or brain injury) may not be affected as much as our memory for more recent events. This reduced memory for information after an illness or injury is called “amnesia.” [am-nee-zhuh]

- Procedural memory

Procedural memory refers to our memory for doing activities or routines in our every day lives.

- This may be your memories that help you to do things such as making dinner, using a computer, riding a bike, or getting dressed.

- Semantic memory

Semantic memory may involve knowledge of things, events or other types of factual information that are not always linked to our own experiences.

Examples may include knowing historic details (e.g. the outcome of World War I).

- Episodic memory

Episodic memory most often refers to a time and place in our lives.

- Examples may include certain events that took place at a specific birthday party or losing a camera while on a recent vacation.



## **How do I cope with memory problems?**

Depending on the reasons for your memory loss, there may be exercises you can do to enhance your memory or tips that you can use to help you manage better.

In some cases, exercises may be tailored to the part of your memory where the breakdown occurs. Card games, memory-matching or sorting games, as well as some computer games, may help your memory to improve. They may also enhance your concentration skills, which is an important building block to remembering. Also, there are other things you can do that may help you to remember, such as using rehearsal

strategies (go over the information again and again) or recording the information you want to remember. These can help the encoding process to happen.

Doing the best you can with the memory skills that you have may be the right option for you.

Examples of some tips to help you remember include:

- Using a day timer to keep track of important appointments or deadlines
- Using a watch with an alarm to remind you to take your medications on time
- Writing down or listing the things you need to remember in a notebook
- Storing items in the same place at home or work to more easily locate them

It is important to use the same way to remember things each time so that you will know where to find what you are looking for.

You may also want to work with a healthcare professional, such as an Occupational Therapist, who can show you things you can do that would be most helpful to meet your needs.

Who can I call if I have questions about memory loss?

Once you have returned home, you can talk to your family doctor if you still have concerns about your memory. A referral can be made (by your doctor or by you) to a Community Care Access Centre (previously known as Homecare) Occupational Therapist for more assistance.

What are some other resources and websites that can help me?

- **Canada's Occupational Therapy Resource Site** [www.otworks.ca](http://www.otworks.ca)
- [www.lumosity.com](http://www.lumosity.com)