

Lessons that can improve your memory

If you think a failing memory is an inevitable consequence of growing older, think again.

"Over the last 10 years, we've learned that even in advancing age, the brain can continue to grow and adapt," says Curt Sandman, Ph.D., codirector of the Memory Disorders Clinic at the University of California at Irvine. The key to maintaining a good memory, researchers say, is to think of the brain as any other muscle, which needs regular "workouts" to keep from getting out of shape.

Memory-training classes

One of the newest workouts for improving memory are memory-training classes, offered through some colleges and universities. After 10 sessions of memory training, participants over age 60 scored from 10 to 50 percent higher on memory tests, reports Robin West, Ph.D., a psychologist specializing in memory and aging at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

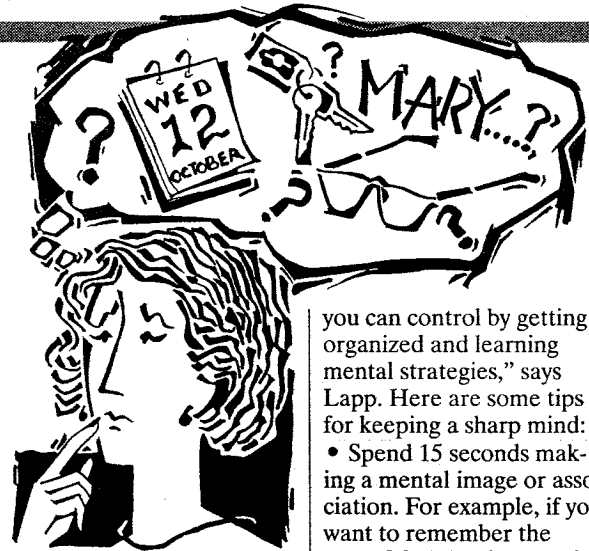
A memory course can help you draw on all the senses, emotions, and rational processes that affect how memory works, says Danielle Lapp, a researcher and memory-training specialist at Stanford University in Palo Alto, Calif. With proper instruction, you can sharpen listening skills and expand your visual memory, plus pick up tips on how to mentally file information for easier recall.

Video exercises are often a key component of memory training. A typical exercise may begin with the

instructor showing a slide of a number of unrelated objects (such as a comb, spoon, and pen) and asking participants to remember them. Few can, until shown how to establish a connection between the objects through a phrase, size, material or function.

Another video technique teaches people to associate names with faces. They are asked to exaggerate a prominent feature on screen and superimpose an image on the face that corresponds to the name—for example, a bird's beak for a man named Bill.

To find a memory-training course, start by calling



the psychology department or counseling service of your local university or community college.

Do-it-yourself methods

Formal training sessions aren't the only way to improve memory. "Think of memory as something

you can control by getting organized and learning mental strategies," says Lapp. Here are some tips for keeping a sharp mind:

- Spend 15 seconds making a mental image or association. For example, if you want to remember the name Mr. Morehouse, picture him at the door of a house that keeps getting bigger.

- Keep frequently misplaced objects like keys and eyeglasses in a set spot. Visualize the object in this place, and say out loud for reinforcement, "I'm putting these scissors in the top right drawer." To find something missing, retrace your steps and recall as many details as possible; one recollection usually triggers others.

- Anxiety is the number-one cause of memory slips. When a word is at the tip of your tongue, keep talking about the subject while the brain continues scanning. By not calling attention to your lapse, you can usually diminish the anxiety block.

- Remember numbers by creating a rhyme or non-sense phrase around them, much the way you learned "Columbus sailed the ocean blue in fourteen hundred and ninety-two." Also, associate account or phone numbers with birthdays, anniversaries, addresses, and other lucky numbers.

- Keep moving. Aerobic and conditioning exercise three times a week sharpens memory performance, researchers have found. Exercise increases blood flow to the brain, which improves alertness.

—Eve Glicksman