Memory makeover: tips to spruce up an absent mind

It's Monday morning. You have one minute before you have to leave for work, but can't find your keys. Ransacking your home in a frantic search, you finally locate the keys—right where you left them—on the kitchen counter. Breathless, you hop on the bus and realize your lunch is still at home. Worse still, you spot a new co-worker on the bus and can't remember his name.

Understanding Memory

Before learning any memory improvement technique, it's useful to first understand the three stages of memory: encoding, storage and retrieval. The encoding stage refers to the process of putting information into memory. The storage stage refers to retention or maintaining information in memory. The retrieval stage refers to recovering information from memory. If memory lapse or forgetting occurs, often a problem occurred at one or more of the stages of encoding, storage or retrieval. Increasing the efficiency of these stages, therefore, will help to improve memory.

Tips and Tools You Can Use

In the same way we exercise our muscles to keep fit, we have to continue to train our brain to maintain its efficiency over time.

Boost your brain power with these tried and true tactics:

Ditch your multi-tasking ways. Think you can successfully study the details of a report while talking on the phone and reading your horoscope? Think again You need at least eight seconds of focused energy to digest information and store it in the brain's memory centre. So hang up the phone, find a quiet place and focus.

Stay organized. Many people overlook this crucial step and end up missing important appointments, deadlines or details. Put pen to paper (or finger tips to keyboard) and record important dates in a calendar, notebook or on your mobile device. Recording and arranging data will help ingrain it in your memory and give you a point of reference in case you do forget.

Get hooked on mnemonics. Mnemonic devices boost memory through associations. Depending on the material and learning style, you might use visual images (for example, a black cat stuck in a well to remember the name "Blackwell"); rhymes and alliteration (for example, 30 days has September, April, June and November); acronyms, such as HOMES to remember the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie and Superior); or even jokes to recall important information.

Try chunking items into smaller groups. One way to improve memory is through a procedure called chunking. This occurs when you reorganize items such as letters or numbers into units or small groups. For example, remembering the number sequence of: 6-3-2-4-8-1-7-9 could be remembered easier if the sequence is chunked into: 63-24-81-79. Using the chunking technique, the number of items needing to be remembered is cut in half.

Take a guided tour. Another old but proven mnemonic device is the "method of loci." This involves using a familiar route, e.g., the pathway through your home to your bedroom or the way to the corner store, as a way of remembering key details of a speech or the order of a complex task. Use each room or landmark on your journey to "signpost" different parts of the speech or each step of the process you need to remember.

Take a fresh perspective. Neurobics help exercise and strengthen underused brain pathways. Keep those brain synapses firing by taking a new route home from work, using your non-dominant hand to brush your hair, challenging yourself with a crossword puzzle or taking a class in a completely foreign field of study.

Stay active. Physical exercise boosts the amount of oxygen to your brain and can help lower your risk for diabetes, heart disease and depression—all of which can impede memory. It also promotes sleep, which can

improve focus and help consolidate memories.

Eat right. Foods rich in B vitamins—including legumes, spinach, broccoli, strawberries and citrus fruits; Omega-3 fatty acids—like tuna, salmon, herring, flaxseed and walnuts; as well as antioxidants (vitamin C, E and beta carotene)—sweet potatoes, tomatoes, berries and green tea amongst others—are thought to improve brain function.

A great way to realize the potential of your brain and even increase your memory and learning abilities is based on the idea that by reflecting on how you think, you can learn how you best absorb knowledge. Consider how your way of thinking or storing information is working for you, and then ask yourself how well you did in recalling this information or how you could use your memory differently next time. In other words, use memory strategies that work best for you.

Everyone draws a blank from time to time. Young or old, forgetting is a natural part of life, but there are ways you can boost the power of the brain to keep you sharp no matter what your age. Consider the suggestions outlined in this article, and if your brain power continues to falter, be sure to discuss the issue with your doctor.