Am I Losing My Mind?

Memory lapses happen to people of any age. It seems that as we get older, we start to associate these lapses with our age. How many of you have used phrases like this before?

***** Senior Moment *** Brain Lapse *** It's Just My Age *****

Do you have others that you use to describe memory loss?

While some change may be expected as you age, that doesn't mean you can't do something about it – you can be proactive in using some strategies and lifestyle adaptations.

If you don't learn or receive good information, you can't remember it.

Your memory is only as good as the information you take in!

Types of Intelligence

Crystallized

Accumulated knowledge on which a person can draw, such as vocabulary, judgement, wisdom & experience.

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Speed & accuracy of information intake & processing. How quickly something can be learned & recalled.

Fluid

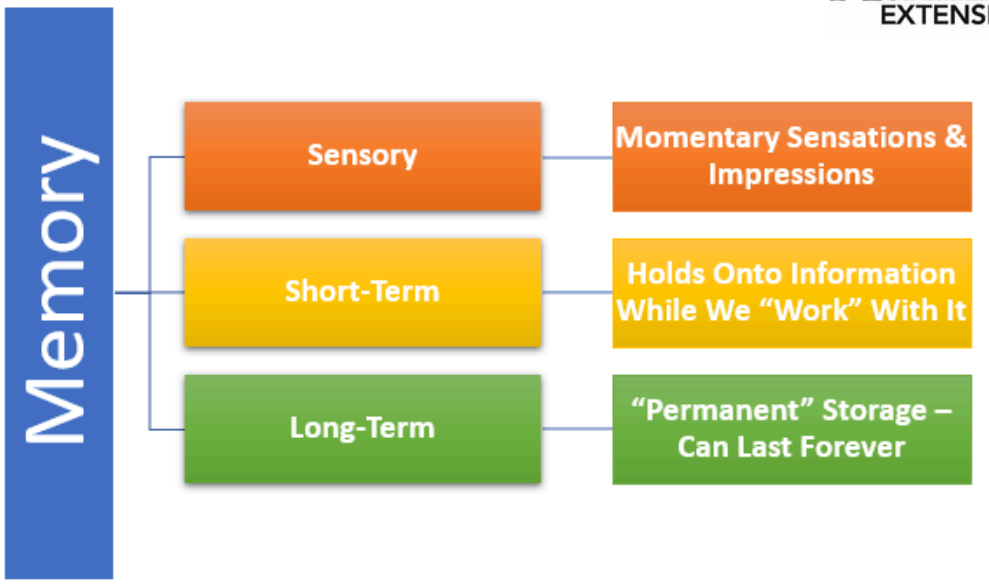
Intelligence can be described as the capacity for learning, reasoning and understanding. We divide intelligence into two types: crystallized and fluid.

Crystallized intelligence is based on wisdom and experience, it stays relatively stable with increasing age. We might say that crystallized intelligence is knowledge dependent on acquired information. Examples of crystallized intelligence include your vocabulary, your skills with numbers, and your ability to make judgments based on past decisions and experiences. A good way to remember what your crystallized intelligence does is to think of a crystal: hard and clear.

On the other hand, fluid intelligence deals with your ability to think and make decisions "on-the-spot." Studies show that this type of intelligence reaches its peak during early adulthood and begins to decline in subsequent years. Fluid intelligence could be described as knowledge that is not dependent on acquired information. Your ability to think about a situation and react quickly to it as well as your attention span are tied to your fluid intelligence. Think about fluid intelligence like a fluid: sometimes it is clear and fast, sometimes it may be murky and slow.

A simple way to think about the differences is to think about each name. "Crystallized" gives you the sense of something hard and unbreakable: thoughts that come from inside your brain – your memories and knowledge. "Fluid" gives you the sense of something changing and unstable – thoughts that come from your environment, which changes moment-by-moment. So, while intelligence remains relatively stable over the life cycle, the speed with which you process and recall information may decline – not necessarily as a result of age but as a result of not keeping your brain as active.

How Does My Memory Work?



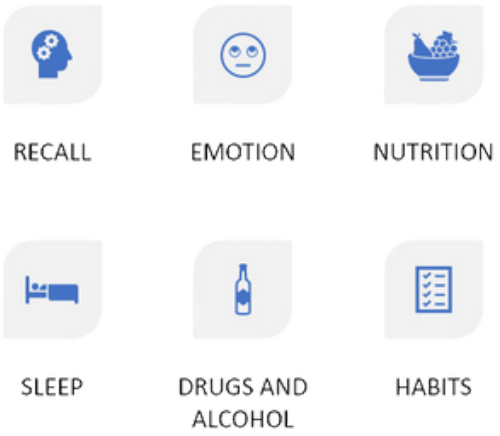
When you receive new information, it is managed in one of three ways: sensory, short-term or long-term.

Sensory memory contains information received immediately from a person's senses by the brain. Your brain then quickly decides whether this information needs to be processed further or disregarded – if our brains tried to remember everything, the capacity of the brain would be overloaded in a matter of minutes. Most things in the s*ensory memory* that are further processed are pieces of information that meet our basic needs and interests or things that are out of the ordinary. Everything else just "goes away."

If the information is further processed, it moves into the *short-term memory* or working memory. Your *short-term memory* holds information for several minutes and then disregards it if it is not repeated or rehearsed. This type of memory will hold about seven pieces of information: phone numbers, zip codes, serial numbers, etc. Your working memory is also where you remember things from your long-term memory and process them to suit your needs.

If a piece of information makes it through short-term memory and is deemed important enough to remember further, it may be encoded into your *long-term memory* where it may last forever! *Long-term memory* allows information to be retrieved even after it has been stored in the brain and out of conscious thought. Information in *Long-term memory* could have been learned or encoded ten minutes ago or ten decades ago. Storage takes a long time, and retrieval can be tough sometimes, thus the "memory lapse" when recall isn't instantaneous. That is why you sometimes sit up in the middle of the night and remember the name of a person or a song that has been on the tip of your tongue all day long.

Why Can't I Remember?



Many things may contribute to your inability to remember that are not related to your age or the health of your brain.

- Sometimes you cannot remember something because you never learned it in the beginning. Also, once the information is stored, it may take a while to come back out. Speed of recall may decline with age – your fluid intelligence. Often, relaxing your mind will allow that information to surface again.
- Medications and alcohol can impair your ability to remember and also to recall information
- Stress, grief, depression, and other emotional presses can affect your ability to remember and recall information. When the brain is under pressure, it can't function properly.
- The brain needs certain nutrients to function properly. Without the right building blocks, the brain cannot make chemicals that make memories and allow the retrieval of information.
- Your daily habits can help you or hinder you when it comes to remembering things. Placing your keys in the same place for years and then moving them is not memory loss, it's breaking your habit.

The principle of "use it or lose it" applies to the brain much like the rest of the body. By stimulating your brain and making it think about things in different ways, you are building better brain capacity.

However, by the same token, if I exercise my legs daily, do my arms get any stronger? No. The same thing happens with your brain. If you do the same brain exercises over and over again, certain parts of your brain, that is, certain ways of thinking get stronger, but you need to vary your activity to ensure your exercising your whole brain.

Find ways to make the things that you day-in, day-out fun and challenging for your brain. Something is better than nothing, right? Many people emphasize the use of word games and crosswords to improve brain function. However, if you have always worked the crossword puzzle and it is no longer challenging for you, you should try some other way to stimulate your mind. Don't stop working your crossword puzzle, just expand your mental ability and agility by trying something different, something challenging. Maybe you could work your crossword puzzle with your non-dominate hand. That way, you may know the answer immediately, but it still requires some thought to form the letters in the answer.