

Psychologist offers tips to remember more in today's high-tech world

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Today's technology has brought instant access to important information at our fingertips. It's also overwhelmed us with more things to remember -- from computer logins, passwords and codes, to instructions on how to run today's latest gadgets. And some people find it hard to remember it all.

That's why you still need to remember to write some things down, according to Rob West, director of the Cognitive Psychology Program at Iowa State University where he is also an associate professor of psychology. There's a limit to what people can remember at any given time, and today's technology isn't going to change that.

"There's probably no easy way to remember those logins and passwords, particularly since good passwords should be random, mixed strings of letters, numbers and symbols," said West, who has conducted research on memory. "So unless you write them down, you're unlikely to remember them."

But West also has tips on how to improve memory so you don't have to write everything down. They don't include finding a one-day memory fitness workshop.

"There's a group that's charging people \$500 a day to come in and do this memory fitness assessment," West said. "The claim is that this one-day assessment will allow them to tell you how to make your memory better. I know scientists who do memory training in people over the age of 65

and based on their research, I doubt there are any long-term benefits from a one-day program.

"I think there is the parallel to physical fitness," he said. "Would you believe that you could achieve physical fitness in one day? Your New Year's resolution is that you're going to get in shape this year. And on Jan. 2, you spend your day at the gym and then you say, 'OK, I'm done for the year.' No person is going to say that would work. But that's basically what the claim is for these one-day programs."

West knows of a memory fitness program that has reported successful results, but it requires participants to commit two to three hours per week for 12 weeks.

He also is aware that creators of video "brain games" claim that they can improve memory and attention. He doesn't dispute those claims, particularly if the games are used on an ongoing basis. However, at present there is limited research demonstrating the benefits.

But there are some research-based things people can do to improve their memories. He suggests these tips:

-- Improve cardiovascular fitness. "Some of the most encouraging data that you're seeing right now is the effects of cardiovascular fitness (on memory fitness)," he said. "We've known that's been important for a long time, but there are now some really nice studies on the impacts of fitness on specific aspects of cognition."

-- Link new information to existing knowledge. "That probably works across the life span," West said. "One of the things we know about aging is that world knowledge tends to be relatively preserved, but your ability to remember new facts is not as good. So if you can somehow relate new information to old information -- like linking a new cell phone number

to one of your old numbers -- that could be helpful in remembering it."

-- Reduce stress. "Get some quiet time and try and block out the stress when you're trying to remember something," he said.

-- Stay focused. "We know that distraction or divided attention when learning new information, or trying to recall old information from memory, is detrimental," he said. "So trying to remember while driving and talking on your cell phone could be bad."

-- Try actively exercising your mind. "The important thing there is being active, so things like doing crossword puzzles and Suduko work. Reading also works, particularly if you're reading something other than pulp fiction," West said. "It could be anything that's actively engaging you in thinking."

-- Determine when your optimal thinking time is. "What researchers have typically found is that starting in your 50s, there's this kind of shift where middle-aged to older adults report that their optimal time of day is before noon -- so from 8 to noon," said the ISU psychologist. "Testing of younger adults typically finds that their optimal time is much more late afternoon or early evening. So an easy thing to do is be sensitive as to when your optimal time is. Don't put the most difficult thing you have to remember or learn off until the end of the day if your optimal time is in the morning."

According to West, the Morningness-Eveningness Scale (web.ukonline.co.uk/bjlogie/test.htm) can help assess a person's optimal thinking time.

But even after trying out some memory calisthenics, West warns that there is no magic pill when it comes to memory. Just like physical fitness, it takes regular work to keep the mind in shape.

Source: Iowa State University

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