

Perceptions trick memory

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An inflated sense of memory function in people with dementia may influence their likelihood of seeking help, new Flinders University research shows.

As part of her PhD, Flinders research associate Dr. Chris Materne studied the [disparity](#) between memory [perception](#) and performance in people with [dementia](#).

In the first stage of the project, Dr. Materne analysed data from the [Australian Longitudinal Study of Aging](#) which showed that most survey participants believed their memory had remained stable over the 11-year assessment, despite tests showing a decline in [memory performance](#).

She then conducted an intervention with 13 individuals, from a larger group of 23 people with dementia, using spaced retrieval [memory training](#) to help them achieve a specific task or activity, such as remembering to lock the front door or keep their glasses in the same spot.

“Spaced retrieval works by helping people remember specific information or tasks by getting them to respond to a prompt question over progressively increasing intervals of time,” Dr. Materne said.

“In one case we helped a man remember to put his glasses in the same place because he was always losing them which made both him and his wife quite distressed,” she said.

“We think the training taps into procedural memory so it becomes habitual rather than explicit memory, such as memory for facts, which tends to decline before procedural memory when you have dementia.”

The technique was conducted once a week for six weeks, with seven out of the 13 participants still able to perform their nominated activity or task after six months.

The 23 participants were also asked to rate their performance based on a specific question, such as how many people they could name in a photo with 10 faces.

While most respondents were initially over-confident in their abilities, with some claiming to be able to name all 10 faces, their perceptions did change over time to more accurately reflect their cognitive function.

About one third of family carers, however, initially considered their loved ones memory to be better than what the person with dementia actually reported.

“In the longitudinal sample people didn’t feel their memory had changed over time because the questions were more general but when we asked specific, detailed questions about [memory](#) in the smaller study, the respondents came to recognise their declining performance.”

Dr. Materne said the research highlighted the need for more comprehensive assessments when diagnosing dementia to increase the accuracy of peoples’ perceptions, and therefore their likelihood of seeking help.

Provided by Flinders University

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