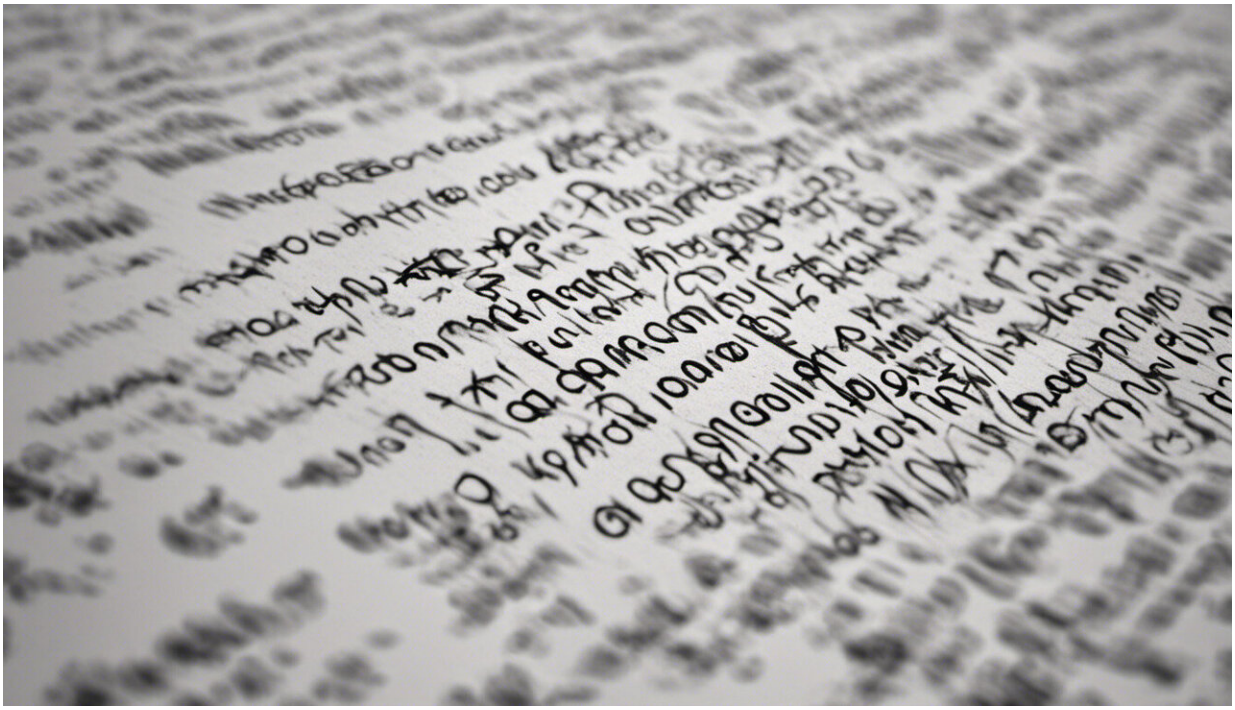
Remember—a bad memory is actually good for you

March 17 2016, by Robert Nash



Credit: AI-generated image (disclaimer)

It's not uncommon to hear people wishing that they had a better memory. "If only I weren't so forgetful", they complain. "If only I could reliably remember my computer password, and that my neighbour's name is Sarah, not Sandra." If this sounds familiar then I know how you feel. As a psychologist who studies the science of remembering, it's especially

embarrassing to me that my memory is frequently dreadful. When asked whether I had a good weekend, I often struggle to immediately recollect enough details to provide an answer.

But it's precisely because I study remembering that I'm acutely aware of how our memory's flaws, frustrating and inconvenient though they can be, are among its most important characteristics. Human memory isn't like a recording device for accurately capturing and preserving the moment, or a computer hard disk for storing the past in bulk. Instead, human memory serves up only the gist of an event, often with a healthy side of ego-flattery, lashings of indulgent wrong-righting, and a painkiller for the next morning.

Consider the sorts of things we are particularly good at failing to remember accurately. In one study, university students were asked to recall their high school grades. The students were truthfully informed that the researcher had full access to their official records, so it was clear there was nothing to gain from intentionally distorting the truth.

The students misremembered about a fifth of their grades, but not all grades were misremembered equally. The higher the grade, the more likely the students were to remember it: A-grades were expertly recalled, whereas F-grades were recalled very poorly. Overall, the students were far more likely to recall their grades as being better than they had been, than to recall them as worse than they had been.

Credit: Monstera Production from Pexels

Findings such as these illustrate how misremembering can be self-serving, supporting our well-being by pushing us to feel good about ourselves. In other cases, misremembering can help to protect our belief in fairness and justice.

In a Canadian study, participants read about a man named Roger who had won several million dollars on the lottery. Some participants learned that Roger was a man who worked hard and was kind to others: a man who fully deserved his lucky win. Other participants learned that Roger was undeserving: a lazy man who complained a lot, and never smiled. When asked to recall exactly how much money Roger had won, those

who believed he was undeserving recalled his prize as, on average, $280,000 lower than the figure recalled by those who believed he was deserving.

These are just two of many examples in which our memory behaves like the good friend who protects us from hearing bad news or cruel gossip about ourselves. When we reliably learn that a serial cheat has been hired by a prestigious law firm, we later misremember that this news came from an unreliable source. When someone gives us critical feedback on our character traits, we selectively forget many of the less-flattering bits. And by and large, our unhappy memories lose their sting long before our happy memories lose their fervour.

The cumulative effect of these small self-deceptions over time is that, just like an over-protective good friend, memory gives us a distorted but altogether rosier perception of the world and of ourselves. And who wouldn't choose to wear these rose-tinted glasses?

In a recent study, psychologists asked members of the public whether they would (hypothetically) take a drug that could guarantee to numb the pain of a traumatic memory. Fascinatingly, most (82%) said they would not. There is no doubt that we place a huge value on the (apparent) authenticity of our personal memories, both good and bad, and so it's clear that the idea of actively interfering with these memories seems wholly unappealing to many of us.

But we should also be sceptical about the desirability of a world in which every past event can be retained perfectly in memory: authentic, objective, unapologetic, and unadulterated. Although flawed memories are often a nuisance and sometimes disastrous, they can also do wonders for maintaining our self-esteem, satisfaction, and well-being. In these respects at least, perhaps we shouldn't be too critical of our manipulative friend, memory, for pulling the wool over our eyes.

Source: The Conversation