

Forgetting may help improve memory and learning

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Forgetting names, skills or information learned in class is often thought of as purely negative. However unintuitive it may seem, research suggests that forgetting plays a positive role in learning: It can actually increase long-term retention, information retrieval and performance. The findings will be presented today at the American Physiological Society (APS) Institute on Teaching and Learning in Madison, Wis.

Contextual clues play a role in what people are able to store and retrieve from their memory, says Robert A. Bjork, Ph.D., distinguished research professor in the department of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. A change in context can cause forgetting, but it can also change—and enrich—how information is encoded and retrieved, which can enhance learning. Bjork defines forgetting as "a decrease in how readily accessible some information or procedure is at a given point in time." For example, some items may be strongly imprinted in our memories (referred to as "strong storage strength")—such as a childhood phone number—but may be difficult to retrieve quickly due to the length of time since that information has been accessed ("weak retrieval strength").

Bjork will discuss the differences in storage and retrieval and how "forgetting enables, rather than undoes, learning" in the plenary session "Forgetting as a friend of learning" on Wednesday, June 20, at the Madison Concourse Hotel.



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