

Memory loss isn't just an old person's problem – here's how young people can stay mentally fit

August 29 2018, by Catherine Loveday



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

When I give talks, I am often approached by people who are worried about their memory. Maybe they are studying for an exam and don't feel

that they learn as well as their peers. Maybe they keep forgetting to close the window when they leave the house. Or maybe they struggle to remember an event that happened a few weeks ago but which everyone else can describe in vivid detail.

To feel that your [memory](#) may not be up to scratch can be unsettling or even downright frightening. And that's hardly surprising -- memory makes us who we are. Being able to reflect on and share the past is fundamental to our sense of identity, our relationships, and our capacity to [imagine the future](#).

To lose any part of this ability not only causes problems in our daily routine, it threatens the very notion of who we are. By far the [biggest health fear](#) in people over the age of 50 is Alzheimer's disease and the catastrophic loss of personal memory it entails.

Memory disorders in young people

Are concerns about memory the preserve of the post-retirement generation? It seems not. In fact, if modern trends are anything to go by, younger people are just as nervous of losing access to their past. Go to any big concert these days, and your view of the performer will frequently be obscured by a sea of smartphones, each committing the sights and sounds to a safe permanent digital record.

As far back as cave dwellers, humans have found ways to preserve knowledge and experiences, but has the modern lifestyle taken it a step too far? Could an over-reliance on technology make our [memory systems](#) lazier and less efficient?

Some studies have found that using an [internet search engine](#) can lead to [poorer recall of information](#), although another study recently published [failed to replicate this effect](#). And most researchers agree that in these

situations it is not that memory becomes less effective, just that we use it differently.

How about recording events on a smartphone? A recent study showed that a group pausing to take photos at regular intervals had [poorer recall of the event](#) than those who were immersed in the experience. And an earlier piece of research suggested that photos helped people remember what they saw, but [reduced their memory](#) of what was said. It seems that the key factor in these situation is attention – actively taking photos may distract and distance someone from aspects of an experience, meaning that less is remembered.

However, there are novel ways around this problem if you insist on taking pictures. Our own work has shown that distraction can be countered if photos are taken automatically [using a wearable camera](#).

Technology and memory

While it may be true that technology is changing the way we use our memory at times, there is no scientific reason to believe that it reduces the inherent capacity of our brains to learn.

Nevertheless, in today's fast-paced and demanding society, there are other factors that may have a negative impact, for example [poor quality sleep, stress, distractions, depression and alcohol consumption](#). The good news is that these effects are generally regarded as temporary unless they continue over very long periods of time.

There are a small number of people who may experience memory problems over and above everyday forgetfulness. Head injuries, strokes, epilepsy, brain infections such as encephalitis, or congenital conditions such as [hydrocephalus](#), a build up of fluid in the brain, can all lead to a significant loss in our ability to retain and recall information. And

recently, a new condition has been identified -- [severely deficient autobiographical memory](#) -- which describes a small percentage of the population who report a specific but marked impairment in the ability to recall their past.

These people are the exception though, and most people who worry about their memory have no real cause for concern. When it comes to remembering, we all have our own strengths and weaknesses. The friend who gets top marks in every pub quiz may be the same one who always forgets where they left their wallet. And the partner who can describe last year's holiday in incredible detail may take forever to learn a new language. In fact, even world memory champions report everyday forgetfulness, like losing their keys.

By and large, where our memory fails us, it is because we are tired, not paying attention, or trying to do too much at once. Using lists, diaries and smartphone reminders does not make memory less efficient – rather, it frees the brain up to do other things. And instead of making us lazy, looking something up on the internet can help to reinforce or enrich our knowledge base.

But there may be occasions when technology gets in the way – by distracting us from a potentially special moment, or luring us into surfing the web instead of getting much-needed sleep. Most everyday memory lapses can be fixed simply by being more mindful and less busy. So, if you want to remember time with friends, my advice is to enjoy the moment, chat about it afterwards and enjoy a good night's sleep.

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