

How often do people forget things about one another? We decided to find out

September 19 2018, by Devin Ray



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A new acquaintance needs to be reminded of your name while you are having a conversation. A colleague forgets your plan to meet for coffee and schedules a conflicting meeting. A friend books a table for the two of you at a restaurant but it slips her mind that you don't like sushi.

We have all been on the receiving end of another person's [memory failure](#), and have forgotten important things about [people](#) ourselves. Until recently, however, we haven't been able to understand these experiences and their consequences with much beyond anecdotes. My research group decided to change that.

We undertook a [systematic study](#) of the experience of being forgotten. We wanted to find out what a typical experience looks like – who is involved, what gets forgotten, and how often it happens to people. We also wondered how people were affected and whether there was any measurable impact on the relationship afterwards.

To find out, we used a combination of methods. In one strand, we asked about 50 people to keep a daily diary over two weeks. They had to record all occasions in which they were forgotten and give some details about the experience when it happened.

In another strand, we constructed social interactions in our laboratory in which another 50 participants discovered that someone else had forgotten most of the details of a previous conversation. We then recorded how it made them feel. Finally, we showed several hundred people stories in which someone was forgotten or remembered. We asked for their reaction and what they thought of the people involved.

What we found

One of our most surprising discoveries was how frequently things about people were forgotten. On average, our diary keepers reported being forgotten about seven times over a two week period – once every other day. And it wasn't only people who had just met one another; people were forgotten with similar frequency by acquaintances, co-workers, classmates, flatmates and friends.

The type of memory failure did depend on who was doing the forgetting. Complete failures of recognition were relatively rare (9%), and limited mainly to new or casual types of relationships. Personal details were forgotten most often (48%), especially in less close types of relationships such as acquaintances.

In closer relationships such as friendships, people most often forgot something about past interactions or shared experiences (26% of all the memory failures). For example, one participant recorded a close friend telling her a story about a party that the participant had also attended. Closer relationships also provided the most examples of people forgetting obligations or promises ("I had a 'date' on Skype today with my boyfriend but he forgot"). This type of forgetting was relatively rare overall (8%), however.

Another surprise was that people tended to be very understanding about memory lapses. They usually made an excuse for the forgetter – "She met too many people in the last couple of days." Only in about one in five instances did a person explicitly link the memory failure to a lack of investment in them or the information, such as saying "I don't think she found the place where I am from to be interesting or worth remembering."

What it means

So do you need to worry about forgetting during [social interaction](#)? In the minority of cases where people explain [memory failure](#) through a lack of investment, the answer is obviously yes. As you might expect, these instances made people feel substantially less important and less close to the person who forgot them.

Yet even in the majority of cases where people excused the forgetter, there was still some negative effect on the [relationship](#). Despite

providing excuses, people tended to feel a little less important and close to the person as a result. In short, people are usually very understanding about memory failures, but they do still hurt a bit.

So might it improve our relationships if we made more effort to remember things about people? We think it probably would. In preliminary follow-up work, we have found that prompting participants to make clear that they remember the details of a past social interaction improved their ability to communicate that they care about others. We can't yet say with certainty how effective bolstering memory might be for improving social interaction, but it is definitely better than forgetting people.

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