

### What Can You Expect From Your Memory: Seven Myths

In some ways people expect too much from their memories and in other ways they expect too little. Here are seven myths or misconceptions that many people have about their memories and that can prevent you from achieving your full potential.

*Memory is a thing.*

Many people talk about having a good memory or a bad memory like they talk about having good eyesight or a bad heart, as if a memory were some thing. Actually, the word “memory” is just a convenient, abstract term that refers to a number of different mental activities--there isn't even any one place in the brain where all of these activities occur.

*Some people are stuck with bad memories.*

Innate or inborn memory ability is not as important as learned memory skills. Improving your memory is like improving any other skill--you learn the appropriate techniques and you practice them.

*There is an easy way to memorize.*

Some people are looking for the “secret” to a good memory that will take the effort out of remembering. However, remembering is hard work and memory techniques do not necessarily make remembering easy, they just make it more effective. You still have to work at it, but you can get more out of your efforts.

*Some people are blessed with photographic memories.*

Most memory researchers do not believe in the popular notion of a photographic memory. Most of what people attribute to a photographic memory is merely the skillful application of powerful memory techniques that almost anyone can use if they want to badly enough.

*Some people are too old to improve their memories.*

While most elderly people might not be able to remember as well as most college students with equal training, they can remember better than they do now. There is a large amount of evidence that elderly people can learn to use memory techniques effectively.

*A trained memory never forgets.*

It is unrealistic to expect that with memory training you will be able to remember everything you see, hear, or do. All human memories are fallible, and even after mastering powerful memory techniques you will still sometimes forget things—just not as much as you did before!

*People use only 10 percent of their mental potential.*

A common claim and widespread belief is that we use only about 10 percent of our potential brainpower in remembering and other mental activities. However, in spite of how often you might have heard this statement, there is no actual evidence to support it.

## How to Remember Everything: Ten Basic Principles

Some principles of learning and memory are so general and basic that they are involved in almost any kind of memory task. You can remember virtually anything better by applying one or more of these ten principles.

- Pay attention.* This is probably the most basic and most important principle. You must get something before you can forget it, and often when people say they forgot something what they really mean is that they never actually got it in the first place.
- Make it meaningful.* We remember things that have meaning to us better than things that don't, so anything you can do to make something meaningful to you will help. Several of the other principles are specific ways to do this.
- Organize it.* Material that has systematic structure or organization is remembered better than matter unorganized. Group similar items together, chunk individual items into larger units, or break large amounts of material into manageable sub-sections.
- Associate it.* Relate the new thing you want to remember to something you already know, then that something can later serve as a cue to help you find the new thing in your memory.
- Picture it.* Most people remember things they see better than things they hear. Use visual imagery to make a mental picture of what you want to remember, so you see it in your mind's eye.
- Repeat it.* We aren't likely to learn most things after seeing or hearing them only once. Reread the material, or repeat it over to yourself several times. This principle is most effective when used in connection with some of the other principles (e.g., organize it, associate it).
- Review it.* We aren't likely to remember most things we have learned if we don't think about them again after learning them. Set up a systematic schedule to review newly-learned material on a regular basis.
- Relax.* Stress or anxiety interferes with memory, usually by affecting our attention. Relaxation techniques (such as taking slow deep breaths, or thinking of a soothing pleasant experience) can help both with initial learning and with later recall.
- Get interested.* We remember things that are of personal relevance or interest better than things that are not. Find a way to relate the material to your needs or goals, or you can create interest by rewarding yourself as you make progress in your memory task.
- Use a mnemonic.* A memory aid such as making up a story, song, or rhyme, or making up a word from the first letters in a list of items to be remembered, can apply the principles of meaningfulness, association, and organization.