5 simple tricks to sharpen thinking and memory skills

Try repeating words, using a day planner, and associating new names and faces with vivid mental images.

Experiencing a little fuzzy thinking and memory loss is a normal part of aging. At some point, we all forget someone's name or struggle to find just the right word. But there are simple tricks to sharpen your memory and thinking skills. "Certain behavioral strategies and memory-enhancing techniques can help improve your ability to learn new information and retain it over time. I've seen people significantly improve their memory, and perhaps just as important, their confidence in their memory and thinking skills," says Harvard Medical School psychology instructor Dr. Kim Willment. Here are her top five tips.

Repeat
One of the golden rules of learning and memory is repeat, repeat, repeat. That's why as children we were told to write spelling words several times each. "However, the brain responds to novelty, so repeating something in a different way or at a different time will make the most of the novelty effect and allow you to build stronger memories," says Dr. Willment. Examples of using repetition include taking notes, repeating a name after you hear it for the first time, and repeating or paraphrasing what someone says to you.

Organize
A day planner can help you keep track of appointments and activities, and it can also serve as a journal in which you write anything that you would like to remember. Try jotting down conversations, thoughts, and experiences. "Writing down and organizing information reinforces learning. I also recommend that people review current and previous days in their planner at both breakfast and dinner, which is again another opportunity for repetition," says Dr. Willment. Keep the day planner in the same spot at home, but take it with you whenever you leave home.

Visualize
Learning faces and names is a particularly hard task for most people. In addition to repeating a person's name, you can also associate the name with an image. For example, link the name Sandy with the image of a beach, and imagine Sandy on the beach. "This strategy uses a technique called enhanced encoding or visualization to strengthen the association you are making between the face and the name. The more detail the better," says Dr. Willment.

Cue
When you are having difficulty recalling a particular word or fact, you can cue yourself (or others around you) by giving related details or "talking around' the word, name, or fact. Other practical ways to cue include using alarms or a kitchen timer to remind you of tasks or appointments, and placing an object associated with a task you must do in a prominent place at home. "For example, if you want to order tickets to a play, leave a newspaper ad for the play near your telephone or computer," suggests Dr. Willment.

Group
When you're trying to remember a long list of items, it can help to group the items in sets of three to five. You may be familiar with this strategy from learning how to remember phone numbers by dividing them into groups of three or four digits. If you have a list of 15 things on your grocery list, you can group the items by category, such as dairy, produce, canned goods, and frozen foods. "This strategy capitalizes on organization and building associations, and helps to extend the capacity of our short-term memory by chunking information together instead of trying to remember each piece of information independently," says Dr. Willment.

What if these tricks aren't helping you? "Keep in mind that forgetting the name of a former acquaintance or making a mistake on your monthly bills is likely normal. What's not typically normal is forgetting the name of a grandchild and forgetting to pay your bills," says Dr. Willment. Typical symptoms of dementia include problems with short-term memory, keeping track of belongings, paying bills, planning and preparing meals, remembering appointments, or traveling out of the neighborhood. If you're concerned about mild symptoms, consider getting a dementia screening. A neuropsychologist, psychiatrist, or neurologist can administer the test.