

# Six Memory Boosters

How to start remembering the small stuff, and the big stuff, more easily By LESLIE GOLDMAN



**T**HE NEXT TIME you lose your keys or blank on the title of the movie you saw last week, resist the urge to Google “signs of early dementia,” counsels Charan Ranganath, director of the Dynamic Memory Lab at the University of California at Davis and author of *Why We Remember: Unlocking Memory’s Power to Hold On to What Matters*. “The majority of what we experience will be forgotten—and that’s by design,” says the neuroscientist. Indeed, the average person processes more than 74 gigabytes of information a day—nine DVDs’ worth. We expect our memory to function as an archive of the past, Ranganath

says. In reality, your brain selectively whittles and prunes what gets stored so it can perform its primary jobs, which include planning for the future (say, recalling what gave you joy as a child in order to create activities for your grandkids) while also understanding how your past shaped who you are (crucial to healing from trauma and boosting self-awareness). Other skills on your memory’s résumé include decision-making, imagining and communicating. For most adults, momentarily blanking on a friend’s name or misplacing a credit card don’t foreshadow imminent cognitive decline, though they do become increasingly common when we get older. (Not

recognizing a friend or getting lost in familiar places, on the other hand, warrants concern.) Our knowledge of the world and our lived experience “remain relatively intact in healthy aging,” and may even increase with age, says M. Natasha Rajah, a professor of psychology at Toronto Metropolitan University. That said, “recall and memory for contextual details (for example, where you parked your car in the lot) declines significantly, and this decline arises in midlife. Menopause negatively affects this type of memory in some females too.” Which is why so many of us are still poking around, trying to find our keys. So consider these proven strategies to boost your memory and make everyday life a little easier.

**TURBOCHARGE TIP #1**  
**Reverse the ‘doorway effect.’**

►When you enter the kitchen with a sense of purpose, only to freeze—*Why did I come in here?*—you’re experiencing what Ranganath calls an “event boundary,” commonly referred to as the “doorway effect.” Whether you’re leaving a store, boarding a plane, walking from one room to another—any time your perception of your environment changes—your brain creates mental bookmarks called event boundaries that divide your day into distinct before-and-after sections for easier recall later on. If you’re in the living room when you realize you’ve left your eyeglasses in the kitchen, an event boundary is created the moment you enter the kitchen. The problem, Ranganath says, is the brain is easily distracted by the fresh sights, sounds, thoughts and emotions accompanying any new event boundary, causing it to temporarily abandon the thoughts that led up to it. Unless you’re actively mentally repeating *get glasses from island* as you enter the kitchen, your

brain will glom on to the new colors and smells (*Are those cookies?!*) and, *poof*, there goes your memory. (The same thing happens when you’re in the middle of a task and you stop to answer a phone call; you might struggle to remember what you were doing before the call came in.) If you’ve lost the thread, try to recall what you were thinking about back in the previous room, or physically return to the room you were in.



**TURBOCHARGE TIP #2**  
**Use the pink Post-It trick.**

►People often lose track of their most-used items because our novelty-loving brains tend to gloss over routine activities like plunking down a wallet. “It’s not that you don’t have any memory of where you’ve put your glasses,” Ranganath says. “It’s that you’ve put your glasses in many, many places,” so searching for them is like scanning hundreds of yellow Post-It notes and expecting one to jump out.

Be more intentional when setting down frequently misplaced items; mindfully notice the smell of the lilies or the crumbs on the table where you’re leaving your glasses. These details act like neon pink sticky notes in a sea of yellow ones.

**TURBOCHARGE TIP #3**  
**Become a monotasker.**

►Thanks to modern technology, you can chat on the phone as you play a word game, check the likes on

your Facebook post and dismiss the weather alert warning of incoming rain. But any interruption of a conversation or a task creates another event boundary, Ranganath says. “Every time you shift back and forth between two tasks, there’s a lag as your brain reorients,” says Constance Schmidt, professor emeritus of psychology at Middle Tennessee State University, who studies media multitasking. “You need to remember where you were before you were distracted, and it takes cognitive effort to resume the original task.” Even micro interruptions you think you’re ignoring, like a text that’s barely popped up before you swipe it away, are disruptive. “For that fraction of a second,” Schmidt says, “your attention is captured, and interruptions have cognitive costs.” As Ranganath puts it: “Even if you don’t check the text message, you’ve already lost the battle.”

Turn off all notifications and alerts except those deemed absolutely essential and practice focusing on one task at a time, blocking out time chunks for checking email or social media. If tech addiction makes monotasking feel impossible, try an app blocker like Cold Turkey ([getcoldturkey.com](http://getcoldturkey.com)) or Freedom ([freedom.to](http://freedom.to)). You dictate which sites to block and for how long; the app blocker does the dirty work for you.

**TURBOCHARGE TIP #4**  
**Read a novel.**

►When evaluating new patients, one of the first questions Washington, D.C., neurologist and neuropsychiatrist Richard Restak asks is, “Are you much of a reader?” Former avid readers who’ve stopped altogether may be battling depression or vision issues. But if the patient’s response includes some variation of, “I used to read lots of fiction but not anymore,” that’s a red flag for potential cognitive decline, says Restak, a clinical professor of neurology at the



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George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences and author of *The Complete Guide to Memory: The Science of Strengthening Your Mind*.

Fiction, he says, “is a challenge to your working memory,” which has to follow a plot, keep track of multiple characters and engage with the text. Your memory isn’t nearly as challenged by nonfiction, which lets you skip around based on what you find interesting without compromising comprehension.

Restak says you can flex your working memory by picking fiction over nonfiction (at 82, his current favorites include novels by Elizabeth Bowen and J.G. Ballard).

### **TURBOCHARGE TIP #5** **Create a giant strawberry and make it ride a cow.**

►When five-time USA Memory Champion Nelson Dellis needs to memorize as many decks of cards as he can in an hour—his personal best is 20—he turns to mnemonics, a category of memory tools that includes creating outlandish visual images, like that cowboy berry. Other useful mnemonic tools include acronyms (Roy G. Biv, for the colors of the rainbow) and acrostics (My Very Excellent Mother Just Served Us Noodles, for the names of the planets).

Dellis, who was inspired to train for memory championships when his grandmother passed away from Alzheimer’s disease in 2009, says mnemonics work by turning mundane information into dazzling visuals. A grocery list containing strawberries, milk and broccoli is boring. A giant strawberry riding a cow into a backyard planted with cartoonish broccoli trees sticks out. Try it the next time you need to memorize directions, a to-do list or what floor of the parking garage you’re leaving your car on.



*Outrageous images help you remember mundane things.*

### **TURBOCHARGE TIP #6** **Take more pictures with your mind.**

►The next time you’re treated to a gorgeous sunset, resist the urge to whip out your smartphone and start clicking. Filtering life through a camera lens takes you out of the moment, Ranganath says, stealing “your attention away from the parts of the experience you really want to remember later on.”

This isn’t to say you can’t film your grandchild playing soccer or your favorite band rocking out onstage. The point is to be choosy in what you document with your phone.

“Photography can orient you to the moment, and it can be helpful if you use it strategically to help you pay attention to the details that you want to remember later on,” Ranganath says.

On family vacations, he tries to reserve the camera for capturing emotional high points or unique sights, like a particularly gaudy statue—although he usually insists on someone posing next to it. This way, instead of mindlessly documenting every meal or forced family photo, “you’re documenting emotions.”

In other words, you’re capturing a memory. ■

*Leslie Goldman writes on health for Cosmopolitan, Woman’s Day and other publications.*