



# Memory - How it Works

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Hancock has written a regular weekly column entitled "All Psyched Up" for newspapers in two Canadian provinces for more than a dozen years. Over the years, her readers and clients have said that they have benefited from her common-sense solutions, wisdom, and sense of humour. Dr. Linda Hancock, the author of "Life is An Adventure...every step of the way" and "Open for Business Success" is a Registered Psychologist who has a private practice in Medicine Hat. She can be reached at 403-529-6877 or through email [office@drlindahancock.com](mailto:office@drlindahancock.com)

## Published

December 1st, 2008

Today I was with some wonderful people who are members of a bridge club. We were talking about memory and how it is so easy to forget things and how memory problems seem to increase over time. Often people refer to memory as though it was one simple entity that becomes flawed and mysteriously works in some circumstances while not in others. The process of remembering actually involves five steps as follows which, when understood, can be improved upon to enhance one's life.

First of all, we need to listen to have something to remember. How often have you been introduced to someone and then can't remember the name of the person you met? That might be because you didn't really focus on the name at the time or concentrate on remembering. You might have been admiring their outfit, thinking about something else, couldn't hear the name or understand the pronunciation.

Secondly, you need to be able to retain the name in short-term memory for six seconds before it can be transferred into long-term memory. Sales people usually use your name in sentences repeatedly not only as a form of respect but also so that they can remember them. For example, you frequently hear them reply with "Pleased to meet you Mary." or "Do you live in this city, Peter?" or "I believe we met at the charity auction, Dale".

Remembering a person's name can be enhanced through association. There is really nothing more personal to someone than his or her name so talking about is usually quite flattering. You might say "My mother's name is Jean." or "What an interesting name. How do you spell it?" These techniques will help you to remember and provide good conversation.

The third step is to code the information. This is a similar process to putting a label on a file folder. Your folder may read "Nurses" and contain information about those who cared for you when you had surgery. Unfortunately, when you meet a nurse in the mall you may not remember because the label was about your circumstances and not strictly about the person. Step four is to file the information in a place where you will find it. This is like putting the file in order in a cabinet or system so that you can find it again.

Finally, you need a retrieval system in order to find the information and be able to use it again. People who suffer from Alzheimer's or a form of dementia often amaze others when they can sing the words to songs learned in their youth or talk about activities from twenty or more years ago and yet not tell you what happened five minutes ago. Obviously their memory system worked well in times past but there is perhaps a flaw in steps one and two in the present. They may not hear well, not be able to focus or have difficulties in retaining information for more than the six seconds required to transfer to long-term memory banks.

I have found that my memory is good but my retrieval system isn't always as fast as I would like. This is improved by the fact that I don't get worked up about it, laugh and then cue myself by saying aloud "It will come to me in a minute". Sure enough, the information shows up within 60 seconds - sometimes inappropriately in the middle of a sentence. It really doesn't matter. The important thing is that I don't let it bother me.

The next time that you think you are having memory problems, try breaking the situation down to determine which of the five steps is the problem. Then you will be able to develop techniques to improve that area of memory. If you need some help with this, try talking with a Registered Psychologist who has training and experience with problem-solving. And by the way, word puzzles and card games such as bridge or cribbage are excellent ways to strengthen memory. Okay, remind me - who played the Ace?