

**Memory Problems Following Traumatic Brain Injury**

**Patient Information Booklet**



**Talis Consulting Limited**

## What is Memory?

Memory consists of several processes that work in different ways. In order to use your memory you are not just using one skill, incoming information must be attended to. The relevant parts of it must be picked out and these parts must then be stored as a memory in a meaningful way. After this we must successfully access this stored memory later and use it correctly.

### *What About Different Types of Memory?*

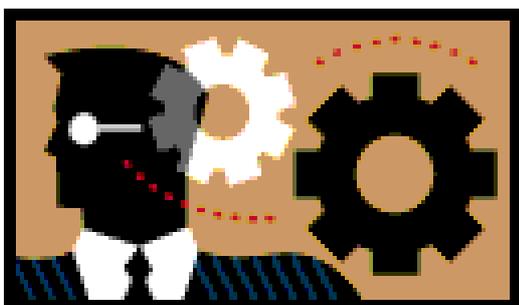
There are many different types of memory we use. We have a short-term memory for things we are currently doing. We also have a separate long-term memory of things that we have learned well; these memories can last a lifetime. But we also have other types of memory, such as procedural memory, which is memory for a task that requires movement (often called “muscle-memory”). These memories often require no thought (like walking). Also we have prospective memory, which is remembering to do things in the future, such as remembering to ring a friend, walk the dog or do the cleaning.



## Why Can Memory be Impaired After a Brain Injury?

As memory involves so many separate processes, many different parts of the brain are used when forming and later recalling a memory. This means that damage to more than one possible location in the brain can affect memory. Memory impairment is a relatively common complaint following a brain injury.

### *How does Brain Injury Affect the Different Types of Memory?*



The many locations of memory processing in the brain means that if one type of memory is impaired, another might remain intact. For example someone might not be able to keep in mind a phone number long enough to dial it, but can remember their own number perfectly well.

Or someone might forget how to find their way to an address, even though they can recall the address perfectly.

What is important is to identify the aspects of memory that you are good at and to use these as much as possible to compensate for aspects you are less good at. Usually prospective memory (remembering to do something in the future) is affected more than the other types of memory, so it is important to concentrate on it.

### *What does this Mean for Me?*

The important thing to keep in mind is that memory problems are very common following a brain injury. Having a memory impairment does not mean you are stupid.

## What can be Done to Help?

Fortunately there is a lot that can be done to work around memory problems, through the use of external aids (writing things down, setting alarms etc.) and internal memory strategies (more efficient ways of learning and remembering).

The tips offered here are a simple and basic overview of a few ways in which you can improve your memory. It is important that you use techniques that work for you and that help your individual needs.



### External Aids:

An external aid is just something in the outside world that acts as a reminder. There are many different forms and different people prefer different methods. Don't be embarrassed to use external aids and don't look upon them as cheating. After all everyone uses external memory aids, every time we write a shopping list or note down an appointment in a diary.

### *Labelling*

Labelling things around the house makes it much easier to find them again. What you label depends on what you think is necessary, but it's a good idea to label the cupboards and drawers in the kitchen, or the rooms of the house.

### *A Place for Everything, and Everything in its Place*

Keep items that you need regularly in the same place. For example always leave your keys on the same dresser, that way you know where they will be when you need them again. Another good idea is to keep your glasses on a cord around your neck, that way you always know where they are. Similarly you might want to attach the key to the door so it is always there when you need it.

### *Set Alarms and Reminders*

One of the most helpful strategies you can employ is to set alarms to remind you when you need to do things. You are able to set multiple alarms on most modern mobile phones, so you can have reminders throughout the day wherever you are. It may be useful to consider buying a large clock with an easily-read face, this has the advantage of being more noticeable, as well as being easy to read.



## More External Memory Aids



### *Have a Regular and Consistent Routine*

Having a regular routine means that there is less pressure to remember what you need to do. This routine can be on a daily or weekly basis. The timing of activities throughout the day or week is not as important as the order of them. If you stick to the same order of activities throughout the day then you are unlikely to forget one of them.

You can also incorporate new activities into your existing routine by associating them with the old ones. For

example if you need to remember to take some pills, place them next to your toothbrush. That way you are reminded to do it when you come to brush your teeth.

### *Diaries and Calendars*

Diaries and calendars can be invaluable for keeping track of things that need to be done in the future. You may want to get a large diary with a page for every day so you can write lots of information down, or you might prefer a smaller diary you can easily carry around with you. Some people prefer a calendar so that they can easily see what they've got lined up for the month ahead. Find your favourite way and stick to it. Don't be embarrassed to refer to your diary frequently, if anything it will make you look like a highly organised person!

### *Note Down Important Information*

It is often a good idea to have a notice board in the house for important information to be written on, such as telephone numbers or instructions on what to do throughout the day. It is also a good idea to keep a notebook handy by the telephone to take down any important messages when someone rings.



## Internal Aids:

Internal aids are simply ways in which we can use our memory more effectively. They basically work on the principle of turning dry information and facts into a form that our brain finds interesting and easy to remember. This is often (but not always) done by visualising the information. They say a picture is worth a thousand words and it seems that this may hold true for your memory.

### Remembering Names

A very common complaint is that even though we can recognise someone, we cannot remember what their name is. We have all experienced this feeling and often we hear someone describing themselves as “good with faces, but not with names”. This complaint is so common we will devote special time to it here, but the strategies described can be applied to the learning of other things too.

*Why can I remember faces, but not the names that go with them?*



The reason for this is because remembering faces involves recognition. The face itself is an external aid that reminds us we have met the person before. However to remember a name requires recall. We must pluck that name out of our memory from nothing. This is a much harder process and therefore names are forgotten more easily.

*How can I help to remember names?*



There is no way to ensure you will remember everyone's name all the time, and if you are required to meet a large group of people you might wish to write all their names down in a note-book. However there are techniques that can greatly improve the way in which you learn names. One of the simplest ways to do this is just to make sure

you pay attention when you are introduced. Repeating the person's name helps to store it firmly. Find reasons to call this person by their name during your conversation.

***What internal strategies can I use to remember names?***

Try to find something distinctive about the person's name and use it to form a mental image, for example if you meet someone whose name is Mike, imagine that person with a microphone instead of a nose. Make this mental image large and vivid and refresh it every time you look at Mike. Some names lend themselves to images very well (for example a Mr. Butcher) however others do not. These names can be twisted to become items, for example James can become jam.



Another strategy is to link the new person to one you already know. For example if you meet a new person by the name of John, think of someone you already know who is called John. If your old friend John was very tall, had a beard or wore glasses, then imagine this new John as being very tall or having the same beard or glasses. Or if your old friend John was a builder, imagine the new John in a hard-hat and overalls. In a similar way to the first strategy make this mental image large and vivid and whenever you look at this new John, you will be reminded of your old friend.

***What if, despite all these strategies, I still meet a person whose name I can't remember?***

Try not to panic in this situation, go through a list of names in your head that start with each letter of the alphabet. Try to think about where you've heard these names before and of any linking images that come to mind with them. This just might kick start one of the learning strategies. If you still can't remember the name don't give up. It may come to you later.



Also don't be afraid to simply ask the person their name, say something like *"I remember you very well, but I'm sorry your name has slipped my mind"*. Finally remember that you can always have a perfectly friendly chat without having to actually saying the person's name.

## Other Internal Strategies to Improve Your Memory

### Chunking Objects

Your brain likes to remember things in groups, and “chunking” information together means you are more likely to remember it later. For example chunk the items on your shopping list together into categories, so treat all the fruit and vegetables as one chunk or items, or all the dairy products as another. This also means that you must spend time organising your information, and this in itself is an aid to memory.

### Chunking Numbers

You can also chunk together numbers you need to remember. Everyone does this naturally when reciting a phone number, you do not recite it all in one go, you break it down into chunks of numbers. Say you need to remember the number 747981. We can chunk this into 747 981. We can also read this number as seven-hundred and forty-seven, and nine-hundred and eighty-one. This brings together the chunks and means we remember the number effectively.

### Make Associations Between the Number Chunks

To increase efficiency further we can make associations between the numbers. With our number 747981, we can make 747 become an aeroplane (a Boeing 747) and 981 might become the George Orwell novel 1981, just missing the first digit. However with this technique it is important that the associations you create make sense to you, and personal associations are remembered more easily.



### Mnemonics

One of the most well-know memory techniques is to use the first letter or every item in a list to create a phrase. For example Richard Of York Gave Battle In Vain would help you remember the order of the colours in a rainbow. This can be applied to any list you need to remember. If you have a shopping list for Bread, Eggs, Dates and Soap, the first letter of each can form the word “BEDS”, making this list far easier to recall.

### Strategies for Recalling Information

If you find yourself unable to remember something, keep relaxed about it, getting frustrated and stressed will make remembering harder. Try to think about where you were when you first learned the information. You also might like to recite the alphabet to yourself and see if you can remember which letter the information you want started with. It may also be useful to try and remember the information you want at a later time, it may suddenly come to you then.

## How Can I Make Learning and Remembering Easier?

An important thing to remember is that no-one's memory is perfect, and it is natural for your memory to go through cycles of good and bad performance. Don't be put off if you find yourself unable to remember something. Coping with these memory failures and remaining calm and patient is an essential first step to adapting to any memory problems.

### *Try not to do too many things at once*

A poor memory can result simply from not paying enough attention in the first place. Try to concentrate on what you are doing and don't let your mind wander. If you know you need to sit down and learn something, try and do it in an environment with as few distractions as possible.



### *Try not to get stressed about your memory problems*

Anxiety and stress will only make it harder to remember something. Avoid stressful situations whenever possible. It is especially important not to get stressed if you cannot remember something, this can lead to a vicious cycle as the more stressed you are then the harder it will be to remember what you wanted to in the first place.

### *Get in the habit of doing tasks immediately*

If you know you need to do something, do it straight away. Putting it off will only make it more likely that you'll forget to do it later on.

### *Make meaningful associations to anything you have to remember*

Your brain will remember vivid and emotional associations far better than dry facts. For example, if you have to remember to phone a friend when you get home, imagine your friend standing by your front door. When you see the front door the association between them and your friend should help jog your memory. Find your own associations that mean something to you and get in the habit of using them.

### **Useful Websites:**

**[www.headway.org.uk](http://www.headway.org.uk)**

***- A useful web site with much information about brain injury and rehabilitation in the UK.***

**[www.birt.co.uk](http://www.birt.co.uk)**

***- Another useful web site concerning brain injury, with downloadable leaflets about brain injury and its implications.***

**[www.tbiguide.com/memory.html](http://www.tbiguide.com/memory.html)**

***- A website with advice and information specifically related to memory problems and how to cope with them.***

**[www.alzscot.org/pages/memory.htm](http://www.alzscot.org/pages/memory.htm)**

***- A website devoted to Alzheimer's disease (where memory loss is a symptom). However has links to websites offering gadgets to aid as external memory cues, such as large clocks clearly displaying the date and time.***

