Memory

**“It is only my memory that has been affected since the accident, how can I improve it?”**

This is a common question we get asked when a person has sustained a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

Usually following a TBI, **long term memory** (e.g. for childhood events, places visited, family and friends from way back) is still intact. The memories are all stored away and can be retrieved when needed.

Difficulties arise when someone is trying to store **new** memories. Short term memory is often severely affected following a TBI and this shows itself in many different ways:

* not remembering what happened yesterday, in the morning, even an hour ago
* forgetting who people are that you have recently been introduced to
* forgetting food in the oven
* forgetting appointments

When it comes to improving short term memory, we do not work on the memory directly but how the information gets into the memory store.

Processing the information effectively and then getting it into the storage system is the most effective way of managing short term memory problems.

The diagram below illustrates how information gets in and out of your brain.

Attention/Concentration

Processing Information

(what you see/hear/read etc)

Memory store

Formulating your thoughts, finding words

Expressing yourself

Communicating and doing tasks/activities

First you must be concentrating on what is going on. If you are distracted by noise, movement or internal thoughts, or if your brain is tired and “zoned out”, then you won’t be able to process what you are hearing, seeing or reading.

The process has broken down at point A

If the information is too much for your brain i.e. it is very complicated or it comes too quickly, then it all gets lost.

Breakdown occurs at point B

Therefore, none (or only small chunks) of the information has reached the memory stores.

When you come to try and find the information to talk about, put things into action e.g. remember that appointment, it just isn’t there.

Breakdown happens at point C

What to do?

To improve your memory first you must look at **where** the process is breaking down and then use a **strategy** to manage the problem (see the information sheet on compensatory strategies).

Firstly, you look at your attention and concentration.

* Ask yourself, “Is my brain fresh?” “Am I concentrating?”
* What distractions are around me?” (e.g. noisy children/TV/radio)
* “Am I doing one thing at a time?”

Fatigue, stress, headaches, illness are all major factors affecting your concentration and therefore your memory.

If you are able to concentrate on information, then it is likely to get to the processing stage.

When processing information, if it is too quick, too much, or too complicated, only bits of information will get through or none of it at all.

Again, you need to be aware that this is happening and use a strategy e.g.

* ask for simple instructions
* ask for them to be in chunks or steps
* ask for repetitions and clarification
* write notes
* repeat information back in your own words to ensure you have understood it
* record the information on a Dictaphone and listen to it over and over

These strategies will help you to process the information successfully and it will be more likely to be stored.

Memory does not just get better.

You have to target the areas of **attention** and **processing** to make a difference to storing the information for **recall** at a later stage.

If managed well, a person with memory difficulties can function successfully.

As well as strategies for attention and processing there are a number of strategies for memory deficits:

* Routine works well – get into a weekly /daily routine and things become habit. The pressure is taken off your brain to remember what you are supposed to be doing (use the weekly planner from the website)
* Diary – look at your diary at set times of the day. Write everything down
* Organised systems – file bills, letters, reports, and label them, be able to find things easily. Keep things that need to be dealt with in an obvious place
* Put things in the same place – have a place for everything (basket or dish by the door for keys)
* Make keys obvious, if you always lose them, by attaching them to a large key ring
* Sticky notes around the house in prominent places (eg turn the heater off)
* Central noticeboard – for notes and reminders
* Calendar on the wall where you can’t miss it
* To do lists
* Shopping lists
* Beepers on a phone or Dictaphone
* Answering machine
* Alarms
* Dictaphone messages
* Tick lists and processes so that stages aren’t forgotten
* Photos with people’s names to use as reminders of who’s who if you are meeting new people at work/socially

Your rehabilitation team will assist you to work out where and when your memory is letting you down. Sometimes you might not even be aware of it, and thinking that you are remembering everything.

When you know what is going wrong, then you can trial ways of managing it with strategies.

Everybody needs to find a strategy that works for him or her.