

Successful Ways to Improve Your Memory for People of All Ages

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Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, was 150 years ahead of his time in understanding how the human brain controls behavior. His concept of the brain matches many features of the sophisticated model coming from recent neuroscientific research.

Here is how Freud thought the brain worked

From his work with patients who suffered with neurotic symptoms, Freud explored hypnosis as a path into the brain. He searched for the hidden reason for neurotic behavior such as obsessive hand-washing or crippling, excessive fear of heights or strangers or spiders. While a patient was in a hypnotic trance, Freud often discovered traumatic experiences “forgotten” by the patient---experiences that seemed to have a connection to the disabling neurotic behavior.

The influence of hypnosis on memory

To illustrate the power of hypnosis on memory, here is an example from Art Linkletter, a talk show celebrity in the early days of television. To explore the influence of hypnosis on memory, Linkletter conducted this experiment:

He invited a person from the audience at random and said to the woman: “I will give you \$500 if you can tell me your name.” The audience gasped! The woman recited her name and Linkletter verified by looking at her driver’s license, then handed her five one hundred dollar bills.

Linkletter introduced the woman to a stage hypnotist and asked, “Are you willing to be hypnotized?” When the woman agreed, the hypnotist led her off stage and returned twenty minutes later. Linkletter said, “I will give you another \$500 dollars if you can tell me your name.” There was a long pause.

Linkletter said, “Please take your time. Tell me, what-is- your-name?” Another long pause. The woman said, “It was right on the tip of my tongue.” She was unable to recall her own name because the hypnotist said to her while she was in a hypnotic trance, “When Art Linkletter asks you your name, you will not be able to recall it.”

Back to Freud

Freud reasoned that if painful memories can somehow be brought to the consciousness of the patient, the insight may relieve the dysfunctional behavior. Once out of the trance however, explaining the memory to the patient sometimes helped but often it did not. The conscious mind seems to resist confronting a traumatic event hidden somewhere in the brain. Art Linkletter illustrated that the unconscious mind has the power to hide information, even information that the conscious mind can always instantly retrieve, such as one’s own name.

Freud tried a different strategy

If, somehow, painful memories can be recovered while one is conscious, the symptom may disappear. To accomplish this, Freud asked his patients to recline on a couch and “free associate” starting perhaps with a night dream. After many sessions, some patients were able to recover and reevaluate traumatic memories, long forgotten. That process, known later as psychoanalysis, is the therapy that made Sigmund Freud a famous name in psychiatry. Although never validated with rigorous scientific experimentation, the approach was practical enough to be integrated into therapeutic practice of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists.

Freud’s theory of dreams

Dreams often express hidden desires, according to Freud. For example, one of his patients had a dream about attending the funeral of a favorite nephew. This horrifying dream did not make sense to the patient until, in the process of free association, the dream was decoded as an expression of her desire to meet once again a physician she met and was attracted to at the funeral of a distant relative. As we are all aware, dreams make no sense when we awaken, but while experiencing the dream, the event is real, logical, and believable. There is an explanation for this phenomenon.

Freud’s model of the brain

From his work with patients, Freud conceptualized the brain as a conscious brain and an unconscious (or subconscious) brain. He thought that the conscious brain was major and dominant while the unconscious brain was minor and submissive. But, the unconscious brain seemed to have a powerful influence on human behavior such as memory, as Art Linkletter demonstrated. Exactly how this worked was a mystery, until clues were discovered in the late 20th century and the current 21st century.

Freud’s conscious brain

When we are awake, the conscious brain seems to be in control, but this may be an illusion. The conscious brain seems to be located in the left frontal lobe of the brain, called Broca’s Area. The left brain can talk, argue, reason, debate, and evaluate, but it accounts for only 1/6 of the electrical activity in the whole brain.

The left brain is conscious while we are awake, but the “unconscious” right brain is not unconscious at all. It is always conscious. Freud thought the right brain was unconscious because it cannot talk. Although it is mute, the right brain can communicate in a faint whisper, singing, drawing, physical behavior such as body language, drama, storytelling, and dreams. The right brain accounts for 5/6 of the electrical activity in the whole brain.

Fine-tuning Freud’s model of the brain

First, the right brain (Freud’s unconscious brain) is never unconscious. It is always conscious, but it cannot speak. It seems to be aware of our entire history. Often in a life-threatening situation, people report “My entire life flashed before my eyes.” This suggests: Our history is a kind of neural tape recording or DVD that can be played back. The right brain seems to regulate and control all the billions of chemical processes in the human body. It seems to know everything that we need to know to survive.

Second, the left brain (Freud's conscious brain) is simply a switchboard to send messages to the right brain where all data is stored. These messages are requests for information or solutions to problems or goals. How fast can we retrieve information?

Some clues

You have some clues by observing a speaker's momentary pauses with "uh" or "um" or "well" or "you know." This gives the right brain a millisecond or more to search, retrieve, and transmit information requested by the left brain. Professional speakers learn to speak without "uh" or "um" with the skillful use of momentary silence. The master of this skill is a talk show host of early television, Arthur Godfrey, who stumbled upon the technique of pauses when he was convalescing in a hospital bed. As he listened to the radio, he realized that announcers were talking as if they were addressing millions of people. But actually, they were talking to only one person, a guy reclining in a hospital bed. From that moment on, Godfrey spoke on the radio to only one person. His ability to use pauses as he talked to only one person made him one of the most successful sales persons in the history of television. Another maestro of the *silent pause* was the late newscaster, Paul Harvey. Many broadcasters today, feeling the pressure of seconds, talk like water coming out of a fire hose with no pauses. It is almost as if they have never heard of periods, commas, and paragraphs.

Our brain knows the answer before we do

As Robert Ornstein reported in his book, *The Right Mind: Making sense of the hemispheres,* ... The brain (i.e., the right brain) knows the answer 1/2 second or more before we do (i.e., the left brain). The request for and retrieval of information may take place across a complex bundle of fibers called the corpus callosum, which connects the right and left brain. Some information travels at high speed from the right to left side of the brain along a kind of freeway, and other information can only move slowly along side streets with detours, stop signs, and stop lights. The delay in transmission may take hours, days, months or years.

Another important function of the left brain

The left brain is a switchboard with another important function, and that is to keep us safe and sane. It seems to work like this: The right brain is a treasure of stored raw data, which is unevaluated. When a request from the left brain comes in, the right brain will search for answers, without comment or editing. It is up to the left brain to look at the incoming message and evaluate it.

A personal example

I have my wife's permission to share this experience with you. In a casual conversation, my wife mentioned to me that she would like to lose some weight. My response was, "I don't think that is necessary." That was the extent of our conversation.

That night we went to bed and the next morning my wife said, "I had the strangest dream. I dreamt I was in the dentist's chair and he was filling a cavity with a miniature doorbell so that every time I chewed, the door bell rang."

I said, "Sigmund Freud would knock that one out of the ball park"

She said, "What does the dream mean?"

I replied, "Well, you made a request (of your "unconscious" right brain) that you wanted to lose weight. Your right brain presented a solution in your dream. If every time you chew, a

doorbell rings, you will not chew as often. If you chew less, you consume less food and therefore lose weight.”

She said, “But that is a crazy solution!”

I said, “Yep, but remember the right brain’s mission is to answer any request you make without editing. Notice that while you were sleeping, you detected no flaw in the solution. The experience seemed normal and reasonable, but once you woke up, the left brain clicked on and evaluated the dream as ‘weird’ or ‘crazy.’”

She commented, “While I was dreaming, if I detected how strange the dentist’s behavior was, I would have jumped up from the chair, run screaming from his office and immediately reported him to authorities.”

My experience in a statistics class:

A revelation about how the “all knowing” right brain works

One afternoon I walked into my classroom with thirty students enrolled in my statistic’s course already sitting at their desks waiting for me. As I approached the podium, I suddenly realized that I forgot my notes for this lecture back in my office, which was a ten minute walk at the other end of the campus. Now what? This is a scenario right out one of those anxiety dreams most of us have experienced.

I thought, “Wow! I can’t ask these students to sit there for twenty or thirty minutes while I returned to my office to retrieve my notes. Well, if there is anything to the notion that my right brain has all the information for this lecture stored faithfully, I should be able to retrieve it.”

I turned to the chalkboard, picked up a piece of chalk and began to write the topic for the lecture. It was like a click and the information started flowing seamlessly through my arm and on to the board. In the next ninety minutes, there was no hesitation. No stumbling. No delay. The lecture was all there. The students detected absolutely no problem because there wasn’t one.” From that time on for years until my retirement, I never carried another note to a statistic’s class. As an aside, after this startling revelation that I did not need notes, students would sometimes, at the end of a class, casually come up to the podium and subtly search for notes they suspected must be hidden somewhere.

I must tell you that lecturing without notes is like an acrobat working without a net: Students are impressed. My favorite example is Rosemary, one of my students, a charming middle-aged black woman who reared many children by herself and was intimidated by no one in the world and certainly not me. She was returning to college to complete her degree. She said to me with the entire class listening, “Dear Dr. Asher! You actually have all that information in your head!”

Rosemary was one of those rare people with a gift of being able to tell someone to go to hell and they would more or less look forward to the trip. Once, after I explained a rather complex mathematical concept, Rosemary interrupted me with, “Dr. Asher, please stop talking now. Walk out of the room for a few minutes and let us digest what you just said.” I replied, “Certainly, Rosemary. Thank you for the guidance.” I left the room, walked down the hall, and got a drink of water.

Another personal example

When I completed a 260 page memoir entitled, [*Growing Up in Norman Rockwell's America*](#), I shared my experience with others who would like to write their memoir for their family. In an article, [*Tips for Writing Your Memoir*](#) (which you will find by going to tpr-world.com), I said about "Writer's Block":

Just thinking about writing a memoir triggers something in one's brain that whispers, "You can't do it! Your memory of people and events is sketchy at best. It won't work! Don't bother trying!" I discovered that those messages are an illusion. Just sit down at your computer keyboard and type anything you can remember about a scene and something magical will happen. A static scene will suddenly morph into a kind of motion picture replaying exactly what is happening in real time with actual conversations of people involved. All you have to do is observe the action, and write what you are hearing and seeing and feeling.

Artificial limits

When instruction is pitched to the student's left brain as in lecturing and reading textbooks, we can expect resistance to the intake of information because the left hemisphere is examining the information trying to decide whether to transfer it for storage to the right brain. Remember, it is safer to reject information rather than take a chance that it may disrupt or even harm the student. The left brain is comfortable letting the student function as usual with no surprises, no changes from a proven routine.

This filtering by the left brain also produces the by-product of the familiar normal or bell-shaped curve for classroom performance. That's why most books in educational psychology will remind educators that a "normal" curve can be expected of classroom learning in any school setting from elementary through the university. Therefore, administrators are suspicious of student performance in any class that does not manifest itself in a "normal" curve. If the grades are not distributed in a normal curve, they look for egregious "grade inflation."

The myth of a "normal" curve

If, however, instruction is pitched to the right hemisphere of the brain (which it rarely is), then we can expect student performance to be skewed, with most students clustered together at the high end of the scale. Most students will achieve an A or a B in the course. There is no cause for alarm. The right brain can intake information in the very first exposure as I demonstrated in my books, [*The Super School of the 21st Century*](#) and [*Brainswitching: Learning on the right side of the brain*](#).

Examples of getting it in the first exposure: The Memory Book

The Memory Book by Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas represents most books that promise an improvement in one's memory. All these books work because they suggest ways to access the "unconscious" right brain for understanding and retention in the first exposure to information. Harry Lorayne tells his personal story of dropping out of high school which he blamed on his "poor" memory. Determined to improve his memory, he read every book he could find on memory training.

The results were stunning. For example, to demonstrate his memory, he would stand next to the president of the club he was visiting and be introduced to every club member, which sometimes was as many as 1,500 people. At the end of a short twenty minute presentation on memory, Harry promised to pay any person in the audience a thousand dollars if he could not

remember their name. Then, he would ask everyone in the audience to stand and when he pointed to each person and spoke their name, that person sat down. He sat down everyone in the audience -always! All this by being able to access the “unconscious” right brain. The lesson I get from Harry’s personal story is that every person, (although they tend not to believe it), can do what a high school dropout like Harry is able to do.

Jerry Lucas, the co-author of *The Memory Book*, had this personal story to tell. Jerry believed that 98 percent of everything a student is required to do in school from first grade through the university is memory of small details. Like Harry, he discovered ways of accessing the “unconscious” brain for first exposure learning, which he shared in his book.

The results were again stunning. He went through the university in a quarter of the time that most students experience, achieved Phi Beta Kappa, and had time to be a basketball star who would be named one of the 50 greatest players in National Basketball Association history. The lesson I get out of the personal stories of Harry and Jerry is the most important class for every student in school at any level is to start with a course in memory training, which means developing the skill to access the right hemisphere of the brain.

More on artificial limits: Learn their names in the first meeting

A colleague of mine complained that he was having some difficulty controlling a class of about 150 freshmen students in a large auditorium. My colleague was annoyed that some students were reading newspapers in the rear of the auditorium and others were “making out.”

I recommended that it would be helpful to learn each person’s name in the first class meeting. “Then when you observe deviant behavior, just write the name of the student on one corner of your chalkboard and without comment, continue your lecture. At the end, the student will come up to you and ask why his or her name was on the chalkboard. That’s time for a brief, mini-etiquette lesson in acceptable classroom behavior.

The I-can’t-do-it syndrome

My colleague responded with, “I can’t do that! I can’t learn their names in the first class meeting! Even in a small class of thirty, I may not know the names of all my students even by the end of the semester.” But, by the end of the semester, it is too late. (Notice the left brain’s automatic response of, I-can’t-do-it. The intent is to protect the person from an intrusion into one’s normal, safe routine.)

The most important task for any teacher

As a college professor the most important task I accomplish is to learn every student’s name in the first class meeting.

It is not that difficult with a simple procedure, and if Harry Lorayne, a high school dropout, can learn 1,500 names in a brief, three second introduction to each person, certainly instructors should be able to learn 30, 40 or even 150 student names in an hour or two.

Here is my memory trick

I pass out a 3 by 5 card to each student. I invite each student to select another student who is a stranger and interview that person for five minutes to discover three facts about the interviewee. “Please be sure one of those facts is an odd-ball fact. For example, here is an odd-ball fact about myself: My mother is a movie actress who had a bit part in every movie she ever auditioned for.”

Then, I go around the room, pick up each card as I ask the interviewer, "Please stand with the person you interviewed and introduce that person to the class." As the introduction proceeds, I study the name printed on the card, listen, and associate the name, face and the odd-ball piece of information about that person. For example, one student was introduced as a child in a family of fifteen children. I then say, "This is Sam and he grew up in a family of fifteen children." After the final introduction. I go around the room, point to an individual, say their name and a fact I associated with the name.

The secret of remembering names

As my dad often said, "Nothing is more important to a person than their name." When someone tells me, "I can not remember the names of people I meet," I know this is a myth. First, most of us do not hear the name when we are introduced. Part of the blame is, people tend to blur the pronunciation of their name. Hence, we do not hear it to begin with. It is no crime to say, "Excuse me! I didn't hear your name." Then when you hear it again, say it to be sure you heard the name accurately. Next, use the person's name several times in the conversation and associate the name with something interesting about the person. The association can be something about their physical appearance or the association can be something interesting or unusual about their background.

What seniors can learn about memory from brain lateralization research

Roger Sperry, from the California Institute of Technology, won a Nobel Prize for his demonstration that each hemisphere of a cat's brain can function independently. He separated each hemisphere by cutting the connecting bundle of fibers (the corpus callosum). Hundreds of studies by researchers worldwide followed to show that the right and left hemispheres seem to have complimentary missions.

Like male and female, the right and left seem to be "mirror images" of each other. For male and female, there is no behavior, no matter how trivial, that, on the average, will not show a significant statistical difference. For example, women, on the average, have significantly better peripheral vision compared with men. Women, again on the average, smile more often than men. Men tend to glance behind them when opening a door significantly more often than women.

Sperry's cat experiment inspired surgeons

As reported in Michael Gazzaniga's book, *Nature's Mind*, Sperry's cats with both hemispheres of the brain separated seem to be "normal" after the operation. Some people have to be hospitalized when an epileptic seizure starts in one hemisphere of the brain and spreads like an electrical storm through the entire brain. Surgeons, following Sperry's research, reasoned that perhaps the seizure in their patients would not be as severe if the corpus callosum was cut, thus restricting the seizure to one hemisphere of the brain.

The operation was successful, and now we had people walking around with a "split brain." In the scores of studies with these patients, one struck me as unlocking one secret of how memory works. The experiment with a split-brain patient P.S., went like this: The directions to P.S. were, "When you see a word flash on the screen such as 'laugh,' please laugh. If you see 'cry,' then cry." When the command "rub" was flashed to the right hemisphere, the subject rubbed the back of his head with his left hand.

He was asked, "What was the command?"

He said, "itch."

It appeared that when the command of "rub" was received in the right brain, the subject's hand reached up and touched the back of his neck. The behavior was observed by the left brain, which made an interpretation that he was itching his neck.

Notice that the left brain was not aware of what caused the movement in P.S. The left brain only observed P.S. lift his left hand to the back of his head and his fingers were moving on the back of his neck. The left brain guessed that P.S. was "itching his neck." It seemed reasonable just looking at what P.S. was doing. I conclude that each hemisphere of the brain is monitoring the other hemisphere.

The monitoring process

The monitoring process was further shown in this stunning demonstration: "P.S., assume the position of ____ and the word "boxer" was flashed to the right brain. Immediately, P.S. shifted his body into a pugilistic stance.

"P.S., what word did you see?"

To the amazement of the researchers, P.S. answered without hesitation, "The word was boxer." Remember, in every previous test in which information, either words or pictures, was flashed to the right hemisphere, there was a response of, "I didn't see anything or "I don't know!" Now, the right brain had suddenly found its tongue. It could speak and give an answer that was exactly on-target. This was too good to be true.

Play it again, Sam

The demonstration was repeated, but just after "boxer" was projected to the right brain, P.S. was restrained from moving. Then he was asked, "What word did you see?"

He said, "I don't know."

Moments later, when he was released, he assumed a pugilistic stance and said, "OK, it was boxer."

Each hemisphere of the brain seems to be monitoring the other. Notice what happens when the test was reversed with the left hemisphere receiving the commands. When the command "laugh" was flashed to the left brain, P. S. uttered the word aloud, then executed the command. The right brain, in my opinion, heard the command and then executed the instruction.

My recommendation for everyone in school from the first grade through the university

My recommendation for everyone still in school is to achieve the skill of memory training advocated by Harry and Jerry. Immediately after the memory course, most everyone in school, at all levels, will zoom into the rarefied ranks of "A" and "B" students. They not only achieve "A"s and "B"s, but they complete school, as Jerry did, in 1/4 or 1/2 of the time. That represents saving billions of taxpayer dollars. As another bonus, student phenomenal school success will dramatically reduce the dropout rate of students from the current 1/3 to 1/2 of the student population.

My recommendation for seniors

My recommendation is simple: P.S.'s experience tells me this: Seniors (and everyone else) should be talking to themselves. For example, "I am placing my keys on the top of my desk." Both sides of the brain hear this. You will go right to your desk when you want your keys.

When you park your car, look around you and say out loud, "I parked my car at G1, which stands for Ginny, my number one wife." You will never forget where your car is located. If the public garage has no symbols or color coding, then look around for landmarks and say aloud, "I see an elevator and there is a view of a movie theater down on the street." You will not forget where your car is parked.

Talk to yourself

"Where am I going? I am going to the freeway and I want to get off at the Brokaw exit. There was a news commentator named, Tom Brokaw. I want to exit the freeway at the Tom Brokaw exit." The more associations you make, the more successful your memory.

Practice to increase your memory skill

My wife and I continually play with our memories such as this: When we go to a restaurant more than once, we ask the server their name and use the name several times during the meal. The next time we come to the restaurant, I will ask my wife, "All right. See that server over there. What is his name?" "That's Juan, the bus boy." People are thrilled when we remember their name because most people do not bother remembering the names of employees in a restaurant.

One server told us, "My name is Debbie."

I said, "Were your parents a fan of the famous Debbie Reynolds who played in Singin' in the Rain?"

Her face lit up. She laughed and said, "Yes, They loved Debbie Reynolds. I was named after her."

I said, "I bet they gave you singing and dancing lessons."

She laughed "Yes. Yes. Many of each."

Every time we come into the restaurant, I address her as Debbie Reynolds and she gives us a hug. This works for the doctor's office. Address the receptionist, nurses, and others by name. You become a memorable patient.

When we are watching movies at home, we connect actors with other movie projects. For example, "Do you recognize the sheriff? He played a priest in (and I will state the title of the movie)." Start making connections. It will improve your memory skill and it's lots of fun!

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