

Brain Experts' 6 Best Memory Tricks

By Paula Spencer Scott, Caring.com
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1. Never forget a name: Look, snap, connect.

There are three steps to psychiatrist Gary Small's favorite tactic, which he calls "Look, Snap, Connect." The first is to tell yourself that remembering a particular name is a priority, says Small, who's also the director of the UCLA Center on Aging and author of several books about memory and cognition, including *The Naked Lady Who Stood on Her Head*.

Step 1: Really focus (**LOOK**) on a name and face you want to remember.

Step 2: Create a visual snapshot (SNAP) of the name and face.

Note a key visual characteristic:

Big ears? Silver hair? Blue eyes? Dimples?

Also **create an image about the name:**

A cat stands for Mrs. Katz, a dollar bill for someone named Bill.

"I sometimes see a famous person with a similar name," Small says.

"So Angela Shirnberger becomes Angelina Jolie wearing shined shoes and eating a burger."

Step 3: Join the two images (CONNECT):

Maybe blue-eyed Bill is a blue dollar bill,

or Angela Shirnberger is a silver-haired Angelina Jolie with shiny shoes eating a hamburger.

The simple act of thinking up these images helps cement them in your memory --

and ups the odds that the new name will materialize for you the next time you encounter the person.

2. Another name trick: Use it before you lose it.

If a new name goes in one ear and out the other, try to trap it inside your head by using it immediately, suggests University of Wisconsin geriatric psychiatrist Ken Robbins, who's also board certified in internal medicine.

When you meet John Jones, Robbins says, **deliberately repeat his name: "Nice to meet you, John."**

Then use his name in conversation every few minutes while you talk:

"So John, how long have you been with your company?"

And, "That's a great point, John."

You might feel a little like a genial newscaster, but you don't have to overdo it.

Every few minutes is sufficient.

Remembering names is tricky because we're distracted by the social interactions of the moment.

And names are arbitrary, a type of information that's harder to retain.

"Simply saying the name aloud a few times helps it stick," Robbins says.

As you walk away from the person, say the name again to yourself: "So that was John Jones of ABC Company."

3. To remember to do something: Picture it.

Don't want to forget to meet your friend for lunch?

Need to remember to take your medicine?

Create an image that associates the task with something else happening around the same time,

and then picture yourself following through when you see that cue,

suggests memory specialist Mark McDaniel, a professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis.

Say the mailman comes just before lunch.

Now picture yourself getting up to go to lunch when you see the mail truck.

Odds are good that when the truck appears, that's what you'll do.

"The concrete environmental event cues you.

It triggers the intention," McDaniel says.

Studies have shown that women who visualize doing breast self-exams in the shower are more likely to actually do them.

Diabetics are more likely to monitor blood glucose daily when the task is tied to another everyday event.

More examples: Remember to take a new morning medication

by imagining yourself doing so when you sip juice at breakfast (if you have juice every day).

Remember to drop off dry cleaning by picturing doing so as you pass a particular landmark at that intersection.

4. To remember where things are: Put them in your path.

Visual reminders are like crutches.

Without them, we have to conjure up an answer from thin air ("Now where did I put my umbrella?") or, worse, remember to remember the thing in the first place ("Darn! Forgot my umbrella again!").

Storing an umbrella (or keys, or sunglasses) right by the door

makes you more likely to remember to find it and take it with you.

Having a habitual storage spot, like an umbrella stand, is another memory booster.

"Leaving it where you can see it so you don't forget helps your prospective memory, which is remembering to remember things, like where you put something," psychiatrist Gary Small says.

But what if the umbrella stand becomes "invisible" to you because it's sunny on most days, so you risk forgetting the thing when it rains?

Again, use a visual reminder, Small says.

Move the umbrella right in front of the door as soon as you see the rain forecast.

Similarly, leave papers you need to take home with you on the floor beside your desk, right in your footpath.

Assemble ingredients on a counter before you begin cooking, so you're unlikely to forget any.

Put a package bound for UPS in your car when you have it ready;

don't expect to remember to look for it when you're leaving the house.

5. To recall important events: Do a nightly review.

Parents sometimes use a "review the day" tactic at bedtime

to give young kids a warm, fuzzy feeling and to recap the day's best teachable moments.

A similar process can help your brain recap what's important.

It's easy: **Before going to bed, run a mental review of the key things** that happened that you want to remember.

You got a call confirming an appointment for tomorrow?

Promised a friend you'd follow up about lunch?

Made a new acquaintance? (What was her name? Her job? Her partner's name?)

Better yet: Carry a small notebook into which you jot critical things to remember during the day.

Review these notes at day's end.

"Most people find that the combination of writing and then reviewing really helps," psychiatrist Ken Robbins says

6. To recollect anything: Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

A tactic that goes by the fancy names of "spaced rehearsal" or "expanded retrieval" is a favorite because it's so effective.

Simply repeat something over and over at slightly extended intervals.

Memory specialist Professor Mark McDaniel says the tactic is often used with Alzheimer's patients.

"And if it works for many of them, it can work for someone with a healthy brain," he says.

To use it: Say you want to remember a name or a short grocery list,

or -- as is often the case for Alzheimer's patients --

you need to remind yourself or your loved one to check a calendar.

Repeat the name or task to yourself. Wait 15 seconds.

Silently say it again to yourself. ("Bob Smith" or "Check the calendar.")

Wait 45 seconds. Spaced Bring it back up.

Wait 90 seconds, then repeat. "If you can remember it after five minutes, you're in good shape," McDaniel says. "It's been well stored."

"Spaced is the operative word," says Martha Weinman Lear,

author of *Where Did I Leave My Glasses?*

The What, When and Why of Normal Memory Loss.

"Rapid cramming -- muttering someone's name to yourself over and over in rapid succession -- is not the best way to commit a name, or anything else, to memory."