

Don't just accept Memory Loss as a normal part of getting older

Have you ever wondered if memory loss is just a normal part of getting older? How can we combat some of the effects of aging? Our memory changes because there are many different brain processes that must work in harmony when we try to remember something. Some functions in the brain are normally affected by the aging process, but that doesn't mean you have to live with them!

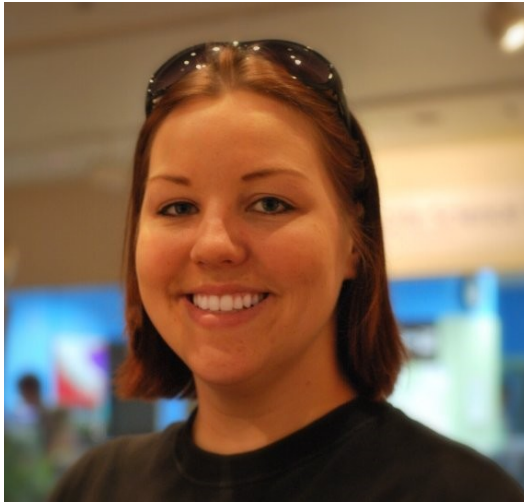
Many older adults encounter memory problems, but we can exercise our mental muscles and help to make them stronger. Most people are familiar with memory stages, such as short and long term memory. Our short term memory is dependent on our brain health. The faster our brain processes information, the better our short term memory.

In the brain, information is communicated from cell to cell through electricity. These impulses become chemical messages inside the brain. Our bodies speed up brain processing by providing 'insulation', or myelin, along the electrical pathways. As we age the myelin in our brain begins to thin, which may result in slower processing time.

By keeping our brain healthy with physical and mental exercise, we can help to compensate for these natural changes. If you consider this information important, you may want to remember it at a later date. In order to do that, you will need to use the memory processes. These functions are important because they take place every time we learn something new or make a new memory.

There are three memory processes - encoding, storage, and retrieval. Encoding is the 'translator' of the brain, making facts and information into chemical signals that the brain understands. We then save that information in the brain through the storage process. The next time we think of this information we are attempting the retrieval process. Learning about these processes is a vital part of understanding how your brain changes with age. Not all memory processes are affected equally – encoding often becomes more difficult in older adulthood, whereas retrieval is relatively well preserved. This explains why we can easily remember our favorite high school teacher, but we may struggle when recalling our new phone number. The retrieval of previously stored information (your teacher's name) is not affected, but the encoding and storage of new material (a phone number) can be more difficult. The struggle is not getting old information out; it's putting new information in!

Thelma's Place offers ongoing cognitive enhancement classes. In these weekly sessions we practice memory making, share strategies with peers, and learn how our brains work. Each week we provide a variety of activities designed to stimulate many parts of your brain. For more information contact Mary Reitan at 503-502-4509 or mcreitan@aol.com.



Cassy Dinius is a psychology student at Western Oregon University. She is a certified geriatric wellness instructor and offers cognitive enhancement classes throughout the Willamette Valley