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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS

I forget, have we discussed memory loss before?

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I am a manager in my mid 50s in a high-profile job. For the past several months, I have had situations where my mind is suddenly a blank. At a business lunch, I forgot the name of someone at the table - and there were only five of us. When a colleague approached, I couldn't make introductions. Last week, I forgot about a meeting I had scheduled. I'm getting worried. What should I do?

-- Call Me Dumbo

PRINT EDITION - SECTION FRONT



Dear Dumbo,

What you're really asking is if you're on the road to dementia. If you forget a client's name today, will you forget your own name tomorrow?

"I get this question about five times a day. After cancer, the biggest worry is memory loss," said Howard Chertkow, a neurologist at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal.

With baby-boomers and seniors making up 75 per cent of the Canadian population, the energy expended on this collective hand-wringing could be harnessed as the next clean energy source. Instead, it has launched two familiar responses to health concerns - the search for a quick fix, and the drive to make money. More on that in a moment.

First, the good news: 80 per cent of people tested over the age of 65 do not show signs of developing Alzheimer's disease, - one of the main causes of serious memory loss, Dr. Chertkow reports, quoting from the Canadian Study of Health and Aging. This study is following 10,200 Canadians as they age, and right now only 8 per cent of those 65 and older are on the road to serious cognitive decline, while 12 to 16 per cent have some mild impairments.

Now the bad news: loss of mental acuity is a normal part of aging. Distinguishing between run-of-the-mill forgetting and the beginnings of something serious is a subtle affair, having to do with your personal health picture, family history and your threshold for tolerating mental mishaps. So my first piece of advice is to see your family physician. He or she can rule out other problems that could cause memory loss

- stress, depression, and diabetes being just a few - and can give you a little memory test, if you're that worried.

Still, "looking after chronic health problems is the most important thing they can do," Dr. Chertkow said, mentioning a "huge synergy" between vascular damage to the brain, such as resulting from mini strokes, and the expression of Alzheimer's.

When his patients approach him with questions about diet or drugs, he tells them the best way to save neuron power is to stop smoking and control weight and blood pressure.

"You should be happy and not lonely," he added. A 2004 Swedish study by epidemiologist Laura Fratiglioni hammers home just how important friends and family are to our health and well-being. Among 1,200 people followed for three years, the ones most likely to develop dementia lived alone and weren't in regular contact with relatives or friends.

Given how powerful social contact is, it shouldn't be surprising that marriage is a great inoculation against serious memory loss. It's not just because your spouse remembers what movies you've seen and whether you liked them, but probably because protective neurotransmitters are released when you connect with people in a deeply meaningful way.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention the association between learning new skills and preserving, or even building neural connections. This has fuelled a huge industry, with product names such as "Brain Trainer," "Brain Builder" and "Mind Spa," not to mention thousands of "brain gyms" in nursing homes, and \$250-million (U.S.) in revenue generated by the Sudoku puzzle industry over the past two years alone, according to The New York Times.

If you detect a note of skepticism, it's not because I don't believe that doing puzzles can be good for your memory. Other than making a dent in your pocketbook, they can't possibly be bad for you. But there's a chicken-egg issue at play here: Do Sudoku or crossword puzzles actually boost brain power? Or do smarter people choose to do these and continue to take on more challenging tasks as they get older, thus strengthening their brain - and memory power? One thing should be clear though: You can be a whiz at matching up numbers in Sudoku - but still forget the name of that vaguely person walking toward you in a restaurant.

Still, I like the hopeful tone in psychiatrist Norman Doidge's new book, *The Brain That Changes Itself*. Novelty, and attentively learning new routines is what counts, whether it's a dance, a language or an instrument, he told me. "For your memory to remain sharp, you have to do demanding tasks where you pay close attention, the way you did when you mastered vocabulary in a foreign language. That's the brain equivalent of a cardio workout."

I like the sound of that. So if I learn how he crafted the compelling stories in his book, will I remember the name of my neighbour's dog next week? Probably not, but then, what's really important? Whatever that is, I hope I remember it.

Dear Susan,

How does a young, dynamic person with a proven track record in a Fortune 500 company research her potential in the job market? Definitely time for a change, but who and where is the question. Any advice?

-- Footloose

Dear Footloose,

Once upon a time, finding a job was a hush-hush affair. Quietly, you torted up your CV, discreetly approached a recruiter and, in more recent times, searched the Web - perhaps at work and you hoped no one would notice.

No more. The way to find what you're worth and where your next position might be now requires you to show your face and talk to people. This goes for leaders as well as debutantes.

Networking - that overused term that connotes glad-handing, boozy lunches and trading information and favours - is not just for those between jobs. "Seventy-five per cent of all job openings are not through recruiters or ads but through personal networking. You can send all the CVs you want, but you'll only cover 25 per cent," said executive recruiter David Lépine, from the Montreal search firm Hevey Lépine Chencherle.

Another self-described head-hunter, Guy Hébert, of Groupe Hébert agreed. "We only get the positions that are hard to fill." Employers look within their networks first, he said.

That's because there's lots of reciprocity, or what psychologists call "social exchange," within a single industry. Trading favours happens instinctively within a defined group. But moving beyond your own boundaries means creating broader networks, and those have to be cultivated.

Early this year, Herminia Ibarra, a professor of organizational behaviour at France's Insead Institute, wrote about her two-year study following 30 managers who were at the cusp of becoming leaders. She found that many of them had carved out their niches by bearing down on the workload and mastering every technical detail of their jobs - what they considered their "real" work - but then got stymied because they hadn't created the human contacts that could buoy them upward. They not only questioned the value of networking (who has time?), they weren't sure how to go about it.

Prof. Ibarra helpfully breaks down networking into three types, from the easiest to the hardest: The first requires grooming your relationships with the people you work with; the second, widening your circle to include professional associations, clubs and friends; the third is strategic networking, and that was the most difficult for the managers in Prof. Ibarra's sample. They had to identify the allies who might be important to them - and their businesses - in the future and seek them out. And you can't do that sitting in your office, quietly tarding up your résumé.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist who writes about human behaviour and social science.

After cancer, the biggest worry is memory loss.

Neurologist Howard Chertkow

Something to remember

Tips for preventing memory loss:

Look after chronic medical problems;

Do brisk physical activity;

Avoid loneliness - better still, marriage is helpful;

Keep your weight down;

Don't smoke;

Keep yourself intellectually stimulated by doing something new and challenging;

Avoid chronic stress

45,000

Average number of Canadians who suffer strokes each year, according to Health Canada data.

900,000

Estimated number of Canadians who suffer undetected "mini" strokes, which some doctors have linked to memory loss.

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