FREE GUIDE · MEMORY

# Memory worries: is it memory, attention, or something to check?

How memory works, why most everyday forgetting is really about attention and resources, which signs are worth checking, and what helps.

You walk into the kitchen and have no idea why. You're introduced to someone and their name has gone before they've finished shaking your hand. You can't remember whether you locked the car. And a small voice asks: is something wrong with my memory?

Memory worries are one of the most common reasons people come to see me. Very often, the problem isn't memory at all. This guide explains how memory works, the many things that can make it worse, which signs are worth getting checked, and what helps.

## Is it really a memory problem?

To remember something, your brain has to do three things:

1. **Pay attention to it** in the first place.
2. **Store it**, which takes effort and repetition, and happens a lot during sleep.
3. **Find it again** when you need it, usually with the help of a cue.

Most everyday "memory" problems happen at step one. If your attention was somewhere else when you put your keys down, there is nothing to remember. You didn't forget it; it never went in. That's why stress, worry, tiredness, low mood and doing three things at once are so hard on memory. They use up the attention that storing a memory needs.

Attention is a bit like a telescope: you can only point it properly at one thing at a time. If it's pointed at tomorrow's worry, it isn't pointed at where you're putting your keys.

## Things that commonly affect memory

- **Stress, anxiety and worry**, which pull attention inwards.
- **Low mood and depression**, which can slow thinking right down.
- **Poor sleep**, which stops memories being properly filed.
- **Overload**: too many demands on too few tokens.
- **Menopause**, which many women notice as brain fog.
- **Physical health**: infections, thyroid problems, low vitamin B12, long-term heart or kidney conditions.
- **Medicines** that cause drowsiness or confusion, and **alcohol**.
- **Hearing or eyesight problems**, which can look like forgetting.

- **ADHD**, which affects attention and so affects memory.
- **Head injury or stroke.**

Many of these can improve with the right support or treatment. That's one of the best reasons to get things checked rather than worry quietly.

## Everyday forgetting, or something to check?

Some forgetting is a normal part of being human, and of getting older. As a rough guide:

| Usually everyday forgetting | Worth getting checked |
|---|---|
| Forgetting where you put something, then finding it by retracing your steps | Often losing things and being unable to retrace your steps |
| Forgetting something you were told a while ago | Forgetting things you were only just told, or asking the same question repeatedly |
| Occasionally struggling for a word | Often struggling to find words or follow conversations |
| Briefly muddling the day of the week, then realising | Getting lost in a familiar place |
| Being a bit slower to process things | Finding bills, budgets or familiar tasks hard to manage |

A useful rule of thumb: if a problem is mildly annoying but doesn't affect your everyday life, it's less likely to be a sign of something serious. Changes that build up over months, rather than years, are worth checking. And sometimes family and friends notice changes before the person themselves does.

## Your brain can be very convincing

Here's a loop I see often. You forget something. Your brain worries it's the start of something serious. The worry takes up attention. With less attention available, you forget more. And every slip gets filed as evidence. Worry about memory can make memory worse, and the brain's summary becomes lopsided because it only collects the evidence that fits.

If you recognise this, the answer isn't to ignore it. It's to get it properly looked at, so your brain can stop running the background worry.

## What helps

### 1. Put attention on purpose

When it matters, do one thing at a time and give it a moment of deliberate attention. Say it out loud: "Keys on the hook." Repeat a name back when you're introduced and use it once in the conversation.

### 2. Use external hooks

Your brain doesn't have to hold everything. Calendars, phone reminders, lists, a notebook, a fixed place for keys and glasses: these aren't cheating. They free up tokens for everything else.

### 3. Give memories cues

Memories are easier to find when they're linked to something. Make a picture of it, connect it to something you already know, or tell someone about it.

### 4. Look after the basics

Sleep, regular meals, movement, managing stress and keeping alcohol low all help memory directly.

### 5. Keep a memory diary

For two weeks, note what you forgot, and what was going on at the time: tired? stressed? distracted? multitasking? Patterns usually show up quickly, and it's very useful to take to a GP appointment.

## When to get checked

See your GP if memory problems are affecting your day-to-day life, are getting worse, or are worrying you or the people around you. It helps to take someone who knows you well. Your GP can check for physical causes and refer you to a memory service if needed. A detailed neurocognitive or memory assessment can also show exactly which parts of memory and thinking are working well and which aren't, which is useful for planning support.

## A conversation with your brain

*"Brain, we forgot the meeting."*
*"It's happening. We're losing it."*
*"Hang on. What was going on yesterday?"*
*"…Three hours' sleep, forty emails and the car broke down."*
*"So was it memory, or was it attention?"*
*"…Attention, probably."*
*"Let's put it in the calendar next time. And if it keeps happening on good days too, we'll get it checked."*

## Worksheets

You'll find these printable worksheets at the end of this PDF:

- **Memory diary**: two weeks of what slipped, and what was going on at the time
- **Before I see my GP**: a checklist to make the most of your appointment
- **My external memory set-up**: a plan for hooks, reminders and fixed places

## Further help

- NHS: memory loss: causes and when to see a GP.
- Alzheimer's Society: causes of memory problems: including causes other than dementia.
- Alzheimer's Society: signs of dementia: how they differ from normal ageing.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

### Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

Read this guide online, and find more free guides, at drmonicaberntsen.com/resources.

WORKSHEET 1

# Memory diary

For two weeks, note each slip and what was going on. Rate sleep and stress from 0 to 10.

| Date / time | What I forgot | What I was doing | Sleep / 10 | Stress / 10 | Distracted / multitasking? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
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WORKSHEET 2

# Before I see my GP

Fill this in and take it with you. Bring someone who knows you well if you can.

### What I've noticed, with examples

### When it started, and whether it's changing (weeks, months, years?)

### What others have noticed

### How it affects my daily life (work, money, driving, getting lost)

### Mood, sleep, stress, alcohol, menopause, hearing or eyesight changes

### Medicines I take (including over the counter)

### Questions I want to ask

WORKSHEET 3

# My external memory set-up

Decide where things live, so your brain doesn't have to hold them.

| What | Where it lives / how I'll be reminded |
|---|---|
| Keys, glasses, wallet, phone | |
| Appointments | |
| Medicines | |
| Bills and paperwork | |
| Things to do today | |
| Names and conversations to remember | |
| Other | |