

MENTAL NOTES

A mind expanding newsletter from Mark Zust, *The Perceptionist*



Forgetting to Remember

September, 2009

I have finally figured out why I don't retain information as well as I used to. I'm bored! At least that's the theory forwarded by Dr. John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist and research consultant. In his provocative book *Brain Rules*, Dr. Medina states that our ability to remember starts with our ability to pay attention. Here's the not-so-big surprise: we don't pay attention to boring things! The brain's ability to pay attention is profoundly influenced by memory. In other words, our previous experience guides where we should pay attention. We focus on things like emotions, threats and sex. Yep, it goes back to our caveman and cave-woman days. The brain asks: Can I eat it? Will it eat me? Can I mate with it? Have I seen this thing before? Once the brain perceives that all base temptations and threats have been acknowledged, it then moves on to less scintillating challenges like, say, differential equations (ugh!).

So if you're struggling to remember dry data, make the process more fun to engage your brain. How? Create an environment conducive to learning and memorizing. Find a comfortable chair in a room with good lighting and few distractions. Get away from your phone and computer and their inherent temptations (like texting, twittering, blogging, etc., etc.). Pour yourself a tall glass of water (not coffee, Red Bull or other stimulants) and give your body a good stretch (3-5 minutes) before sitting down. Now, allow yourself just 15-20 minutes to memorize a page full of information. It could be lists, equations, to do's, a few foreign language phrases, whatever. Then take a five minute break. Repeat the process. Then go do something else. Research shows that the brain's ability to retain new data improves dramatically with repetition, but only up to a point. After about 45 minutes there is a diminishing return and if you keep pushing to memorize the same stuff for more than an hour at a time, you will actually remember less. So don't fight it! Keep yourself engaged for short bursts, repeat the information to yourself at least five times (ten is even better, but no more), and try to tie the information to something useful or pleasurable in your life. For instance, if you want to remember someone's name, find a connection. It could be as simple as saying the name several times in your head, then using a memorable phrase like: "Sue Simpson likes blue and so do I. Sue in blue." Yes, it seems silly and counterintuitive, but it works. Next month, we'll explore the power of repetition and mnemonics. Until then, practice remembering your credit card # or a shopping list. It's good brain food!



Quotable:

*"We overlook
what we do not
wish to see."*

Sigmund Freud

Resources

Paste the following urls into your browser. Enjoy!

brainrules.net
•
nytimes.com/2009/04/06/health/research/06brain.html
•
harrylorayne.com
•
drmcclarey.com (Brain Trust Program)
•
<http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200802/magical-thinking>

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