The Midlife Memory Meltdown

First you forget a dentist's appointment. Next it's your ATM password. And then (*kill me now*) you can't recall your own dinner guest's name. **CATHRYN JAKOBSON RAMIN** explores the humiliating lapses of the aging brain—and what you can do to combat them. ▸

I'D BARELY CROSSED THE THRESHOLD OF MIDDLE AGE. AS a journalist, I was invested in staying smart and quick, mistress of my good brain and sardonic tongue. But almost overnight, I found that I was missing critical information—the names of people and places, the titles of books and movies. Worse, I had the attention span of a flea. I was having trouble keeping track of my calendar, and my sense of direction had disappeared. The change was so dramatic that sometimes I felt foreign to myself. ¶ Over the course of a few years, as friends and relatives moved into their 40s and 50s, I realized that I was part of a large group of people who were struggling to keep up. I was determined to find a plausible explanation for what was happening to my brain and, by extension, to middle-aged minds in general.

As a first step, I began to study and categorize midlife mental lapses as if they were so many butterflies. There was Colliding-Planets Syndrome, which occurs when you fail to grasp, until too late, that you've scheduled a child's orthodontist appointment in the suburbs for the same hour as a business meeting in the city. Quick-Who-Is-She Dysfunction surfaces when you are face-to-face with someone whose name stubbornly refuses to come to mind. What-Am-I-Doing-Here Paranoia leaves you standing empty-handed in a doorway, trying to figure out what you've come for. The Damn-It-They-Were-Just-in-My-Hand Affliction leads to panicky moments spent looking for your favorite new sunglasses, when all the while they're on top of your head. And Wrong-Vessel Disorder results in placing the ice cream in the pantry rather than the freezer.

In the past decade, cognitive neuroscientists have learned that much of what we blame on fading memory in midlife can be more accurately attributed to failing attention. Physiological changes in the brain's frontal lobes make it harder to maintain attention in the face of distractions, explains Cheryl Grady, PhD, a neuroscientist and assistant director of the Rotman Research Institute in Toronto. When the frontal lobes are in top form, they're adept at figuring out what's important for the job at hand and what's irrelevant blather; a sort of neural "bouncer" automatically keeps out unnecessary information. In middle age, that bouncer takes a lot of coffee breaks. Instead of focusing on the report that's due, you find yourself wondering what's for dinner. Even background noise—the phone chatter of the coworker in the next cubicle—can impair your ability to concentrate on the task before you.

When the neural bouncer slacks off, the cognitive scratch pad called working memory (which allows us to manipulate and prioritize information, and remember the thread of an argument) is quickly overwhelmed. You know the feeling: You can't absorb one more shred of information, so you erect a sturdy wall, neatly deflecting your husband's announcement that he'll be working late—an announcement you later swear he never made.

"Metaphorically speaking," writes social theorist David Shenk in his book *Data Smog*, "we plug up our ears, pinch our noses, cover our eyes...and step into a bodysuit lined with protective padding."

As you age, you may also notice that information that once popped into your head in milliseconds now shows up in its own sweet time. Denise Park, PhD, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, has found that while processing speed begins to decline in your late 20s, typically you don't feel the effect until your 40s or 50s. And then you feel as though you're wading through mental Jell-O.

It's tough to acknowledge that your brain is aging right along with your abs, but in both cases you can put up a fight.

Quick-Who-Is-She Dysfunction

One type of forgetfulness is so prevalent, not to mention demoralizing, that just about everyone over 40 complains about it. I refer to the very public cognitive failure known as blocking, or blanking, when names refuse to come to mind and words dart in and out of consciousness, hiding in dark closets just when you need them.

In his landmark book, *The Seven Sins of Memory*, the eminent Harvard memory expert Daniel Schacter, PhD, notes that the concept of blocking exists in at least 45 languages. The Cheyenne used an expression, *Navonotootse'a*, which translates "I have lost it on my tongue." In Korean it is *Hyeu kkedu-te mam-dol-da*, which in English means "sparkling at the end of my tongue."

In midlife, resolving the "tip of the tongue" dilemma grows increasingly challenging. In the split second between your query—"What do you call that sleek, dark purple vegetable?"—and the response—"eggplant"—your aging brain delivers quantities of unsolicited information.

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Often, notes Schacter, "people can produce virtually everything they know about a person...nearly everything they know about a word except its label." The brain volunteers words that begin with the same letter, items that are the same color or shape, and, my favorite, words with the same number of syllables—all of which gum up the works.

Unfortunately, blocking is most common in social [CONTINUED ON PAGE 216]

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 217] dinner engagement. If you can't immediately hang the keys on the hook where they belong, keep them on your person until you can; one woman I know slips them into her bra, creating a silhouette so inelegant that she can't possibly forget where she put them. Give up your habit of tucking important items into indiscriminate pockets of your purse or briefcase. Choose one secure zone—front, zippered—where you always keep your boarding pass or passport, and never alter it. You'll save yourself the discomfort of searching high and low under the stern surveillance of security personnel.

What-Am-I-Doing-Here Paranoia

When you lose track of what you intended to say or do, you've had what cognitive psychologists call a prospective lapse. Wrong-Vessel Disorder is a manifestation of this problem: With the best intentions, you absentmindedly place your cell phone in your briefcase, which has many of the same attributes as your purse. Saturday morning, when you reach into your bag and come up empty, you're mystified. Because you're barely conscious when it strikes, it's hard to fend off Wrong-Vessel Disorder. You just have to laugh.

But prospective failures also show up as What-Am-I-Doing-Here Paranoia: Suddenly, as if someone depressed the power button on the remote, you go blank. The minigaps, where you march purposefully to the kitchen, only to stand there and scratch your head, are irritating; the yawning caverns can really shake your confidence. Fran, the marketing director of a local bank, was bright-eyed and ready to give her quarterly presentation before the board—until somewhere in midsentence, three out of six points eluded her, an experience that made her realize that her days of winging it were over.

Mark McDaniel observes that younger adults make use of robust working memory, relying on a little voice that automatically whispers "get milk, get milk, get milk," all the way home. In midlife that voice is easily interrupted (*Oh, look, it's raining! Now, where did I put that umbrella?*)—at least until you're in the driveway. If you can send the voice back into the game, you'll avoid a lot of extra trips to the store. I've stuck Post-it notes on the steering wheel, which makes driving awkward, but at least I don't return home with the FedEx package still beside me on the front seat.

When what you forget is not a grocery item but an idea, you've no alternative but to backtrack mentally. It's vaguely amusing to do this with a friend at lunch—*What on earth were we talking about?*—but in a professional situation it hurts. With a little digging, you can often extract a key idea that lingers in your working memory and, from there, reconstruct the context of the discussion. In such cases, it is helpful to have a stockpile of useful phrases, conversation fillers that buy you time. "Do you see what I mean?" works well, as does my friend Jeff's old standby, delivered with the greatest sincerity: "Now *that's* very interesting," even when it isn't.

WHEN A COLLEAGUE STOOD ME UP for breakfast, after exchanging no fewer than nine e-mails about where and when earlier in the week, I wasn't upset—I was as curious as a botanist who has come upon a valuable specimen. How had it happened? Had planets collided yet again? In a classic demonstration of autopilot, he'd exited the commuter train, jumped on the subway, and gone straight to work, failing to stop at the café across the street from the station where we'd planned to meet. When I phoned his cell, it took him several seconds to realize his mistake, at which point he howled in dismay.

He didn't want to talk about it, but nevertheless I probed. "Wait," I said, "let's dissect it. How did it start?"

As was his habit, he had carefully printed out his schedule the previous night before leaving work, he explained. Then he packed up his briefcase and departed, leaving the piece of paper in the printer. From that moment on, our breakfast appointment never crossed his mind. "Is this normal?" he asked. It was normal, I assured him, in that it happened regularly to people in midlife. But that didn't mean he had to sit back and take it. It was time to make a stand. ■

Adapted from Cathryn Jakobson Ramin's new book, Carved in Sand: When Attention Fails and Memory Fades in Midlife *(HarperCollins), out this month.*

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 214] situations, when anxiety and distraction combine to kidnap a chunk of your already challenged working memory. Roman aristocrats avoided the problem by always traveling with a nomenclator, an alert slave whose duty it was to supply his master with the names of acquaintances as they were encountered. In the film *The Devil Wears Prada,* magazine editor Miranda Priestly relies on her young assistant, Andy Sachs, to produce the names of party guests. Absent such a companion, Barbara Wallraff, senior editor and columnist for *The Atlantic,* sought suggestions from her readers on how to describe what transpires when you're introducing two people but have blocked their names. One reader suggested *whomnesia.* Another proposed *mumbleduction.*

With planning, many instances of Quick-Who-Is-She Dysfunction can be eradicated. Before you go to see the eighth-grade play, where you will sit among people you've known since

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your kids were in kindergarten, take 15 minutes to look over the school directory. You may avoid the embarrassment suffered by my friend Victor, an economist, when he introduced himself to a woman at Back to School Night who reminded him that the year before, at the same event, they'd spent a pleasant hour chatting about their shared alma mater.

Writing down a few key phrases on an index card before putting yourself in a cognitively challenging situation can ward off word loss. Before heading to your book group, take a moment to review the names of the characters and the plot of the fat novel you finished two weeks ago and barely remember. The other members will thank you. If words go missing anyway, grab for a synonym. Staying on the trail like a bloodhound only exacerbates the problem.

Colliding-Planets Syndrome

To your distress, you discover that you agreed to attend your friend Sarah's 50th birthday party on the same night you're supposed to be at a convention in Las Vegas. Now, how did that happen? If I had to guess, I'd say that you said yes to Sarah's birthday ("Of course, I wouldn't miss it!") when you were nowhere near your calendar. If you want to eliminate Colliding-Planets Syndrome, that calendar must be your new best friend.

Don't get cocky and put off entering a date, even if it's just for coffee the following day. Mark A. McDaniel, PhD, a professor of psychology at Washington University in St. Louis and an expert in human learning and memory, found that in the face of even a brief delay, older adults have much more difficulty than younger ones keeping in mind a task to be accomplished in the future. Refuse to agree to anything, ever, without a calendar in front of you. And don't write down cryptic things like "Starbucks," because you'll draw a blank on which café you meant, and sit for a long time in the wrong one. *Where* you write things down matters: Multiple calendars—home, work, school—can only lead to trouble.

But what about things you must remember to do in the short term, like returning the nurse-practitioner's call in 15 minutes or putting money in the parking meter in a half hour? These are what Daniel Schacter calls time-based commitments, and putting them on your calendar isn't likely to help unless you habitually check it every five minutes. On less than an hour's notice, my most responsible friend, Jane, agreed to pick up her neighbor's son at school when she collected her own brood. Knowing she had to make it to soccer and ballet in Los Angeles traffic, she was the first in the carpool line, where she efficiently loaded her kids and took off. The neighbor's child sat waiting on a bench until teachers phoned his mother, who had nothing nice to say when she got in touch with Jane.

In midlife we have trouble remembering to do things at specific times because we're at the mercy of a million environmental distractions. One of Denise Park's studies demonstrated that elderly subjects were more likely to remember to take their medication on schedule than middle-aged subjects, because in midlife the crush of extenuating circumstances often got in the way. To remember to make that call to the nurse practitioner, Schacter told me, you're going to need an unmistakable cue, one that will be both available and informative. An alarm clock on the desk in front of you can do the job, but under no circumstances should you permit yourself to switch off the clock and finish just one more thing before you pick up the phone. And don't count on your PDA: You've heard those bleeps and blurps so often, you've learned to ignore them.

Damn-It-They-Were-Just-in-My-Hand Affliction

Even the most meticulously managed PDA won't work if you misplace it. And as luck would have it, the items we lose most often—keys, glasses, wallets, cell phones, planners—are the ones that are crucial to our survival.

This abject failure to keep track of our belongings may emerge from the brain's talent for forecasting the future. The neocortex, a long-term storage facility, constantly predicts how we'll behave in specific situations, explains Jeff Hawkins in his book *On Intelligence.* Instead of reinventing the wheel every time we do something familiar, the brain chooses from a library of existing patterns, based on choices we've made before. A novel event—a man with a gun—gets the brain's full attention, but when we're merely lugging groceries into the house, we shift into autopilot. And autopilot is the mode in which we're likely to misplace things.

The problem can be remedied, but only with a preemptive strike. Awareness is essential: When the phone rings as you're entering the house loaded down with groceries, don't drop your keys on the counter, where they will be buried in the day's mail, making you frantically late for your [CONTINUED ON PAGE 219]