

Health

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Do you feel like you forgot something?

Have you ever had a day like this: One day I had a really neat idea about writing an article on forgetfulness and memory problems as women get older. I had the whole column planned in my head, and then I decided to have lunch. After lunch I couldn't remember some of the ideas. I decided to relax, walk around the house and maybe the ideas would come back to me, but by the time I got to the bedroom I couldn't remember why I was there. And, did you ever look in the closet and suddenly find you don't know what you're looking for (but when you leave the room and return you magically remember what you had wanted)? I absolutely know I'm not alone in my experiences because I hear other women talking about feeling confused about why these things happen. Well, I wanted answers and so I did some investigating. The information was fascinating and helped me feel better. I hope it helps you, too.

Memory, what is it? Webster's dictionary defines memory as “the mental capacity or faculty of retaining or recalling facts, events, impressions or previous experiences”. Scientists still do not fully understand how memory works and, while children and young adults are often proud of their memories, as adults we generally complain about ours. To keep your sanity, what you need to remember is that forgetting things is very common and happens to everyone, especially women who are approaching or in menopause. Some call it the “menopause fog” or a “mini-vacation.” However, most authorities do not believe menopause (i.e., low estrogen levels) directly causes memory problems. A team from the University of Rochester Medical Center conducted studies on menopause and memory and found that the issue is not really impaired memory. Instead, they found a link between complaints of forgetfulness and the way middle-aged, stressed women learn or “encode” new information. That means that you may feel like you can't remember something, but that's because you never really learned the information in the first place. While you may be afraid that you're losing your mind and are showing early signs of Alzheimer's disease, the team found nothing to support the idea that this is true. Rather, what they found was that when women's lives are hectic and their moods change a lot, and when they are worried or anxious about fulfilling the duties in their lives, they simply can't keep track of everything. Not only do women usually have responsibility for managing their homes, but they often also have work, career, aging parents and child caring responsibilities. And as women get older, all of these duties are handled at the same time as dramatic hormonal changes occur that create sleepless nights (those hot flashes!) and exhausting days. For these women, the stress of life diminishes the ability to concentrate, pay attention and learn information properly.

Perhaps knowing that these perceived problems with memory do not suggest early dementia might alleviate some concerns and actually improve functioning - it's one less thing to worry about. Also, there are several things that you can do to improve "memory problems" such as getting more sleep, talking with your doctor about hormone replacement therapy and using certain herbal remedies. Try simplifying your life by making lists, placing things to be remembered together and putting things back in the same place each time. Use little sticky notes to remind yourself of tasks and cross off items when completed. Get help in handling some of your duties or consider which ones you could drop for a while to reduce your stress level. Exercise does wonders for the mind and body, as does scheduled quiet times using yoga, meditation and other relaxation techniques. Make sure your diet is a healthy one, avoid sugars, eat fruits and vegetables, and avoid caffeine. And remember, be kind to yourself because symptoms will often subside naturally as the menopausal years progress and the stress lessens.