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### THE RECOVERING MEMORY METHOD: A GUIDE

This guide describes a technique we (Marshall et al., 2005) designed to assist in the recovery of desired or important memories. The memory recovery technique described here is firmly based on experimental literature on memory. Although we have not extensively validated this technique, in its use with 22 clients, 20 reported satisfactory recovery of their memories.

The Mayo Clinic ([www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)) and other health organizations have outlined some of the medical causes of reversible memory loss, such as, medications, minor head trauma or injury, alcoholism, vitamin B-12 deficiency, hypothyroidism, brain diseases, and sleep apnea. If you feel your memory problem is related to a medical condition, it is best to consult a physician first to help resolve that issue, not just for the memory problem, but also for your well-being.

Psychological causes of reversible memory loss are primarily emotional disorders (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression). There is also evidence in the literature that memory for highly charged (e.g., traumatic) incidents can be compromised (Beidel et al., 2003). Memory problems resulting from traumatic, emotionally-charged experiences, most commonly occur in the victims of trauma rather than the perpetrator, but can appear in both. Similarly, drug-induced blackouts causing memory loss typically only occur when intoxication levels are high and recalling these memories may prove difficult. Finally, a combination of medical and psychological causes may result in memory problems in which case it may be sensible to seek help for the medical condition prior to engaging in this memory recovery technique. In most cases, however, a memory recovery technique may prompt a more accurate and fulsome recall.

The rationale for using this memory recovery technique has two aspects. First, the “neural network” model of memory (Kosslyn & Koenig, 1995) proposes that memory is stored not in discrete isolated cells, but rather in a network of interconnected cells where the activation of some of these cells may trigger activation in others, and possibly in the whole network. This activation is what happens during accurate recall of a set of events such as the sequence of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that occur prior to, during, and immediately after an event. To recall memories, therefore, will require activation of some of the memories of the day/time of the desired memory that have not been forgotten, even if they are temporally distant from the desired

memory. This activation will generate a spread of activation to other cells in the neuronal network which, hopefully, will lead to a fuller recovery of the desired memory.

It is clear from memory research that the majority of people (including many psychologists and psychotherapists) believe all experience is stored permanently in memory with forgetting being simply an inability to locate the stored memory (Garry et al., 1997; Loftus & Loftus, 1980; Yapko, 1994). While some evidence shows a remarkable stability over time (up to 50 years in some cases) of intact memories (Bahrick, 1984; Bahrick & Hall, 1991; Bahrick et al., 1994; Usher & Neisser, 1993), it is also true that much of our experience is either forever lost or never stored in the first place (Loftus & Loftus, 1980). Nevertheless, we can expect to believe that most memories desired to be recalled, given the likely importance of those events in our lives, are still intact with the problem being one of retrieval.

The second aspect of our rationale rests on two sets of evidence. First, it is established that the majority of people believe that psychological techniques of one kind or another enhance memory recall (Payne & Blackwell, 1998; Whitehouse et al., 1991). Presumably a technique with an acceptable rationale, like the one we outline, will be readily accepted as effective. In addition, however, our technique is based on evidence from memory research. Tulving and Thomson (1973), for example, reported that changing the retrieval cues subjects were using led to recall of previously forgotten material. The types of cues that best facilitate recall are contextual reinstatement (Kihlstrom & Barnhardt, 1993; Wilkinson, 1988) and the use of imagery techniques (Shiekh et al., 1987; Wilson, 1987).

The desired memory recovery technique is described in detail on the next page of this guide. It may be helpful to print that page to aid in practicing the technique. Although, you may be frustrated with the length of time it takes to recall the desired memory, do your best to persist in practicing the technique. It may also be helpful to journal your current memories of that day/time and add to it as you recall more, even seemingly minor or unrelated, details of the day/time of the desired memory. This will reinforce the recall strategy and allow you track progress made. A template is added to the last page of this guide for you to use in case it is helpful.

### The “Memory Recovery Technique”

- Use the contextual cues that occurred on the day of the desired memory, starting with where you were when you awoke that morning.
- Recall as vividly as possible the physical surroundings that morning, what you were wearing, what you were doing, and what you were thinking and feeling throughout the day.
- Vivid activation of these memories, repeated over several days, will make access easier to other associated, but currently unremembered, memories.
- As the recall of the day progresses over time, you will eventually be able to recall the events leading up to and including the desired memory. It has been shown that repeated recall attempts do, indeed, increase the amount remembered (Payne & Wenger, 1992).
- In implementing the procedure, find a place where you will not be interrupted as you think back to the day of the desired memory.
- Initially attempt to recall only unrelated features of the day, such as what you did upon awakening, what clothing you wore, and detailed aspects of both your accommodation (e.g., the color of the walls, floor covering, number of rooms), and the vehicle you drove that day. With these features in mind, try to reconstruct the day in as much detail as possible progressing slowly and repetitively over many attempts.
- Each time you follow this piecing together of details of the day in question, you will recall more and more details.
- Be patient and persistent.
- As you reconstruct the day of the desired memory in detail, continue the process into the events that are closest to the commencement of the desired memory

#### Reverse Strategy

- If you experience difficulty doing this, switch tactics by recalling an event that occurred after the desired memory, wherever your memory is easier to recall. At whatever point post-the desired memory your recall is intact, apply the same process used for the period prior to the desired memory, only this time work backwards.

Once the you begin to recover memories, details usually emerge reasonably rapidly, although it often takes several or more days of practice to initiate this process.

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Current memories of the day of the desired memory to recall:
Where did I live? What did the building look like What was the neighbourhood like? What did my bedroom look like? The colour of the paint and any artwork on the walls Furniture and any other features (e.g., sloped ceiling) of the room Who lived in the home with me? What type of vehicle (car, truck, bicycle, bus) did I use and what did it look like? Was I in school, working or...?
Anything else?
New memories of that day/time recalled after practicing technique