

Simple Steps to Sharpen Memory

by Shannon Mooney

When the mind is functioning optimally, you have a keen sense of awareness, a sharpness of focus and attention, good memory recall and decisiveness. Typically, memory function is as natural as breathing. It is only when there are problems with recollection that we become aware of the process of recording information in the brain. A dull or cloudy mind can lead to scattered thoughts, forgetfulness and a feeling of heaviness.

According to Ayurveda, most memory problems are related to kapha dosha, with its dense qualities, thick, soft and sticky qualities. Images, experiences, and feelings are recorded and retained on the "film" of the brain's white matter, tarpaka, a sub-dosha of kapha. This special tissue nourishes and protects the brain cells and other nerve tissue. Stagnation of kapha typically results in a heavy feeling and a dull mind. An example of high kapha could be a thick, oily quality to the blood due to high triglycerides, or fat in the blood, allowing low flow of blood across the blood-brain barrier.

Other memory problems can be related to a vata disturbance with its light and airy qualities. In the condition of excess vata, a person may be so scattered or spacey, due to stress or anxiety, that they cannot remember a conversation they had even an hour earlier. Typically, in this example the person is not able to focus enough attention, detrimentally affecting the quality of nerve impulse, to record a memory and information goes in one ear and out the other.

There can be many causes to having a dull mind and poor memory. Most commonly, the brain does not receive necessary nutrients from the blood. Other possible causes can be a chemical imbalance in the brain's neurochemistry or certain toxic drugs that have affected the brain detrimentally. Unprocessed thoughts, feelings, experiences and emotions can result in mental indigestion. This mental ama (toxins) can affect the quality of tarpaka kapha. If feelings, emotions and thoughts are never dealt with and digested, there can be added stress, impaired mental function and weakened immunity. During old age, the vata stage of life, memory can begin to deteriorate as degenerative physiological changes begin.

Everyone is prone to moments of forgetfulness at any time in their lives, but particularly as old age approaches, it is important to take preventive measures to keep the mind clear, with sharp focus of attention to ensure a long happy life.

Diet

In Ayurveda, each person is treated as an individual and dietary advice is tailored to each person's needs. Generally a diet which is light, cleansing, and sattvic (that which gives wisdom and sharpen the senses) will help to enhance your perception and help strengthen memory. A balanced diet of fresh, organic fruits and vegetables is best, including some nuts and ghee.

- Add carrots and beets to your diet. These help to strengthen pitta's positive qualities, promoting a good memory. Try fresh raw vegetable juices to help build blood and nourish the brain.
- Limit refined sugars and carbohydrates which "turn off" or "short circuit" the brain.
- Limit alcohol consumption. Alcohol can cause damage to brain tissue, particularly the frontal lobes, responsible for functions such as problem-solving, reasoning, abstraction, planning, short-term memory, and emotional regulation. <http://pubs.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/aa63/aa63.htm>
- Limit caffeine. This stimulant can aggravate vata and pitta doshas and cause thoughts to "jump" from one to the next instead of keeping a steady stream of focused attention on one idea at a time.

- Limit heavy foods such as aged cheeses and meat. These can lead to kapha stagnation and inhibit brain function.

Ayurveda emphasizes the benefits of fasting in order to clear the body of toxins, improve digestion and strengthen the nervous system and brain. During a fast, the body's energy is redirected inward in an effort to cleanse and detoxify. For this reason it is recommended to do as little work as possible, planning your fast for a period of time when you can remain close to home and have lots of rest. After beginning a fast, note your energy level each day. If there is a dramatic decrease in energy, a feeling of weakness or dizziness, the fast should be terminated. As a safety precaution, it is wise to request the supervision of a trained Ayurvedic physician or other medical professional.

A single food fast on kitcheri, which is a nourishing dish of equal parts split mung dal and white basmati rice, can be done for three to five days.

Cooking with spices such as black pepper and turmeric can be of great benefit to supporting good memory function. Black pepper helps to decrease vata and kapha doshas while stimulating pitta. Curcumin is the main biologically active phytochemical compound in turmeric, and also gives turmeric its lovely yellow color. Curcumin is used therapeutically as a treatment for Alzheimer's disease to reduce both oxidative stress and inflammation of the brain tissue. Research provided by the Department of Neurology at USC concludes that Curcumin decreases physical evidence of Alzheimer's in the brain and that "the overall memory in patients with Alzheimer's disease has improved."

Lifestyle

- Exercise your body. Brisk walking can help to improve circulation throughout the body and improve blood flow to the brain. Exercise oxygenates brain cells and helps to flush out toxins. Individuals prone to sedentary lifestyles can benefit from engaging in more vigorous activities that work the heart and lungs.
- Exercise your mind. Challenge your mind with crossword puzzles, Sudoku puzzles, or any activity that involves problem solving or reasoning. Stimulating your mind strengthens and maintains brain connections.
- Get sufficient sleep to recharge the body and allow the brain to digest the day's activities.
- Create written reminders for yourself. Keep a notepad with a list of things that you would like to remember. Put it in a place where you are sure to see it so that you do not forget to look at your list!
- Abhyanga or self-oil massage with Vata Massage Oil or Sesame Oil is extremely therapeutic for balancing vata dosha and improving memory loss. For more about Ayurvedic self-oil massage click <http://www.banyanbotanicals.com/ayurveda/abhyanga.html>
- Massaging the scalp and the soles of the feet with Bhringaraj oil calms the nervous system and encourages restful sleep.

Herbs

- Brahmi oil can be rubbed on the soles of the feet and massaged into the scalp to both relax and stimulate the nervous system.
- Nasya oil has been used for centuries to improve voice, vision and bring clarity of mind. Lubricating the nasal passages helps to keep the sinuses clean and protect the nasal membranes.

- Include Triphala as part of your daily regime to support elimination, detoxification, and tonification of the gastro-intestinal tract. Constipation in the bowel can contribute to "constipation" of the mind. It is important to keep the colon clean with regular movements.

Yoga

Inversions are especially helpful to increase the blood flow to the brain. Include inverted poses such as Camel, Plow, Shoulder Stand and Headstand. Regular practice can help to balance the doshas and calm the nervous system. Asanas can help to tone brain function, clear the mind and strengthen communication between body, mind, and universal spirit.

Pranayama

Yogic breath work or pranayama is an excellent way to revitalize prana and to train the mind to be present and alert. Pranayama cleanses and strengthens the physical body while calming and clearing the mind. Try alternate nostril breathing to balance the hemispheres of the brain and improve mental clarity.

Position the right hand (you may choose to alternate with each practice) in vishnu mudra by folding the index finger and third finger inwards to lightly touch at the base of the thumb. Your pinkie finger rests by the side of the ring finger. You will alternately use your thumb to close your right nostril and your ring and pinkie fingers, working as one, to close your left. Rest your left hand comfortably in your lap. The breath should never feel forced. Envision the breath as a light thread of silk, lengthening effortlessly with each inhalation and exhalation.

Keeping the breath relaxed, subtle and light:

- Close the left nostril and exhale completely through the right.
- Inhale fully, through the right nostril.
- Close right nostril and exhale through the left nostril.
- Inhale through left nostril.
- Close left nostril and exhale through right nostril.

This is one round. Begin a slow and regular practice of 5-10 rounds. Rest after your practice and notice how you are feeling. Once comfortable with this practice, you can begin mentally counting to four on your inhalation, pause at the space between the breath and then count to four as you exhale so that the length of your inhalation and exhalation are equal.

Meditation

Meditation is a powerful tool to clear the mind and reduce stress and anxiety. When the mind is overloaded, poor memory can result. Take time each day to sit quietly and notice your breath. Allow each breath to be full and deep. Meditation teaches us to be in the present moment. Being in the present heightens the quality of consciousness and can improve the function of tarpaka kapha, improving memory and brain function.