

Succeeding With Memory Problems

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Twelve years ago, I had brain surgery to stop the seizures I was having. In many ways I tend to think what happened to me back then was and still is a “blessing in disguise.” Don’t get me wrong, I wouldn’t wish having seizures or brain surgery on anyone—although I’m sure we’ve all known some people in our lives that we thought might benefit from brain surgery. However, as a result of the experiences I have had with seizures, with brain surgery and with the effects of medication, I am proud to say

that I have learned some amazing things in my life that have helped me to overcome difficult times and make the best of it (if only the NY Mets would listen to me). After you read this article, I hope you too will feel as confident as I that you will be able to overcome some of the difficulties you may be having and accomplish whatever it is you set your mind towards achieving—so please “do remember this.”

I have organized this article into two parts:

first, what I have learned and second, succeeding with memory problems. Part one highlights several important insights that I discovered through my experiences with complex partial and tonic-clonic seizures, the mistakes I made, and how that has made me a better person. Part two focuses on strategies that you can use to successfully deal with your memory problems. Hey, if worked for me, it can certainly work for you.

What I Have Learned

■ First, everything happens for a reason

On September 29, 1984, my mom died. A few days after our Shiva period (a seven-day mourning period) had ended, I remember standing in my living room and having my first complex partial seizure. While I didn't know what it was at the time, I did know that it was time for me to grow up and realize the potential of all the things that she had helped me to create in my life. Believing that my seizures were happening for a reason somehow led me to recognize that even though mom was no longer physically there for me, there was a lot that I could do for myself, my friends and my family. Over the next two years, I was accepted at the graduate school at the University of North Texas in Denton (a far cry from Brooklyn, New York) and I met Tracy, to whom I have been happily married for the past twenty-one years. Today, I am a professor of sport and exercise psychology, working with students and athletes on how to use their minds to enjoy and increase their performance in sport and exercise. Talk about

growing up. It's amazing how seizures can put life into perspective for you!

For thirteen years, I covered up the fact that I was having seizures. However, after suffering my first tonic-clonic seizure in 1997, I suddenly realized through the actions of my wife, Tracy, that I really couldn't handle this all by myself and I needed help. Thank God for Tracy's proactiveness, because it is obvious to me now that back then I didn't even know how to ask my own wife for support. In all of our years together, Tracy has taught me many things and the one that stands out most is that it is a real strength to recognize and admit to your problems and ask for help rather than cover up and pretend that you can always take care of yourself.

Surgery stopped my seizures, but ever since I had the surgery, my mind has been just a little different. On the positive side, I no longer fear having seizures and I know that I'm okay. On the negative side, remembering things that used to be an automatic became a daily challenge for me and a real hassle. Common situations that for most people would require no conscious effort whatsoever would overwhelm me and cause a great deal of stress. Here are just a few that would overload my mind practically each and every day: "Where are my keys?" "Did you really ask me to pick up bread at the supermarket on my way home from work? And I said yes?" "Somebody called earlier, but I just don't remember who it was." "Hey Steve, I saw Mark today, yeh, that's nice who is Mark?"

Editor's Note: Some people who go through surgery have worse memory after surgery, but others do not. It depends upon the type and extent of surgery and individual factors. Left brain surgery (in right-handed people) tends to generate problems remembering words and names. Right brain surgery can impair memory for shapes and pictures. Many people with epilepsy have a memory problem before surgery, and for a few of these, memory can improve after surgery. Such improvement usually occurs when seizures stop and medicines can be reduced.

While this may seem like no big deal to some people, for me it was. I felt embarrassed, frustrated, and angry with myself. At one point I became so upset that I used my analytical skills to concoct what I thought of at the time as a “scientific explanation” of my memory problems. I told certain members of my family that I had “a deficit,”—that I just couldn’t remember anymore and that from now on it was always going to be like that for me. So, anyone who would choose to ask me to do something must realize that if I don’t do it, I can’t be blamed. What a bunch of nonsense!—a major cop-out on my part.

All that I accomplished was to heighten my negative feelings about myself; and with the new life I was living, that just didn’t sit well with me. It’s one thing when you’re having difficulty in life and you don’t know what to do. It’s another thing to allow yourself to have these difficulties when you know

how to at least minimize the problems and quite possibly prevent them from happening. Deep down, I knew what to do, but for some reason I chose to think that it would all come back to me one day. “Bad choice.” It took me several years to recognize that it was time for me to stop complaining about my memory not being good anymore and figure out a way to meet this new challenge. There are several strategies that I would like to share with you that may help you to overcome your memory challenges and succeed in daily life. I hope that it helps you to feel better about yourself the way it did for me. So here goes!

Succeeding With Memory Problems

■ Acceptance

The first step in being able to successfully deal with your memory problems is to accept it as part of your life. For all the years I battled seizures—“when will they come?,” “tell nobody,” “it will go away”—nothing changed until I accepted the fact that I had a problem and I needed help. As for my memory, once I accepted the fact that my memory wasn’t the same as it used to be, I could move on to working on what I could to improve it and stop forgetting so much. I chose to recognize the reality of having memory problems as simply a daily challenge that must be overcome.

■ Communication

For a while, I tried to keep my memory problems to myself. My first instinct was to tell nobody, as if that would mean that I had no trouble remembering things. It

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became apparent that that didn't work; it just distanced me from the people I cared about most. I would joke and say you can't forget what you never remembered. Then each time I recognized a lapse (e.g., finding things, remembering what I was supposed to do that day or who had called me), my foolish pride would convince me that I ultimately would remember and I didn't need to write it down or call and ask my wife what I had mentioned I was supposed to do. The simple fact is that one of the best ways to remember things is to communicate them to the people in your life that play a role in your responsibilities (spouse or significant other, children, boss, secretary, co-workers, friends). To this day, when I have something important to take care of and I know I may forget it, I will ask the person I am involved with to "do me a favor" and remind me by calling, texting or emailing me. For me, that helps to keep things fresh in my mind and it allows me to process what I have planned and prepare for the next step (e.g., writing it down, calling to confirm, etc.).

■ Develop a routine

It is always easier to remember things when you create a routine and stick to it as much as possible. For example, if you're like me

and you misplace important items like your car keys, your wallet, your cell phone, etc., and you cannot remember where you put it, then I invite you to develop a routine and learn to put your important items in one place. This will minimize the chances of forgetting where you left things. Simply go to the one and only place that you taught yourself to put these things.

Editor's Note: Memories come in several varieties. Distant memories from the past, learned skills like riding a bike or playing chess rarely are affected by brain surgery. Recent memories are more affected—a form of absent mindedness. New material may not "stick" as well. Paying extra attention to such new material sometimes can get it into memory stores.

■ Positive self-talk

Sometimes we can become very hard on ourselves and get angry at not remembering. We may berate ourselves and think negatively (e.g., "you knew you were going to forget;" "you'll never remember this;" "I am so bad at this"). Unfortunately, being negative with yourself when it comes to remembering is not going to help. In fact, it's only going to make you feel worse. Therefore, what you need to do is be positive with

yourself. Focus on what you are going to do that will help you, not what you didn't do or what didn't work.

■ Relax

One of the most difficult things to do is relax when you forget something that you want or need right away. Yet, the tenser you become, the harder it will be to remember. Speaking of remembering, I remember one of the first check-ups I had after brain surgery in 1997 with my neurologist, Dr. Orrin Devinsky. I told him that I had a conference to present at in St. Louis and I was nervous that I was going to forget my expertise. I thought, "what if I lose my train of thought and don't know what to say? What will my audience think of me...?" Dr. Devinsky told me to just relax and allow whatever thoughts entered my mind to just be there and one of two things would happen: either I would remember what I wanted to say or another word or phrase would come up. Sure enough, I prepared and prepared for the conference and when it was time for me to present I made certain to "remember" what Dr. Devinsky told me and sure enough it worked. I talked and talked without stopping and everything went well.

■ Laugh it off

Sometimes the best approach to forgetting something

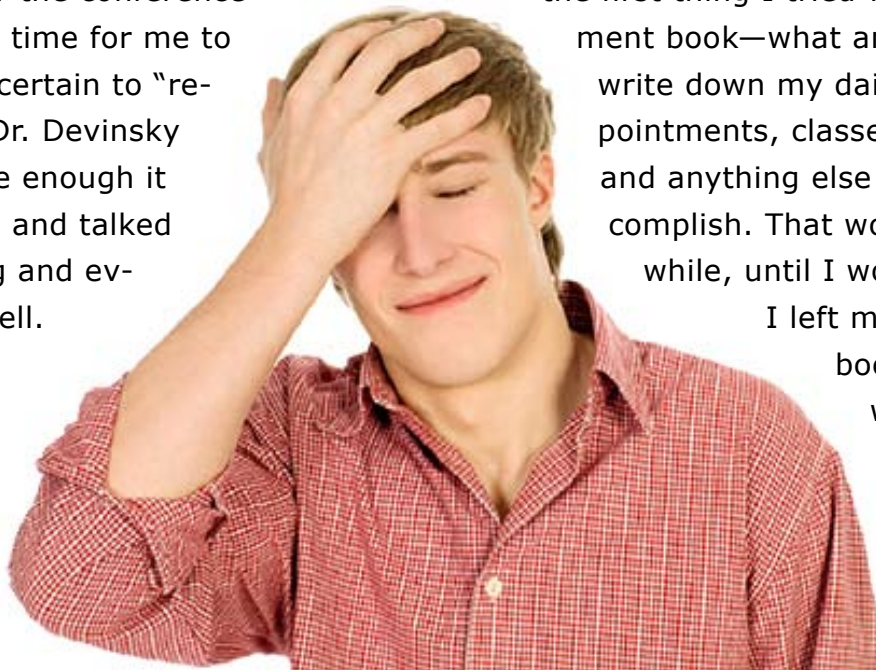
is just to have a good laugh; share what happened with someone you trust and just make a little fun of the situation. I've done that several times and while it may not have helped me to find what I lost or to remember what I forgot, I was able to turn a potentially negative situation into a very positive one.

■ Write it down, type it up, email it and text it

For years, each morning I would tell myself what I needed to take care of during the day, at home and at work and most of the time I would forget it. This would often result in me carrying around lots of folders, thinking that whatever I needed to take care of was in there, while having no clue what to do with such a large stack of materials. While I increased my physical strength over the years by carrying around tons of paperwork, it didn't help me to find what I needed when I had to go through hundreds of documents in short periods of time. So,

the first thing I tried was an appointment book—what an idea, to actually write down my daily schedule, appointments, classes I was teaching and anything else I needed to accomplish. That worked for a little while, until I would forget where

I left my appointment book. The next step was to use an office pad and write down my daily agenda. That also



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worked for a little while until, you guessed it, I would forget where I put the pad. So, then I discovered email and I would send my agenda to myself at my home and work email addresses. While knowing that I couldn't lose my desktop computer was a relief to me—it would always be there in my office—I lost a lot of confidence in the network system when my work computer crashed one day and the content could not be retrieved. Finally, I decided to listen to my wife and allow her to get me a cell phone. I started to text myself and then to jot down my agenda. Of course, this did not stop me from forgetting where I left my cell phone. Now, if I just can't remember where my appointment book is or my note book or my cell phone than I figure that I either need to start gluing my agenda to my body or it must not be that important to remember.

Seriously, my compulsive behavior now has me writing down the same things over and over again. So if I actually forget one thing, like my appointment book, I know I have my agenda on my note pad or on my computer or on my cell phone. Most importantly, I have designated certain places for each item. For example, I use my appointment book to write down my daily agenda

and then it goes into my work bag. The bag is so heavy it's almost impossible to lose. Then I use my big note pad to also write down my agenda and that usually stays in my car or accompanies me to my office where it goes on my desk. My cell phone stays in my pocket most of the time, except when I am in my office; there it goes in its own special place on my desk. When I get to my car, it sits right on the console and when I get home, it goes on the kitchen counter with my wallet and keys. And my desktop computer, well, it's right on my desk at work.

■ Live in the present – I am better for it

I know it's not always easy to live life in the present. When things happen to us, like forgetting, we often revert to negative past thinking, "there I go again, this always happens to me." Unfortunately, living in the past is not going to help you in the present. Therefore, I encourage you to be present and focus on the now. When you forget something, think about what you can do to help you remember now, not about why it's happening again or that you knew this was going to happen because it always does. Being in the present will allow you to take more powerful action towards accomplishing what you want.

Succeeding With Memory Problems

- Acceptance
- Communication
- Develop a routine
- Positive self-talk
- Relax
- Laugh it off
- Write it down, type it up, email it and text it
- Live in the present



In conclusion, those of us who have experienced seizures, undergone brain surgery, and have been or are on medication realize that remembering things on a daily basis can become a real challenge. Yet, regardless of our own personal experiences, it's important to realize that everyone in this world is faced with challenges no matter who we are, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, seizures or no seizures. It is the way we choose to deal with our challenges that will ultimately determine whether we conquer them or they conquer us. The bottom line is to take action to conquer these challenges. Remember that!

Steve Frierman is one of the editors of a journal called: The Journal of Youth Sports: Youth First. His first book, entitled, "Commit to be fit: Now and Forever" will be out in 2010.

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