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How to Have a Conversation When Memory Fades

As we age, more and more of us have family and friends with substantial memory loss. They do not just forget a name and have to wait for hours or even days for it to pop back into their minds. They do not just go from one room to another and have to go back to the first room to remember why they left in the first place. These kinds of [failures of memory](#)ⁱ are increasingly common with age and not a big deal. Major memory loss means, for example, asking the same question or telling the same story over and over and over again:

"Where are my keys?"

"In your jacket pocket, Dad."

And they ask again in a couple of minutes. And again after that.

Or, "What are you up to these days?"

"I have a new job with much more responsibility, Mom."

"You do? How nice!"

And again, in a couple of minutes, "What are you up to these days?"

Major memory loss means that new information, even about major life events, often doesn't stick:

"Are you going to the wedding?"

"What wedding?"

"Your grandniece's."

"No one told me she was getting married."

Major memory loss makes conversation difficult. We expect to be able to talk to our parents and friends about matters of substance, whether it's the events of the day or the economic condition of the country. We expect an interchange of experiences and ideas. But as major memory loss sets in, conversations stay increasingly on the surface, fall into silence or become repetitive.

People with major memory loss frequently retain some habits of speech that can make you think that they are "with it" again, but now there's little underneath the habit. A conservative friend who loves political argument may say, "There's too much government spending." "Really?," you

say, "What would you cut -- Social Security, Medicare, the military?" It's the start of an old, friendly argument. But he says blankly, "I don't know the details." End of conversation.

Loss of conversation is tough on a relationship. In addition to our sadness about the diminished capacity of someone we care about, there is also the fear of knowing that this could be us in a few years. And then there's just the simple irritation of spending time with a person who repeats and repeats.

How can we deal with this?

Ask leading questions. Ask questions that give information, rather than questions that assume memory.

Try this: "Isn't it great news about Betty's new baby? How does it feel to be a great-grandmother?" The reminder may trigger a memory and an appropriate response: "She's beautiful. I never thought I'd live long enough to be a great-grandmother."

Instead of this: "Did you go for a walk today?" "I always do." "Where did you go?" "I don't remember the details."

Or this: "Do you have a photo of the baby?" "What baby? Nobody told me about a baby."

Contribute to their sense of pride. In "Death Of A Hired Man," Robert Frost describes a sad old man at the end of his life as having "nothing to look backward to with pride." There may be people who really have nothing, but most of our parents, aunts or uncles, spouses and old friends have plenty to be proud of. Find opportunities to remind them of their achievements, big and small:

"Where is my check book?"

"I have it now, Dad. I'm taking care of the bills. And every time I write a check, I remember when you taught me how to. You were a good teacher."

Engage emotionally. At a certain point, the substance of conversations doesn't matter. What matters is that contact counters loneliness. Conversation is no longer about conveying information that we expect to be remembered. Now it's about the good feeling of being together and being cared about. You can chatter about things you're doing that you never would have mentioned before or about what you did together growing up. You can ask them to reminisce, with an appropriately leading question: "It must have been amazing to see Babe Ruth play." Your relative or friend may no longer remember the beginning of a paragraph by the end of it, may no longer have clear memories of your childhood or accurate memories of their own, but it often just feels good to be with you, their child or spouse or old friend.

Being with people we care about whose memories are increasingly limited can be painful. But it helps if you no longer expect lost memories, if you can help them to feel pride in their past, and if you understand that emotional contact is what matters most.

For information about memory loss, [click here](#)ⁱⁱ, [click here](#)ⁱⁱⁱ, or [click here](#).

For more tips, [click here](#)^{iv}.

ⁱ Forgetfulness – 7 types of normal memory problems. Harvard Health Publications.
<http://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/forgetfulness-7-types-of-normal-memory-problems>

ⁱⁱ Memory Loss. Medline Plus. National Institutes of Health.
<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/003257.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Are You Worried About Your Memory? Alzheimer's Society.
http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=696&gclid=CLOy_L2TmaYCFcbc4AodhBquoA

^{iv} Tips for Communicating with People Who Have Alzheimer's. Alzheimer's Association.
<http://www.alznyc.org/caregivers/communicate.asp#tips1>