The Facts on Forgetfulness

By Eve Glicksman

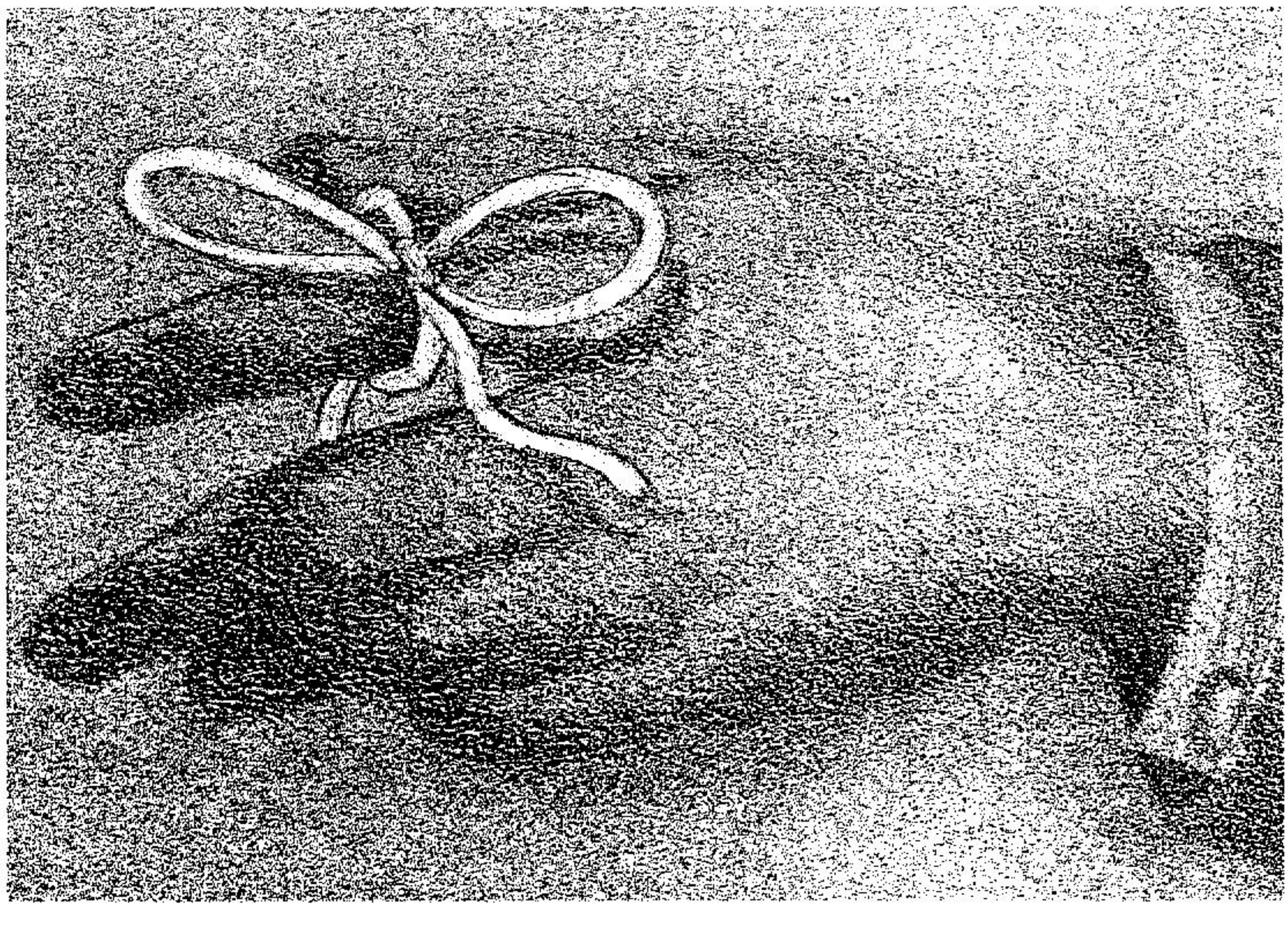

Illustration by David McClure

Ever come back from the supermarket furious that you forgot the milk? Find yourself groping around every corner of the house for car keys? While at one time everyday slip-ups like these were chalked up to simple absent-mindedness, more and more adults—particularly those in their 30s and 40s—are growing increasingly alarmed over routine memory lapses.

According to memory experts, the heightened anxiety is connected to fears of having Alzheimer's disease, the neurological disorder that includes memory loss as an early symptom. The combination of a forgotten appointment one day and a misplaced checkbook the next is putting many in a panic, convinced that they're in the first stages of the debilitating condition.

Possible causes and a few pointers to help you get back on memory lane.

The truth is that everyone has trouble at times remembering something they read or where they parked the car—a recent survey reveals that most of us forget an object or thought at least four times a month. The most frequent incidents cited had to do with items one went to another room to get; other things high on the "Most Forgotten List" are names, the whereabouts of keys or eyeglasses, birthdays of friends and relatives, and television programs that one intended to watch.

But, say memory specialists, what many people are attributing to possible Alzheimer's is ordinary forgetfulness, caused by stress, depression, normal aging, and even poor listening habits. Alzheimer's affects only about 5 percent of Americans over 65 and rarely strikes anyone under age 50.

Nevertheless, memory-testing facilities around the country report being inundated with people wanting reassurance that they don't have the incurable disease. Sales of both memory-training manuals and cassette tapes are booming, and memory courses have become popular fare in adult education programs nationwide.

"The fear about Alzheimer's is ridiculous," says Dr. Robin West, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Florida and author of *Memory Fitness Over 40*. According to West, we're witnessing a

success-oriented generation that is ignorant and frightened about the natural decline of brain function that occurs after 40. While memory loss once was considered a normal, inevitable sign of aging, it is viewed now as a horrible disease since the stepped-up media attention to Alzheimer's in the late 1970s. Ironically, she adds, it's usually the people with the best memories who are most aware of and unnecessarily worried about the slight deviations they notice in their mental performance.

Dr. Thomas Crook, director of the Bethesda, Maryland-based Memory Assessment Clinics Inc. and former clinical psychologist at the National Institute of Mental Health, concludes from evaluating thousands of memory tests that most Americans believe their recall powers are much poorer than they actually are. "Often, there's no problem at all," he comments. "The majority of people think their memories are worse than average, but many times it's that they failed to acquire the information properly in the first place. If you don't remember a name, it could be that your mind was someplace else when you were introduced."

Although you may be dazzled by those with sharp recall, be assured that there is no link between memory and intelligence. Take the proverbial case of the brilliant absent-minded professor, for instance, or the high-school dropout who can rattle off players' batting averages from the past eight years. The point is that some people's brains are better at formulating concepts or organizing information, while others may excel in storing details.

Psychologists confirm that the majority of people who think their minds are decaying have a perfectly normal condition referred to as age-associated memory impairment or "benign forgetfulness." By age 60, 70 percent of us will have some degree of memory loss—a 10 percent or more drop in performance from when we were 30. Just as we lose hair or muscle tone with the turn of time, we lose brain neurons, the circuits that control memory. Our recollections of distant events and long-known facts and figures endure, but short-term recall begins to fray.

A slower mental speed is usually apparent after the age of 40. Between 40 and 50, a person may discover that it takes a little longer to learn something new or recall a familiar ZIP code or phone number. Along with this, the ability to memorize something in the midst of distractions—a name learned at a noisy party, for example—will fall off substantially. Young people also will show far greater improvement when allowed to repeat a memory test than someone from an older age group.

Dr. Joseph Mendels, medical director of The Memory Institute, part of the Philadelphia Medical Institute, observes that most people have inaccurate notions as to what is considered normal memory for their ages. Not including Alzheimer's patients, only 10 to 15 percent of people over 60 have significant memory problems, he says. Older adults may feel like they're forgetting a lot, but it's partly because there's just more information accrued in their brains to forget. While our memory bank grows over time, the proportion of it we are able to access with ease stays the same.

Aside from age, memory can be hampered by psychological stress such as grief or fatigue, alcohol use, or by certain medications and illnesses. Mendels, also a professor of psychiatry and pharmacology at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, estimates that 10 percent of patients coming to see him for a suspected memory problem actually need treatment for depression or anxiety—common causes of memory dysfunction.

In other cases, memory decline is a function of misuse or disuse. Of 229 elderly persons studied by researchers in Seattle, 40 percent were able to regain basic memory abilities they thought were irreversible after five one-hour training sessions with specialists. The "use it or lose it" principle also applies to memory: The brain that is regularly exposed to mental stimulation will perform much better than the one not being exercised. "A well-trained 75-year-old can have a better memory than a 25-year-old," says Crook.

Certainly, the best way to sharpen your memory is to improve the way you learn, maximizing the chance that desired information will make it to

your brain from the start. To do this, you have to improve your concentration, motivation, and ability to encode information effectively.

If you are trying to improve your memory, paying attention is crucial. You're more inclined to forget what you read if the TV is on, music is playing, or you're otherwise distracted. Likewise, recognize your limits—a person of any age will begin to tire mentally after 30 minutes of intense study.

It may be helpful to make a mental picture to go along with a word or idea. Visualize Mr. Green with a lime-colored coat or a girl named Jean wearing jeans. Focus on a prominent facial feature to remember a face. Or tie in new information to something you already know. To remember a date, for example, associate the day and month with another event on your calendar. Or link an acquaintance to the place where you met.

Since anxiety is a mental block, it's more than likely that recently acquired information will get dumped from recall zones when you have a lot on your mind. Therefore, act on your thoughts before storing them away. If you want to remember to take your umbrella to work, hang it on the door the moment you think of it. And to keep track of objects, always keep them in the same place; try saying out loud, "I'm putting this pen in the top right drawer." Along the same line, rehearse new bits of information aloud by repeating them in conversation or by asking how to spell difficult or unusual names.

If you're convinced that your memory is beyond repair, West suggests that it may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. From her work in this area, she relates that people who are not confident of their memories tend to demand less of themselves mentally. In turn, the lack of intellectual challenge results in a lower level of functioning.

Should you suffer from age-associated memory impairment, take heart that experience can make up for what you lack in mental agility. "Your abstract abilities don't change and may even improve," says Crook, noting that wisdom is on the side of age. In one study comparing the typing skills of young and old, it was shown that while the older subjects had slower reflexes, they compensated for their lack of speed by looking ahead at the text—a time-saving practice that the younger subjects failed to do.

How do you know if your memory is slipping enough to warrant medical attention? Doctors indicate that there are usually problems in more than one area, such as speaking difficulties along with memory loss. You should also be concerned if you're unable to perform familiar tasks, as in the case of a longtime file clerk who suddenly can't alphabetize something. Crook predicts that memory-enhancing drugs will be available for healthy adults in the next five years; farther off, he says, may be a breakthrough drug for treating and preventing Alzheimer's.

But as the general population ages and the nation's information explosion comes full swing, Americans will continue to search for ways to conquer the elusive forces of memory. According to one study, the modern person stores away one trillion pieces of information during a lifetime. Says Mendel: "I'm impressed at how much we do remember." □