



ILLUSTRATION BY GORDON THOMPSON

**"W**hat's on for tonight, dear?" asked my husband — for the third time. I couldn't believe it. Was he joking or disinterested in where we were going, or had he really forgotten so soon?

Finding a remedy for that particular situation was relatively easy. I bought him a handsome, personalized, gold-edged datebook to note appointments and tuck into his pocket as an instant reference and reminder. No more repeat inquiries about our plans; no more disbelief on my part.

My husband is young (sort of), vital, and seriously on the go — in and out of the city and in and out of the country, too. Just because he couldn't remember to whose house or what movie we were going that evening didn't mean the onset of Alzheimer's disease. I was pretty sure. (I hoped, anyway.)

How about me? I misplace keys, pocketbooks, my portable phone and, occasionally, reference materials for articles in progress. Panic sets in. Then, after I calm down, I usually find what I'm looking for.

My friends of almost every age are in the same boat — forgetful and, often, anxious about why miss dates, lose keys, and fail to remember friends' names when they start to introduce them.

**IS IT STRESS?**

"I'm stressed out all the

# Are You... Missing Appointments? Misplacing Car Keys? Losing Your Memory?

**BY BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG**

time," says Irene Silver, a nurse in her mid-30s. "I work two jobs and have a million things to keep track of each day, but sometimes I can't remember half of them. I forget simple things like returning phone calls, even after I write down the messages. My friends are ready to kill me. I sure hope this isn't the start of Alzheimer's."

Actually, that's pretty unlikely at Silver's age, according to Dr. Joseph Mendels, a research psychiatrist who is medical director of The Memory Institute Inc., a facility involved in the evaluation of new medications that affect brain functions. Mendels is also professor of psychiatry, human behavior and pharmacology at Thomas Jefferson University.

"A lot of people are worried about getting Alzheimer's disease these days," says Mendels, "because as the population ages we're seeing more and more of it, and more is being written about it." Mendels cautions that most of what is proving troublesome to otherwise healthy older adults (considerably older than Silver) is another problem, known as Age-Associated Memory Impairment (AAMI).

"Many people are concerned with memory loss, particularly as they pass the half-century mark and are still involved in activities that require retention of informa-

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# Memory

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tion," says Mendels. He notes that in years past, even when people lived to a "riper" age, "they were often farmers or housewives or engaged in activities that didn't require too much strain on memory skills."

Today, people are staying active longer and wish to remain competitive, he explains. "So when their memory falters, they become increasingly worried about themselves."

Mendels views memory loss as a natural consequence of aging (the brain cells lose potency), much in the same way as people's eyes are not as sharp as they were in their youth. "But when our eyesight is not good, we don't hesitate to get glasses," he says.

He theorizes that the research underway at the Memory Institute will enable people one day to find the same kind of relief for their memories. "We are finding medication to slow down or reverse Alzheimer's disease, and we'll do the same with Age-Associated Memory Impairment."

## MEASURING MEMORY

The Memory Institute has embarked on a research program, supported by pharmaceutical companies, to evaluate some new medications designed to improve memory loss. Currently, about 500 people are enrolled in the study at no cost to them; these are people in their 50s and 60s who have noticed a change in their ability to remember dates or other information necessary for the conduct of their daily lives. Most participants will be involved in the study for six months or a year, although some will remain as long as two years. "It requires commitment," Mendels says.

The institute takes a high-tech approach to measuring memory acumen: A technician administers an interactive computerized program designed by Dr. Thomas Cook of the Memory Assessment Clinic in Bethesda, Md. On the monitor, the computer simulates everyday experiences, like meeting several people and trying to recall their names and where they come from. Another program asks the participant to "put away" a variety of objects — boots, keys, books — displayed on the screen and then go back into the program several minutes later to "find" them. (In which room was the item stashed? Bedroom No. 1 or No. 2? The living room or the den? Just like home.)

According to Mendels, how well people associate those particulars in the simulation is indicative of the state of their memories.

While Mendels' research is directed toward several aspects of memory and the loss thereof, Dr. Chris Clark, a neurologist at Graduate Hospital, is specifically interested in research on Alzheimer's disease and establishing diagnostic markers to understand its nature more fully.

"Actually," Clark speculates, "Alzheimer's may be a variety of diseases, some due to genetic factors and others due to such conditions as Parkinson's disease." Clark's focus is on "trying to sort out the various types and then to evaluate drugs that slow down or reverse the symptoms."

"If you *think* have Alzheimer's, you rarely do," Clark says. "While memory loss is often a symptom of the disease, family and friends are more likely to notice the various other symptoms of Alzheimer's. The individual who has the symptoms seldom recognizes them."

According to Clark, people under age 50 have little to worry about, even if they seem to be unusually forgetful. "Severe problems, such as Alzheimer's, rarely begin until after 50 — or 60."

He notes, however, that loss of memory traces can be severe and annoying.

a few years ago about his inability to remember the simplest things — or so it seemed to him. His friends were teasing him a lot, so he figured it was time to consult an expert.

"I went to the Neurology Department at the University of Pennsylvania to be tested and found out that most parts of my memory were above average, but the spacial aspects were pretty poor. For example, although I know New York pretty well, I would confuse east from west and invariably turn the wrong way to go to a particular address, or I'd park my car and not remember where it was," he says.

Shapiro says he has learned to rely on some of the "crutches" Clark spoke about. He records the location of his car on a piece of paper and takes the paper with him to his destination, and he carries a map for easy reference.

While people generally lose some memory as they age, the loss doesn't have to be profound, Clark explains. "It's just that the brain isn't as good as it once was, but as it turns out, the improved judgment that frequently comes with age compensates for whatever loss

there may be in the basic memory itself."

Furthermore, Clark says, people who keep active and read and take part in discussion groups or other forms of mental exercise seem to maintain their brain function better. "But," he cautions, "some of that may be self-selective. It isn't the activity that keeps people mentally sound, and inactivity doesn't produce dementia (Alzheimer's) — just dullness. And, that's reversible if people become mentally stimulated again."

For example, someone who sits in a room watching television all day for weeks or months on end, "isn't necessarily a candidate for Alzheimer's but won't have much to contribute or participate in life with," Clark says, citing the common "use it or lose it" philosophy.

Rita Cohen, an active, middle-aged woman, "uses it" a lot. As the administrator of a major graphic design firm in Center City, she is responsible for the financial and operational aspects of the company. "That means I keep track of a zillion things: financial and contractual dealings, scheduling, project tracking, etc.," Cohen says. "There isn't time to refer to sources every time a deadline is coming up. You just have to remember, but sometimes I need to look back and check. It's tough; I used to be able to keep it all in my head."

Sometimes Cohen wonders, "Is it my mind that's going — or is it just the volume of work? I'd like to think the latter. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's what it is."

People have been searching for remedies to memory loss for years. Some, in desperation, went tooling off to Romania to a spa run by a Dr. A. Atlan, who administered a mixture of seven vitamin-based pills and shots known as GeroVital, called a "surefire cure" for senility.

Now it isn't necessary to go dashing off to Europe for exotic remedies to cure a faltering memory. Some of the most interesting work on memory (or the loss of it) is being done right here in Philadelphia by Clark and Mendels.

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Dr. Mendels invites anyone seriously concerned with the possibility of Alzheimer's disease to contact The Memory Institute for a free evaluation and possible participation in his research program. For details, call 923-8378. ■

*Barbara Ann Rosenberg is a local free-lance writer who writes for several local and national publications — but she can't remember which ones.*