

Blindness

for Beginners

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by Maribel Steel

Chapter 6

Tools for Progress

It wasn't until the light sensation completely vanished and I knew there was no way back that I said, I've got to try to understand blindness otherwise it will destroy my life.
~ John M. Hull, Touching the Rock

Professor John Hull, theologian and academic realised in 1983 that he was losing his last remaining sliver of light perception and began to keep an audio diary. Over a three year period, Hull recorded his experiences as he struggled to come to terms with his life-changing situation: He noted, 'I began to feel as if I didn't exist.'

Even though his family were used to him being legally blind (he had developed cataracts in his teen years, and later lost a substantial amount of sight due to Retinal Detachment brought on by numerous surgical operations), as the final dim shadows disappeared altogether, Hull was alarmed to find himself unprepared and grieving his loss.

Not wanting to burden his wife and children, Hull began speaking into a cassette recorder. He delved deeper to untangle his inner turmoil of thoughts and dreams in an attempt to understand blindness. He found it disturbing in this readjustment phase to be a stranger in his own life: 'I had taken up residence in another world.'

Seven years later, Hull's autobiographical recordings on cassette tapes were compiled into a best-selling book, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness*. In the book, Hull openly explored the impact his sight loss had on his closest relationships and on his professional career. Initially, his diary entries were merely a way to help him reach an understanding of his new struggles – 'So full of challenges, making a cup of tea, putting on a tie' – but broadened in depth and scope to reveal his deepest thoughts and subconscious dreams as he explored what it meant to him to be blind.

Touching the Rock is his honest journey from personal loss to an adjustment that opened up an entirely new field for Professor Hull, writing and lecturing around the world on blindness and living with a disability. In 2012, the UK's Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) honoured John Hull with a Lifetime Achievement Award for Services to the Literature of Blindness.

Like John Hull, I've experienced the transforming benefits of keeping journals to untangle mixed emotions and thoughts when I have been upset or confused by the surprises that are a part of not being able to see. My first typed reflections began at seventeen, capturing my random thoughts on white pages tucked into an electric typewriter. The whirring sound thrilled my sense of hearing and the keys tapped urgent messages reflecting on my latest experiences. It often surprised me to discover the real feelings underlying my reactions. Later I took to writing in a lined notebook using a CCTV, an enlarging machine with a camera that could raise the print on a page by up to 40 times magnification. I watched my handwriting appear on faint lines, filling my journals with thoughts. Today, my diaries are crammed into files on my personal computer and read back to me by a synthesised screen reader.

The mystery of the transition from self-reflection to self-revelation has never ceased to amaze me. It is with this in mind, that I encourage the beginner to blindness to consider using a journal as a pathway to emotional wellbeing. By taking time to delve deeper into the issues you face and by asking yourself soul-searching questions. In time, the voice within you has a chance to reveal aspects of life which you can view with more clarity.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING

Perhaps you already keep a personal journal – in which case, I urge you to go even deeper during this time of uncertainty. However, for the reader who would like to learn more about expressive writing, I'm delighted to introduce you to the technique. Expressive Writing is a method of recording your thoughts to help relieve stress. In some circles, it is also known as therapeutic writing where you tap into your true feelings; ones hidden deeply in the subconscious until probed.

Keeping a private journal, whether handwritten, typed, or spoken into a device, where you ramble freely to express all sorts of emotions is especially effective for people who find talking about personal issues to another person too painful or too burdensome to repeat. Taking up Expressive Writing (or recording the voice) is worth considering as a way to manage your stress because there really are so many benefits to reflecting and voicing your thoughts. During the process, the person is able to express anger safely; to gain insights that help to push past feeling stigmatised; to strengthen emotional fragility by choosing to feel the pain and then reframe it in a less painful way; to reflect on new ideas and design a plan of action; and to allow the heart and mind to release negative thoughts to realign the self with a renewed sense of purpose.

Those able to sit quietly and be honest with themselves in contemplating a challenging situation, recording and reflecting on their thoughts, are more likely to feel strengthened emotionally by moving through the pain. Confessing to a torrent of fears is not meant to make you relive them over again but to bring a sense of relief and meaning to something that seemed insurmountable. By taking time to process what you are feeling during a difficult phase, you create a safe haven in which to retreat for a little while. The advantage of using expressive writing or audio journaling as a method for self-healing is that you don't have to be a good writer. No one else need read your work.

Using a creative approach like expressive writing as a tool for improving a person's recovery after experiencing trauma has led to hundreds of studies worldwide. Researcher and author, Dr James W. Pennebaker, in his book, *The Secret Life of Pronouns: What Our Words Say About Us*, writes, 'The mere act of translating emotional upheavals into words is consistently associated with improvements in physical and mental health.'

In order to gain the most benefit from recording our life ‘sufferings’, Dr Pennebaker believes that it is helpful to fully acknowledge the negative aspects of a situation and face them so we can move into a more positive frame of mind. He conducted a series of experiments where people were asked to write freely for fifteen to twenty minutes a day for four days to reflect on their experience of trauma. ‘Compared to people who were told to write about non-emotional topics, those who wrote about trauma evidenced improved physical health. Later studies found that emotional writing boosted immune function, reduced blood pressure and feelings of depression while elevating daily moods.’

During the writing of this book, I used expressive writing several times while going through a difficult situation. I jotted down my random thoughts into a computer journal, describing disempowering feelings that kept me stuck, seeing everything as hopeless. Through this journaling, I was able to observe the turmoil of my thoughts and question them. Before long, I found my focus shifted to finding brighter solutions, and it felt comforting – like self-induced therapy. I began an internal dialogue, and that inner, wiser part of me was inspired to offer tangible solutions. I then realised I had strategies to use the next time fear threatened to take hold. By changing my pattern of thinking, a different approach became possible and the situation shifted in a positive way.

I’ve learned that reflection and brainstorming with oneself is like taking a walk with the mind. At the end of the walk, I feel rejuvenated by my increasing insight and understanding my own thoughts and reactions. I can even emerge feeling ecstatic with a totally new sense of direction.

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STEPS TO JOURNALLING

When beginning your own journal of expressive writing, the following steps may inspire you to work through the many elusive and challenging aspects life brings to the beginner to blindness.

Step 1 – Begin with where you are now.

Choose a quiet space where you won’t be disturbed for at least half an hour. Get comfortable as you record your feelings and thoughts about your current situation,

being as honest as you can. No one is going to read your journal, or listen back to your recordings, so dive right in. Don't be afraid to bring up all your doubts and phobias – they are all valid.

The key is to express your inner world without judging what you write or say. Perhaps ask yourself, what do I fear most in this new situation? What do I feel I can't share with anyone right now? Jot down anything: your troubled thoughts, doubts, indecision, loathings, or fragments of fear as they crop up. Any dark or bullying thoughts will be forced out into the openness of your mind. Keep going if you can because there will be many layers to uncover.

Step 2 – Don't edit the thought process.

Writing as therapy works best when you don't correct your private dialogue. It's all about enabling you to heal and to progress rather than to be perfect in your current expression. In time you may seek rehabilitation services to help you cope with your life challenge but for now, in the newness of the prognosis, just speak or write frankly and get in touch with true feelings.

Step 3 – Be your best friend.

Think of your journaling as pouring out your heart to a good friend – who just happens to be you: a friend who is there to listen, to allow you to express how you truly feel; a friend who really cares about your well-being. By revealing your thoughts, you are paying full attention to the stirrings of both heart and mind.

Just as when you are addressing a dear, supportive friend, you can open up more and more. Are there any other questions he or she would ask? If so, answer these questions without editing. Try to notice the advice your 'best friend' would give you in this situation. Often this is where your *Aha!* moments can occur.

Step 4 – Reframe your outlook.

There is no wrong or right way to handle a life-challenge but there are definitely positive ways to help you progress. One method on those days when you feel you are going nowhere or even falling backwards is to try and reframe the situation.

For example, think about or write into your journal five things you can be grateful for. During a time of angst, this is the last thing you might want to do but it will

create a total shift in your perspective. Asking your mind to consider the positive in a time of distress can flick an internal switch. If you feel grateful for one simple mercy, your heart is briefly strengthened by this. Continue to dwell on five simple mercies and before you know it, your perspective starts to change.

Keeping a 'gratitude journal' as part of your expressive writing diary is a way of taking notice of the good things you tend to forget about during times of stress. Writing about the positive; your hopes as well as your fears can boost self-esteem and renew confidence. Recollect your successes, no matter how small they might seem. A thoughtful realisation, a commitment to making progress, a willingness to try again, or anything you feel to be a personal achievement, are all worth noting.

Step 5 – Commit to reflecting.

To reap the benefits of expressive writing, it is advisable to commit to writing (or recording) regularly in a private nook where you can cry, laugh or just think. Give it a go every day for a minimum of ten days to see how this form of self-care really works. Regular practice will help you to form the habit of journaling, enabling you to stay on top of your emotions with a technique that brings you renewed inner strength, as well as giving you a focus on how to plan your next action steps – or quiet retreat.

In the words of Dr Pennebaker, 'When we encounter adversity, we react by thinking about it. Our thoughts rapidly congeal into beliefs. These beliefs may become so habitual we don't even realise we have them unless we stop to focus on them.' By making a commitment to observe your random thoughts in order to reflect and reframe, you create insightful moments that can nurture your emotional life.

♥ Legacy in First Draft

In 2010 I felt a nagging urgency to create a legacy for my family. I wasn't planning to leave the planet but I knew that the past history of my life would never be known in full to my children unless I began my autobiography. How could they understand the bizarre things that had occurred with the onset of blindness, or the events that shaped our lives as a family and my spiritual perspective on life if I didn't write them down?

I took to writing everything as it came flooding back. The good, the bad and the unexpected. One year later, the stories I had compiled in my computer added up to over 200 print pages of autobiographical writings. Chuffed with my achievement, I asked a writing mentor to read through the manuscript to give me her honest feedback before I went in search of a publisher. Her reply made me sit back and rethink my plan.

‘It’s alright. For a first draft.’

First draft? I thought I had finished it. Disappointed at first, I had to admit that there was a lot more to learn about the craft of writing an engaging book for another reader. Even for the family, I had to go back to the drawing board. I am so glad that I did. Devoting just about every evening to the craft of writing for the next two years, I devoured article after article on the craft of writing; advice on writing nonfiction and fiction, strategies for building characters, plotting a narrative arc, constructing dialogue and the art of memoir writing. I became even more passionate about writing. It hooked me completely.

Yet, my family had not yet seen a scrap of my work and I felt like a fraud not having one single story published anywhere even though I was calling myself an ‘emerging’ writer. It occurred to me that if I took some of my autobiographical stories from my unpublished manuscript and polished them up as short stories, using the knowledge gleaned from my internet studies, I could not only submit them to a writing contest but also create my very own blog and publish them myself. This revelation launched my online writing career as a blogger, *At the Gateway to Blindness*. My second blog, *Touching Landscapes*, followed two years later.

There, in view of the world, my short stories of family life, travel and living with blindness emerged. I was so surprised to receive emails from people I didn’t even know, who left kind comments about how much my words were encouraging them. Writing for my blogs was more than a passion, it became an addiction but I still didn’t have a book to call my own.

In 2012, with the availability of self-publishing becoming a real avenue for writers to explore, I went with an impulsive idea – to create my first book as a surprise present for my family. Thanks to the encouraging words from an artist friend and book designer, Bee Williamson, who said when I inquired if she could help me, ‘Let’s do it, girlfriend’.

I set out on a whirlwind adventure to publish my first book within a three month deadline. Bee hit the 'PUBLISH NOW' button while we held hands and squealed, 'We've done it!' Two weeks later, *My Mother's Harvest: A Collection of Family Recipes & Short Stories* arrived in a box holding the first 100 copies. Voila! What a surprise for all of us.

Personally, the experience was a great success. What I gained professionally by self-publishing a book was an unexpected increase in opportunities to publish elsewhere as a freelance writer. All this began with keeping a diary, internalising issues as they arose, listening to the wise small voice within, following my muse to play with new ideas and using the *Aha!* moments experienced along the way as the seed-thoughts for my creative writings.

Using Expressive Writing could become a lifechanging tool in your hand too. Where will *you* begin *your* story?

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IMPROVING THE WIRES TO MEMORY

If your sight is compromised by a loss of vision, it is important to strengthen cognitive activity. One skill people fear losing as they get older is the ability to rely on their memory. We can all fall victim to believing in the old saying, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks', but is this really true or could it merely be an excuse not to improve the function of memory?

Scientists and neurobiologists agree that we can all boost our long or short term memory. They have also discovered that neuroplasticity – which is the human brain's ability to reorganise new neural connections (nerve cells) after an injury or illness – can respond by adjusting to the new situation.

I find that being blind or vision-impaired requires me to be extra observant – like a Sherlock Holmes type of character who has to detect not only minuscule details of the changes going on around me but must also build on my capacity for recall. As sight fades, I am aware of how much I am gathering clues from listening, touching, smelling, tasting, intuiting and observing as best my eyes can. Above all, there is one undeniable device working overtime in helping me to adapt to change. It's called my MEMORY. I consider it to be a personalised computer app wired to my brain. And you have one too!

When you lose the ability to scan with your eyes and have to rely on memory to update, store and retrieve data you need to remember, the essential skill to develop is to train the multi-sensory operating system inside your head. Every time you intellectually challenge your brain, the activity stimulates dendrite growth, and the brain accommodates the growth of these new networking neurons that connect and proliferate, regardless of your age.

As a beginner to blindness who has to switch from scanning with your eyes to relying on your other senses in order to strengthen the function of memory, you have a vast resource inside your head that can be trained to retrieve details in ways you may not have tapped into yet. The human brain is surprisingly malleable in creating new neural pathways to accomplish new skills. Being able to recall details is about developing good habits and effective techniques by not limiting your cognitive abilities. In other words, your brain's capacity for storing information is virtually limitless.

Each time you learn a different skill, complete with all its challenges, you are stimulating the mind and improving the mechanism of recall while creating 'files' inside your memory filing system. I hope you will be encouraged to know that it is possible to become a whiz at remembering things no matter how old you are as your sight fades. Memory is acquired, not retired.

Consider the findings of a researcher at the University of North Carolina, Dayna Touron, who conducted a series of experiments with adults over the age of 60, which found that they often underestimated their ability to use their memory as a reliable tool for retrieving information, and were not using their function of recall to its full capability.

'We do see some adults who come into the lab who never shift to using their memory,' Touron said. 'They say they know the information, they just prefer not to rely on it.'

This sounds plausible because I have noticed how sighted people on the whole override their ability for recall and use their sight as a more reliable informant. For example, they write down a phone number rather than remember it, they use their eyes to read a person's name tag at a conference rather than commit it to memory, and they can scan their eyes over a menu as many times as they like. As a person who is blind or vision-impaired, you must use a different technique to store similar information.

Blind People Have Superior Memory Skills, an article on the LiveScience website reveals some findings that may be of interest. A neurobiologist by the name of Ehud Zohary of Hebrew University (Jerusalem) and his colleagues conducted two memory tests with 38 people. Half of the volunteers were sighted and the other half were blind from birth. The first test involved hearing a list of 20 words which the volunteers were asked to recall. In the second test, the volunteers were asked not only to recall as many words in the list as possible but also to remember them in the correct sequence. (Hands up those who are glad not to be doing this test!)

The tests revealed that the volunteers who were blind were able to remember 20 to 35 percent more words than did the sighted volunteers. But perhaps more impressive was the fact that the blind volunteers were able to remember twice as many more words in the right sequence. This suggested to Zohary and his colleagues that with the absence of sight, people who are blind are constantly using other cognitive strategies, giving them ‘superior’ memory skills. Zohary concluded that, ‘congenitally blind people appeared to be using the visual cortex for other needs, and now we may be seeing part of how this area is getting used for other functions, to maybe be more involved in memory and language processes.’

One cognitive strategy I have developed over time to deal with the absence of sight is to remember details in a sequence or in a pattern that makes sense to me. It’s like having a jigsaw puzzle inside my mind that takes information in by repeating the details in such a way that it fills a missing part of the puzzle piece by piece. This creates a mind-map inside the brain that with practice becomes a reliable method of retrieving information. Sighted people regard this as an admirable talent.

The more you can repeat words, even putting words to popular tunes (as I did when studying the top 20 elements in Chemistry by using an ABBA song), the easier recalling important information will be. Use a creative pattern to jog your memory. Look for anything that can become a mental landmark and file it with focus and repetition. This is an effective strategy and an essential tool you most definitely already have within your reach.

♥ Hallelujah for Mind Maps

Singing has always been one of my passions, especially because I don't need to see in order to sing; a good listening ear, an awareness of pitch and a method of remembering lyrics is all that is required.

When I listen carefully to the verses of a song I have been asked to perform at a concert, I notice words that jump out first. These words form the structure my mind builds on. As I repeat the verse, random words are snatched up by memory, which is on the prowl in search of the next keywords to cement together, until the song is built like a mental scaffolding with the lyrics firmly in place and in the correct order. I'm aware of my mind looking for words it can either group together or use as a prompt to remember the rest of a verse. As long as I don't get too anxious about keeping up with sighted singers, and relax into the mind-mapping process, I can sing with confidence with my eyes closed. Other singers are sight-reading but not necessarily putting the words into their memory.

If you have ever tried to remember the verses of Handel's choral arrangement, The Messiah's Hallelujah Chorus, you will most probably want to cling to the song book for visual guidance through the complex layers of harmonies. The first time I performed the choral work was with the Montague Choristers. The choir consisted mainly of retired people and I turned up one rehearsal night as their youngest soprano.

They welcomed this new choir chickie to the brood and warmly ushered me towards the protective wings of the mature hens between the sopranos and the altos. It was a prime position and I soon felt right at home, allowing the clucky-musical hens to place me in their pecking order. Their admiration for my ability to retain lyrics puffed up my pride and increased my singing confidence.

Several months later, we were preparing for a Christmas concert. The choir were struck by a dilemma: would they take their music books on stage or could they sing from memory?

'What about Maribel? She doesn't have a book like us, won't that look a bit odd on stage?' asked the soprano who was sitting next to me.

'She doesn't need one,' joked one of the men from the bass section, sending a chuckle rippling around the room.

'That's right,' said the soprano more soberly. 'If she doesn't need a songbook, why do we? If she can remember all the words, why can't we?'

The banter in the bass section stopped. For a group who relied on sheet music, this was a frightening thought. No one wanted to abandon their beloved books. I sat smugly on the border listening to their comments flying across the room. Finally, the choir director took charge.

‘It’s OK,’ she calmed the group. ‘You can take your songbooks on stage. I have an idea that will keep everyone happy.’

At the next rehearsal, I was presented with a book that looked exactly like everyone else’s brown-covered songbook – except that mine was a gardening calendar full of glossy photographs of spring flowers. The audience would never know. On performance night, I held my ‘Messiah Songbook’ just like the other choristers, and sang together with them, counting the bars on my hidden fingers. Every now and then, I pretended to be reading when I would feel a nudge from a soprano on my left or my right to indicate ‘Turn the page now’.

While flicking over the pages with the others, colourful blooms caught my attention. Bright yellow daffodils, red and hot pink tulips, and deep purple hyacinths held my gaze momentarily until a jolt from Memory reminded me of the words in my head waiting to be sung. At interval, when all the choristers had left their songbooks on their seats, I impulsively swapped my brown-clad gardening calendar with a real song book sitting on the abandoned seat on my right. That very chorister came over with a cup of tea (and her brother) to make casual conversation.

‘Why don’t you show Howard your music book?’ she suggested with a grin, expecting to reveal the secret of the spring flower calendar.

‘Sure.’ I smiled back. I flicked open the book and showed Howard.

‘Hmm?’ he remarked with a slightly arched eyebrow. ‘Black music dots, quavers and lyrics in neat rows.’

With a straight face I turned to my fellow chorister, who was now looking confused. ‘Why not show Howard your songbook?’

She opened the song book and burst into laughter. ‘OH! The flowers that bloom in the spring!’

A MEMORY SKILL

As mentioned before, working to improve your memory is like being your own super-sleuth. You have to take notice of details and then place mental notes to self into a

filing system inside the brain. This process is called 'encoding the memory' and there are two other follow-up procedures that make it highly efficient in recalling any stimulus the mind considers to be important information to retrieve later, like being able to remember a person's correct name and a host of routine daily tasks.

When memorising something, visual or auditory stimuli are converted into an electrical message that is transferred from neurons to the brain and kept in a complex storage system. The memory can then go into that space to retrieve the facts or information that passed through this memory-formation encoding system. All this is happening without any of us really understanding how powerful our capacity to remember can be. The facts may slip easily from our minds but Memory is ever ready to assist.

A highly effective way to enhance your memory if you are experiencing vision loss is by being alert to other sensory information waiting to give you vital clues. Sensory cues and landmarks are everywhere but are you aware of them?

The way in which I have adapted to a more sensory recall is to 'converse' with 'Ms Memory' everywhere we go. On walks around my neighbourhood, for example, I am fully aware of an internal dialogue that basically goes on for the entire outing. Ms Memory assists by reminding me of the crucial points of reference that will keep me moving confidently and safely through my local environment.

'Remember this kerb is usually flanked by a large puddle on rainy days. Move a few inches to the right, just after the bright red post box. Walk around that tree, you don't want its overhanging branch to smack you in the face again. Don't forget the council workers recently installed a telegraph pole in the middle of the laneway. What day is it? Rubbish collection day. OK, avoid those large things scattered to the right. You're coming up to the house with the barking dog who likes to frighten the living daylight out of everyone – but not you today because you've remembered to move onto the nature strip. You're approaching the spot where you will have to walk around the white vehicle that is always parked on the pavement. Shouldn't you place a little card in their letterbox to request the path be kept clear? (Ms Memory jots down this brief thought.) Just a little further, that's right, past the large clump of bushes on the corner, not too close. Turn left NOW. Road crossing in a few metres. Listen for the audible beeps and traffic flow. Here you go – sounds like your tram is fast approaching.'

On we go, Blind Sherlock and Ms Memory in a constant search for clues, sometimes scolding each other for missing an important detail that has changed. Ms Memory promptly makes a mental note for next time.

This constant banter with oneself might sound exhausting but it is a technique that will develop over time as you become proficient in retrieving important information you can no longer see. Don't worry too much if details slip your mind at first, because sometimes our short term memory has limited capacity for storage.

Our short term memory is occupied with current thoughts that only last about a minute before moving on to other thoughts. On the whole, it limits our storage capacity to around seven items at a time. Learning this helped me understand why I can suffer brain-fatigue as a vision-impaired shopper in a supermarket. My aim might be to buy orange juice. I home in on my choice, but sometimes a sighted helper will tell me the other fifty varieties of juice. I find so much information overwhelming to store in my head. If this were to occur with every item on my mental shopping list, I would literally feel brain-dead by the end of the shopping trip.

My senses are in overdrive just concentrating on staying out of people's way and taking in other sensory information. This means that I often decide to stick to my original choice of orange juice, simply to keep the lines to my short term memory clear and avoid overloading my system. In this situation, multi-tasking is not so helpful because it interrupts one task to focus on another.

On the other hand, our long term memory has the ability to remember anything from a previous time (even from days or years ago) and has an unlimited storage capacity. Here, the brain can retrieve details of past events, factual data and general knowledge we have acquired through study and mental focus. With such an amazing neural super-computer inside our brain, do any of us really have an excuse to neglect the power of memory?

One technique for improving memory I recently came across is apparently so effective you hardly have to do anything at all. Freelance science writer, David Robson, who specialises in writing in-depth articles on medicine, psychology and neuroscience, published 'An Effortless Way to Improve Your Memory' online at BBC Future. Robson's article suggests that simply taking some time out to rest after digesting new information, minimising distractions of any kind, has proven to be a powerful way of retrieving this information for students and the elderly alike.

By sitting quietly for 10 to 15 minutes after taking in new information, it has been proven in many scientific tests that one can boost the ability of memory to retain the data a person wants to remember much more effectively than if they had continued with other tasks. This means that multi-tasking is not so efficient if we want to enhance and improve our power of recall.

Robson writes that ‘The remarkable memory-boosting benefits of undisturbed rest were first documented in 1900 by the German psychologist Georg Elias Muller and his student Alfons Pilzecker. In one of their many experiments on memory consolidation, Muller and Pilzecker first asked their participants to learn a list of meaningless syllables. Following a short study period, half the group were immediately given a second list to learn – while the rest were given a six-minute break before continuing.

When tested one-and-a-half-hours later, the two groups showed strikingly different patterns of recall. The participants given the break remembered nearly 50% of their list, compared to an average of 28% for the group who had been given no time to recharge their mental batteries. The finding suggested that our memory for new information is especially fragile just after it has first been encoded, making it more susceptible to interference from new information.’

It appears that the best way to memorise new information is to avoid rushing to stack more facts on top of what you have just learned, and to allow the brain a small amount of time to recharge its internal battery as a matter of procedure. This technique requires you to deliberately avoid activities, such as going on your smart phone to check for messages, or starting up the computer to surf the internet, or getting involved with any task that may hinder the initial encoding process the brain is performing for memory formation. Minimal interference is the key. More rest and less mental clutter may be just the solution for all of us.

♥ Have You Seen My...?#

I am forever touching things wherever I go. Blind Sherlock, with Ms Memory close at hand, tracks clues as we patrol the domestic precinct. I often come across misplaced objects, mostly my partner's, which Ms Memory is quick to jot it down: one wallet in the washing basket, one guitar capo by the kettle, one set of keys on the bookshelf, one pair of glasses perched by the bathroom mirror. When he asks,

‘Darling, have you seen my...?’ he knows full well the blind super-sleuth most probably has.

Shoes – glasses – car keys – wallet – laptop. This ‘game’ is usually played in haste on the way out of the door to an important meeting or before a weekend getaway. His request *sometimes* amuses me – and I forgive him, for he is the artistic type, a right brain sort of guy, spontaneous, a risk taker, a creative inventor, who complements my left-brain approach to life, which is practical, reality-based and highly organised.

After reading about our ability to boost our brain-power, please take heart that none of us are stuck with the memory we have today.

As sight fades you can work on your ability to retrieve those mental files, and to keep learning new skills that gently exercise the brain to stretch and grow. By flexing your memory muscles daily and taking time to rest, more strategies will emerge to enhance your sense of wellbeing in other creative ways.

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