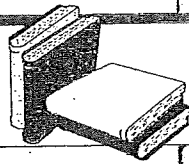


READING



10

Remembering Details

Directions: Read the following selection, then answer the questions that follow.

Have you ever been surprised to find that you have completely forgotten an event that someone else remembers vividly? Some theories of memory assume that our brain keeps a record of everything that we have encountered. Other theories propose that the brain does not keep a permanent record of everything. Some things are completely erased, while others are stored in such a way that some effort is required to retrieve them.

"What do you mean, you don't remember? That was the party where John made such a fool of himself; he actually tried to eat the artificial ivy."

"Was that the same party where he tried to put the poodle in the punch bowl?"

"No, No. Not that one. That was years ago. You mean you really don't remember?"

A fascinating article on remembering by a University of Utah psychologist, Marigold Litton, begins with these "memories." Litton had always been interested in studying people's ability to remember events that had occurred in their lives. When she began this work, her first question was "Where can I find some people who will be available for long periods of time, who are reliable, who won't move away, who won't get bored with the study, and whom I could conveniently follow on a regular basis?" The only person she could find who satisfied all of these criteria was herself. She would be the sole subject.

Every day for the six-year period from 1972 until 1977, she wrote down what happened to her. Each memory was recorded on a separate card in the form of a brief description, such as "I have dinner at the Canton Kitchen; delicious lobster dish," or "I land at Orly Airport in Paris." On the back of each card she wrote the date for each event, and then gave it a rating in terms of how important, emotional, or surprising the event was. By 1977 she had written down descriptions of more than five thousand items.

Every month she tested her memory. She picked about 15 cards at random from the file and read the descriptions. Each item could be anywhere from one day to six years old, and for each she tried to remember as quickly as possible when the event had occurred. Linton reasoned that the more information she had about an event and its context, the more accurately it could be dated. Each month she spent from eight to twelve hours testing her memory in this way.

Linton learned some interesting things about her own memory. After about six months of studying herself, she found she would typically be quite depressed after each test session. The reason was that her general procedure was to "warm up" before each test by simply thinking over the highlights of her life over the previous year. During these warm-up exercises, she usually thought of happy times—friends, successes, a good life. But when she started pulling the individual events from her file box, she discovered that the cards contained not only happy memories but also numerous irritations: Her car breaks down and she can't find anyone to help; she fights with a lover; she gets a paper rejected by a scientific journal. Once she realized the source of stress, it seemed to help reduce it.

After six years of studying her memory, she transferred all the information to special computer cards and fed them to a computer. The computer analyses revealed that by the end of any one year, she had forgotten 1 percent of the items written during that year. By the time those items were about two years old, she had forgotten about 5 percent more. Forgetting continued so that by the time the study ended, she had forgotten over 400 items of the 1,350 she wrote down for 1972, or about 30 percent. In general she seemed to forget things at a low, fairly steady rate, with the numbers of forgotten items usually increasing slightly from year to year.

What kinds of things did she remember? Most of the memories were fairly unique, nonrepeated events, like a traffic accident, or surprising events, like a tennis game in which one of the players was injured. It was pretty easy to supply a date for "the tennis game in which Ed got hit in the eye." However, she could not remember the names of the other players in the game. Assuming that Linton's memory processes are like most of ours, this suggests that people remember general information for some time, but that many details drop out.

(continued)

Overall, Linton's results suggest that specific memories are regularly dropping out. They are not locked in memory for all time, unless they are repeated or relived or unless they are unusually significant. Despite these apparent losses, all is not gloomy. After several phone calls from the same person, it may not be possible to remember any one conversation or even when it took place. But it becomes easier and easier to

identify and remember the person's face. This means that even though specific events are forgotten, considerable knowledge is retained. The mind, Linton thought, undergoes a spring cleaning.

Source: Loftus, E. (1980). *Memory*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 121-123.

Understanding the Reading

Directions: Answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Initially what happened to Marigold Litton after each test session?

2. Why did the memory tests have this effect?

3. At the end of the test in 1977, how much of 1972's memories had she forgotten?

4. What types of memories tended to be long-lasting?

5. Why do routine events tend to fade from memory over time?

Thinking Critically

Directions: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

6. Complete the sentence below with a routine response and with a surprising response. If each event occurred, which would you be more likely to remember two years from now?

"I was riding the bus with a friend who suddenly..."

7. If you were to conduct a study of your own memory, would you use Litton's method? Why or why not?

8. What potential problem could mar the accuracy of Litton's study?