

April 13 2010 | Last updated 1 minute ago

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Chill out to remember more

A fascinating new insight into the dynamics of memory has been achieved by tests on patients undergoing an electroencephalogram

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Published: 00:00 April 13, 2010



There is no doubting the value of a sharp memory, and there have been endless books claiming to improve your memorising techniques, ever since long before my time. Yet the actual science of data storage and retrieval in the human brain has remained as obscure as the origin of a great invention or a catchy tune.

But now a fascinating new insight into the dynamics of memory has been achieved by tests on patients undergoing an electroencephalogram (EEG), where electrodes are placed directly on the brain's surface to monitor its oscillatory rhythms.

When data-input is synchronised with a particular rhythmic pattern (theta wave), it registers more deeply and retrieval is more efficient, according to a recent experiment conducted by specialists from Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre and California Institute of Technology. As theta waves are closely identified with relaxation, it seems that you memorise better when you're relaxed.

This may sound unlikely at first, but personally I know it touches hands with my own strong belief about the other half of the memorising process — the retrieval of data from the memory i.e. the power of recall.

One fine summer evening, I remember feeling a vivid sense of well-being, arriving home with my young family after a wonderful day out at a big safari park, as we casually switched on the TV to see what was showing. It was a quiz contest, and with my background in stress counselling, I could immediately see that the young woman in the chair was suffering badly from stress. Her chosen subject was Gothic architecture — not something I know much about. But three times, I was able to supply an answer to a question that she failed. Obviously the stress had affected her ability of memory recall, while my relaxed mood, sitting at home, had improved mine.

Psychological nosedive

Efficient memorising is also one part of the ability to speak in public — a skill in which I have been coaching executives over many years.

Just telling them to relax is, of course, a little too easy. There are important drills that do have to be rehearsed, no differently from a stage-actor with a script. But unlike a stage-actor, you do not have to keep to the script, word-for-word. This releases you from the terrible fear of forgetting the next word, which then causes your memory to go entirely blank.

With speaking in public, the technique is to prepare your fallback position. Keep some good, unused anecdotes up your sleeve, to help you over until the original script comes back into your mind. If you've established rapport with your audience (and do not display

stress or fear), it is truly amazing how uncritical your audience will be. Nobody will spot the inconsistencies or dream that you came so close to that fatal nosedive.

Key points

The science of memorising has been obscure until now.
New research shows that you memorise best when relaxed.
Public speaking skills are rooted in a relaxed confident attitude.