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Prevention Intervention: Memory Makeovers

We Never Forget Anything (Anymore)

4 superbusy women boost their brainpower with the help of memory makeovers from the nation's top brain experts



Pictured, from left to right: Rachel Walsh, Laurie Anderson, Neerja Jain, and Teresa McCoart.



Teresa McCoart, 51, Sr. Administrative Assistant
GOAL: "Help me prevent Alzheimer's disease"

The Expert: Vincent Fortanasce, MD, a Neurological Rehabilitation Specialist at the Fortanasce

Neurology Center in Acadia, Ca

When she forgets the names of her coworkers, Teresa isn't just embarrassed, she's scared. Before her parents passed away, they both developed dementia--a disorder that impaired their memory, judgment, and motor skills (the most common causes are Alzheimer's and [stroke](#)). Teresa was concerned that her "senior moments" were signs she'd suffer the same fate.

If Teresa were to inherit the disease, she would develop symptoms when her parents did (they were in their 70s). Instead, Fortanasce believes her poor lifestyle habits are to blame for her blank moments now, though they might put her at a higher risk for memory loss later. The good news: There's still plenty of time to make adjustments. "Genes determine 30% of your risk of developing Alzheimer's," says Fortanasce. "The other 70% comes from factors you can control--diet, fitness, and stress levels." Though Teresa did recently start exercising, which has been shown to help slow mental decline, she should also make these changes:

EAT MORE BRAIN FOOD

Fortanasce recommended she add 1 cup of [blueberries](#) to her daily diet; studies show they contain compounds that improve short-term memory. She should also increase her intake of fruits, [vegetables](#), and fatty fish (such as salmon) to help protect and nourish brain cells; cut saturated fat to keep her heart strong and pumping blood to her head; and replace refined grains with whole ones to keep brain fuel reserves full.

Make a brain-boosting vinaigrette

Rosemary and [turmeric](#) stimulate the brain. Fortanasce recommends adding a pinch of each, three times a day, to your food. Teresa does so by whisking them with olive oil (2 tablespoons), garlic powder (3 pinches), salt (a dash), and rice wine vinegar (to taste)--and uses the vinaigrette on salad and to marinate meat and drizzle over veggies

SLEEP 8 HOURS EVERY NIGHT

Your brain needs sleep to function properly: It uses the "downtime" to sort and store information. Plus, new research suggests sleep helps strengthen memory recall. To help Teresa get more than her regular 5 hours, Fortanasce suggested she cut down on fluids and keep her bedroom cool (around 63°F), quiet, and dark.

"I sleep more soundly--and longer. I get between 7 and 8 hours now. I also made it a habit to toss [blueberries](#) in my cereal or mix them with nuts for a snack. Though I still have the occasional blank moment, overall, I'm more focused, more energized, even happier. I now know how to keep my brain healthy, and I'm motivated to keep it up."



Laurie Anderson, 47, Technology Assistant
GOAL: "Help me excel at my new job!"

The Experts: Alvaro Fernandez, cofounder of [sharpbrains.com](#), a leading brain-fitness web site, and Elkhonon Goldberg, PhD, Sharpbrains' Chief Scientific Advisor and a Clinical Professor of Neurology at New York University School of Medicine

After 10 years of teaching, Laurie decided it was time for a change. Although she was excited about her new job at a middle school, she worried that she might not be able to learn new skills fast enough.

To keep her mind fit and flexible, Laurie needs to exercise her mental muscles, says Fernandez. An active brain creates new connections between cells so it can store and retrieve information more easily. Fernandez coached Laurie through a personalized brain-fitness program; he also recommends the following:

DO SOMETHING NEW EVERY WEEK

Fernandez was pleased to hear that Laurie likes to try different things because tackling unfamiliar tasks boosts short-term memory and builds up the parts of the brain that encode information. "Just doing Sudoku or crossword puzzles, for example, is like working out your biceps but ignoring the rest of your body," says Goldberg. Instead, find about 20 minutes four times a week to do a variety of mentally stimulating activities--switch between reading different newspapers, playing Scrabble, and learning a new function on your cell phone.

BREATHE DEEPLY

Processing new information when we're anxious is tough; the stress itself is a distraction. Fernandez taught Laurie this relaxation trick: Close your eyes, touch your pinky fingers to your thumbs, and think about that healthy feeling after a good workout. Take deep breaths and hold that thought for 30 seconds. Next, move your ring fingers to your thumbs and remember a time when you felt loved for 30 seconds. For your middle fingers, recall a caring gesture, and for your index fingers, imagine a beautiful place.

"After just a week of SharpBrains training, I surprised myself: One Friday afternoon, a colleague wanted to show me a new part of the job. There were kids talking, phones ringing--it was hard to focus. I took a moment to use the relaxation technique I learned. On Monday, I was able to complete a project with no extra help."

Tease your brain

Play memory-boosting games to give your mind a workout. Laurie's favorite: A SharpBrains game based on [biofeedback](#). As a monitor chronicled her heart rate, she played a game she could win only if she used deep breathing and visualization to lower her heart rate. Try some brainteasers at [SharpBrains.com](#), or visit [Prevention's Brain Fitness](#) section for more.



Neerja Jain, 43, Store Owner
GOAL: "Help me clear my foggy brain"

The Expert: Prevention Head Coach Columnist Thomas Crook, PhD, a Clinical Psychologist based in Florida and author of *The Memory Advantage*

Neerja owns and operates five franchised coffee stores. Between handling personnel issues, equipment troubles, budgets, and inventory--and sticking to a business plan that calls for eight more stores over the next decade--Neerja often finds herself distracted, frazzled, and anxious.

"Neerja is stuck in a vicious cycle of stress," says Crook. Studies show that oversecretion of the stress hormone cortisol inhibits brain cells' ability to communicate properly. If Neerja can't think clearly, it's harder to do her job, which causes more stress and perpetuates the cycle. Crook's plan to get her back in control:

MAKE A LIST OF TASKS--AND CONSULT IT TWICE A DAY

Running from store to store and crisis to crisis while trying to keep up with her executive tasks, Neerja was asking her brain to retain too much information. She needed to get--and stay--organized so she could keep up. Crook suggested she use a handheld voice recorder equipped to hold audio files in several digital folders--one for each of her stores and one for her personal life (cost: about \$100; at most electronic stores). She should review her recorded notes at night, prioritize her to-dos, and then look over her list before work the next day. Knowing she has a plan of action will ease Neerja's anxiety, says Crook.

SCHEDULE EARLY MORNING "ME" TIME

With her tasks mapped out and fresh in her mind, Neerja can now use her hour-long commute to do something she enjoys: Chat on the phone, listen to music, or pop in an audiobook. "Pastimes and passions are more than indulgences--they're stress relievers," says Crook.

"I use the handheld recorder and also take notes in a little book. It's amazing how such a small act made such a big difference: As soon as I stopped worrying about forgetting something, I felt calmer. Creating a to-do list at night helped me sleep better, too. And spending those few minutes to review my game plan before I head out to work lets me spend my morning drive catching up with friends and family on my hands-free cell."

Daydream to reduce stress

Neerja and her husband hope to open an orphanage in India, so Crook suggested she take just one moment a day to "visit" the orphanage in her mind. "It helps put everyday hassles into perspective and makes me feel more relaxed and happy," says Neerja.



Rachel Walsh, 47, Realtor
GOAL: "Help me stay sharp and focused"

The Expert: Gary W. Small, MD, Director of the UCLA Center on Aging and the author of *The Memory Bible*

To sell multimillion-dollar homes, Rachel needs to be fast and flexible at solving problems, closing deals, and making her clients feel that their numerous needs are her top priority. If she stumbles over a potential client's name, the person may lose confidence in her abilities.

"Rachel is a multitasker, and that keeps her attention fragmented," says Small. And as we age, changes in the frontal lobes of our brains make it hard to concentrate in distracting environments. To support her

memory, Rachel needs to go back to these basics:

TAKE IT ONE TASK AT A TIME

Trying to do too much at once leads to forgetfulness, and Rachel often talks on the phone and reads e-mails at the same time. A mature brain tends to experience "moments of rest," resetting as we shift from one task to another, says Small. These pauses are the reason Rachel might draw a blank when she hangs up the phone or walks purposefully into a room and forgets why she needed to be there.

SAY IT OUT LOUD

Instead of passively taking in information, trusting that your brain will filter out the fluff while sorting and storing the important data, concentrate on being mindful. When you enter your house, for example, watch your hand place your car keys in the proper spot, even saying out loud I'm putting the keys on their hook to give your brain an added boost.

"My job does require some multitasking, but I make an effort to finish one thing before moving on to the next, and in the end, I'm more productive--and more organized. Instead of piles of paperwork on my desk, I have bins for completed, current, and future work--it helps me look at one folder at a time."

Look, Snap, Connect

Small taught Rachel his favorite memory-boosting trick. How it works: Look reminds you to pay attention; Snap stands for taking a mental snapshot; Connect means to link the snapshot with what you need to remember. Say you meet someone named Mrs. Siegel. Look for a distinctive feature--her red hair. Picture a seagull nesting in it and you've connected her name to her image.

Play Games for Healthy Brains

Make your mind fit with the science-based, electronic brain games at prevention.com. Some hone memory skills, while others test language abilities. (Beware: They're addictive!) Plus, find easy de-stressing tips and exclusive memory-boosting workouts- -all at [Prevention's Brain Fitness](#) section.

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