Dr. Rob’s Science Connection -- Enhancing Brain Health

## Why Do We Forget Names?

## Issue 8

One of the most common complaints about memory is the inability to remember names. In this short article, I will discuss this phenomenon and give some suggestions and hopefully peace of mind when one is unable to recall a name. There are a couple of primary reasons why we sometimes are unable to remember someone’s name. First, we often don’t encode or make a new memory of someone’s name in the first place. We can’t later retrieve a name if we never stored it. The failure to make a new memory of someone’s name when you first meet them is probably the most common challenge we have with names. The second main reason we might not remember someone’s name is *not* because we haven’t learned it, rather we can’t retrieve or find their name in our memory banks; this situation is known as the *Tip of the Tongue* state. With *Tip of the Tongue* experiences we know the name, we know we know the name, we might even know what sound or letter the name starts with, but alas it won’t come to us. I am happy to report that *Tip of the Tongue* states do not appear to be a sign of a more significant problem, although they do often occur with increasing frequency during middle and late adulthood, however middle age and older adults are more likely to solve a *Tip of the Tongue* state than a younger adult. One strategy for dealing with these situations is to simply stop thinking about the name for a while. Another strategy is to think about people and things related to the name one can’t recall, such as other people associated with the person, places you have been with the person and so one.

If you want to remember someone’s name, you might want to do one or more of the following suggestions.

When learning someone’s name, imagine someone else you know with the same name. Quickly imagine whether the two people you know, with the same name, could be friends or if they have some sort of commonality.

Ask them to spell out their name. This will give you more time to rehearse the name and possibly create a more visual image of the name.

After learning someone’s name, you can try repeating it back to them, then hold it on your mind for a moment and rehearse it by using it in a normal conversation. If you forget the name in the first few minutes, go ahead and ask them to remind you again. Be sure to use their name when you depart.

Try writing the name down as soon as possible, rehearse it over the next day or two.

Finally, don’t worry if you are unable to remember a name, it is normal and something most of us find challenging at times.

Dr. Rob Winningham is a Professor of Psychology and Gerontology at Western Oregon University. For the past 20 years he has researched human memory and ways to enhance cognitive abilities. His brain stimulation activities are used by thousands of retirement communities and have been shown to improve memory ability. For more information go to: [www.robwinningham.com](http://www.robwinningham.com)

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