



## Forgetting

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Forgetting can be described as the loss of information that is already stored in an individual's long term memory. This process can happen immediately or over the course of time and results in the inability to recall old memories from where they are stored.

One way to counteract the process is by consistently reviewing information in a way that stimulates the brain. This means that quickly glancing over information may not be enough to stop the process of forgetting.

We will look at three main reasons why the process of forgetting is believed to occur:

- Cue Dependent Forgetting
- Organic Causes
- Interference Theories

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## Cue Dependent Forgetting

This is the inability to recollect information because the stimuli which were available at the time the memory was stored are not present when the person attempts to recall a memory. Basically, this theory states that although the memory cannot be remembered at this point in time, it will come back under the right conditions. Retrieving the memory at that moment in time is like trying to find a certain piece of literature in a library without knowing the actual title or other pertinent information. The book exists in the library just like the memory exists in a

person's brain but neither can be found without a little help.

Retrieval of this information is dependent on state and context depending cues. State dependent cues relate to the mental condition of the individual at the time his or her memory was first stored. The cues that will jog the person's memory involve their state of mind at the time of memory. Therefore, the person may need to go back to being happy, angry, disappointed etc. at the time the memory was encoded in order to retrieve it.

Context dependent cues are related to the situation or environment present when the memory was first encoded. For example, weather, music or even taste could act as a cue. Students are asked to study under similar conditions to what they will experience in their exam for this very reason. Studying in different conditions could result in a student forgetting important material learned once he/she is in the exam hall.

## Organic Causes

When the brain experiences physiological damage which causes forgetting <sup>[1]</sup>, these are known as organic causes. Illnesses such as Alzheimer's and Dementia damage the brain and cause forgetfulness. Self-imposed damage such as excessive consumption of alcohol or narcotics also have a detrimental effect on memory and cause people to forget information that was previously stored in their long term memory.

## Interference Theories

This is a theory which states that the process of learning something new could cause older material to be forgotten. The three different branches of interference theory are Retroactive, Proactive and Output.

When new information causes old memories to be compromised, this is known as Retroactive interference. Proactive interference occurs when older memories cause problems when the time comes to retrieve newer information. Output interference happens when recollecting a specific piece of information prevents an individual from remembering old memories.

One final theory relating to forgetfulness states that the brain forms a memory trace when new information is learned. This trace gradually vanishes unless it is used from time to time. This is known as the 'decay theory'.

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### Links

[1] <http://allpsych.com/psychology101/memory>