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Prospective Memory

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Prospective memory is another way of describing our ability to do something later on. This is different to retrospective memory which involves remembering things that happened in the past. It is not known whether we need to consciously focus on prospective memories or if they suddenly pop into our head.

Our minds have two very different type of memory constantly working, retrospective and prospective memory. Retrospective deals with memories of events that have already happened in our lives while prospective memory concentrates on recalling information that we were supposed to remember as well as knowing we are supposed to perform some sort of action in the future.

A major difference between the two types of memory is the fact that retrospective often needs a stimulus in order for us to remember while prospective does not necessarily require such stimuli.

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Prospective Memory vs. Retrospective Memory

Retrospective memory involves having the ability to write something down on a keyboard or paper without having to look at what we are doing. Other examples include memorizing data and recalling it and performing everyday routines without having to consciously think about it.

Examples of prospective memory ^[1] include remembering how to keep our balance, knowing that the car needs to be filled with fuel every few days and remembering to call a friend at an appointed time.

Cues

With prospective memory, we may have a cue to do one thing which leads to recollection of a previous task that must also be performed. An example of this is remembering to meet a client which acts as the cue followed by the realization that a certain message had to be passed on to them. This would be a prospective memory based on an event.

There are also examples based on time such as remembering to watch a television program, meeting the above client at a specific time or buying groceries while the shop was still open. Everyday activities such as writing a list of things to do may well improve prospective memory.

Our ability to recall prospective memories can greatly diminish over the course of time. This is why the old adage which suggests we should perform a task now rather than later has more than a ring of truth to it. It is a good idea to either write down a task as you remember it or else perform it while the memory is still fresh.

Attentional Resources

Psychologists are currently arguing about whether we use attentional resources to strengthen our prospective memory. Attention is defined as the process of ignoring several different things in order to focus solely on one aspect of a task.

An example of a research question relating to this would be asking if attentional resources are required in order for us to remember to meet someone and give them a message. Some psychologists maintain that our prospective memory always needs to use some resources.

This viewpoint has opponents however. The multiprocess model suggests that various mechanisms would be necessary for something as vital as prospective memory. This model suggests that cue identification may require an effort or else be an automatic process but it depends on several variables. These include the prospective task's properties as well as what you were doing at the time.

Studies in 2005 argue that cues do not always need a massive monitoring effort to be identified. Essentially, this states that certain intentions simply come to our mind out of the blue.

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Links

[1] <http://alexandria.tue.nl/extra2/200213729.pdf>