

## ① REBOOT YOUR RECALL

If everyday forgetfulness has got a hold on you, it's time to flex your brain in a new direction. One proven way to improve memory retention is by simply learning a new skill, whether it's picking up pickleball or practicing Mandarin on the Babbel app. "Learning builds new connections in our brains," says Kaitlin Casaletto, PhD, an assistant professor of neuropsychology at the University of California, San Francisco, Memory and Aging Center. Another is to switch off GPS when driving. Spatial navigation harnesses your hippocampus, the part of the brain in charge of laying down memories, which we don't use like we did pre-Waze. Also, start using visual cues. If you often forget people's names (the number-one complaint Casaletto hears), one way to conquer that is by connecting them to what you see when you meet them, as in: "Rita is in the red dress."

## ② TRIUMPH OVER TO-DOS

It's a double whammy: Overcommitting steals your focus and makes it hard to complete tasks, and staring at a long list you can't make a dent in increases your anxiety, which *also* makes it hard to tick off items. Here's a radical idea—cut your list in half, says Ellen Langer, PhD, a psychology professor at Harvard University. Ask yourself if each item relates to a larger goal or intention, like taking care of your mental health, suggests Ryder Carroll, creator of the Bullet Journal, which guides users to do just that. New York City organization and productivity expert Julie Morgenstern offers her four-D's method: *Delete* things that aren't worth the time invested—like that ambitious bookshelf-alphabetizing project. *Delay* something (the catch-up call with a friend) for when you can give it the attention it deserves. *Diminish* an item by figuring out a more efficient way to get it done, such as replacing an email that takes a half hour to write with a five-minute phone call. Finally, *delegate* something—ask your partner to schedule the family doctor's appointments. And if cutting something gives you space to concentrate on meaningful tasks you enjoy, or simply recharge, let it go.

# Sharpen Your Focus

You walk into the kitchen and totally blank on what you meant to grab. The reason could be your hectic life, hormonal shifts, getting older, or all of the above.

But fear not—these strategies will help lift that mental fog, and get you thinking in high definition.

TEXT BY TINA CHADHA

### ③ OWN YOUR IN-BOX

“An interesting feature of the brain is that it does not really multitask,” says Casaletto. Rather, it switches between a specific network of neurons very quickly—and each restart is incredibly cognitively demanding, which leaves your mind murky, she says. This is why reading emails as they trickle in is the worst possible practice, says Morgenstern. Indeed, a 2014 study from the University of British Columbia found that checking less helps reduce stress. To curtail interruptions, ignore your email for set intervals, and batch-process messages by blocking off, say, 15 minutes three times a day to reply or delete. If you need to respond to certain people faster, New York City-based professional organizer Andrew Mellen, author of *Unstuff Your Life!* (Avery, 2010), suggests setting up filters by keyword or sender, so emails from your boss go in one folder and sale alerts from Nordstrom land in another. Also, abandon the idea of ever being “done.” Says Mellen, the concept of “in-box zero” is “preposterous for anyone who wants to do anything else in life besides interact with email.”

### ④ OUTSMART YOUR PHONE

“Smartphones are hands down our biggest distraction,” says Larry Rosen, PhD, professor emeritus of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Per a 2021 survey by Reviews.org, the average American checks her phone 262 times a day. And tapping on all those news alerts and social posts comes with a big price. Johann Hari, author of the new book *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention—and How to Think Deeply Again* (Crown), cites research showing that when we're interrupted, it can take about 23 minutes to get back to the same level of attention we started with. The end result? “We are constantly living with profoundly degraded brainpower,” he says. To safeguard your mental space, Hari recommends installing

apps like Freedom, designed to curb phone addiction by blocking you from the internet for set periods of time. You can also switch your phone's interface from a colorful playground to a sea of gray (on an iPhone, open Settings, click “Accessibility,” then “Display & Text Size,” and “Color Filters.” Toggle color filters on, then select “Grayscale”). Last, establish tech breaks with very short binges in between, says Rosen. Set your phone timer for one to two minutes and text or TikTok it up. Then flick apps closed, set your alarm for 15 minutes, and place your silenced phone upside-down next to you. (Keeping it in sight wards off “nomophobia,” or no-mobile-phone-phobia, a psychological condition that's up for inclusion in the American Psychiatric Association's handbook.) Keep going until, when the alarm chimes, rather than grabbing it, you think, *Wait, I want to finish writing down this thought.*

### ⑤ ENJOY ACTUAL FACE TIME

Chatting with loved ones while paying bills shatters our ability to absorb what we're hearing. The solve: Get personal. At the end of a workday, shake off the office before re-entering normal life. When you shut down your computer or reach home, “close your eyes, take a few breaths, and imagine your family,” says Alisa Murray, PhD, a clinical psychologist in Kent, Washington. Then greet your crew. “If you're present as you walk into the room, it sets a positive tone and helps everyone be more engaged.” Even more crucial, *stay present*. “Connecting with our eyes is so important,” says Murray. “So make eye contact with loved ones.” In short? You'll see clearly what matters most.