

I'm not a robot



























For most of us, our memories are filled with the minutiae of our personal lives. We tend to remember that relatively unimportant time we went to McDonald's with our grandma for years, while information learned in high school about the U.S. Constitution slips away just months (if we're being optimistic) after learning it. For people with highly superior autobiographical memory (HSAM), it's even more dramatic. People with hyperthymnesia, as it's often called, can remember almost every little thing that happened to them over the course of their lives. They can remember back to things that happened to them in the crib, and can often recall in great detail every single event they've experienced, no matter how minor, from the point when they were 10 or 11 years old. They can remember that the U.S. invaded Iraq on a Wednesday in March 2003. They can probably remember what they had for breakfast that day, too, and whether or not they felt tired. Here are nine things you might not know about the rare condition. 1. IT'S A POPULAR DOCUMENTARY SUBJECT. Hyperthymnesia has been the subject of a 60 Minutes special, a Channel 4 documentary in the UK, and countless newspaper and magazine reports (including our own). In 2010, Brad Williams (a one-time Jeopardy! contestant) became the star of his own documentary, Unforgettable, directed by his brother. Superior memory is also a popular topic in fiction. The classic example of hyperthymnesia in literature may be Jorge Luis Borges' short story "Funes the Memorious," in which the main character suffers a head injury that results in the ability to remember everything in exquisite detail. Hyperthymnesia has also been featured in young adult books, been a plot point on House, and used to characters' advantages on crime-solving TV shows like Unforgettable. And yet... 2. SCIENTISTS HAVEN'T KNOWN ABOUT IT FOR LONG. The first case was reported in the journal Neurocase in 2006. It described "AJ," a woman who can recall events and dates from her life with incredible accuracy. Researchers from the University of California, Irvine spent five years interviewing her and testing her abilities before the paper went to press. The patient later revealed herself to be a woman named Jill Price. She published a memoir about her life with hyperthymnesia in 2009. 3. IT'S EXCEEDINGLY RARE. At this time, there are only a handful of individuals in the world who have ever been diagnosed with hyperthymnesia, and scientists still don't know exactly how it works. Some studies have found that hyperthymesiacs might have variations in the structure of their brains, while others argue that it might have behavioral components. However, since so few people are diagnosed with HSAM, it's difficult to study the condition. 4. IT'S A SELECTIVE GIFT. Price, who can instantly recall the day of the week and what she was doing on almost any day going back to when she was 14 years old, told researchers that she couldn't apply her superior memory skills in school. She reported having "great difficulty with rote memorization," telling the researchers that "it [meaning her memory] doesn't work that way. I had to study hard. I'm not a genius." One day in the lab, researchers asked her to close her eyes and recall what clothes she was wearing that day. She couldn't remember. 5. IT USUALLY INVOLVES A SUPERIOR MEMORY FOR DATES. Hyperthymnesia involves more than just remembering everything that happened to you; it's also about remembering exactly when it happened. For instance, Price can label what day of the week virtually any calendar date fell on. Given a specific date, like "March 19, 2003," a 20-year-old hyperthymesiatic called HK can remember that it was a Wednesday, what the weather was like, and what he felt that day from getting up to going to bed. When asked how he remembered dates so clearly, he told the researchers, "They just come into my mind. I can just picture it as if I was there again. Especially when anniversaries come around. That day of the anniversary, I just think back to what I was doing, what the weather was like, who I was with, and so-and-so. I just remember it." 6. IT MAKES THE PAST FEEL LIKE THE PRESENT. HK sees most of his memories happening in the first person, "through his eyes," as he describes it—even though he's blind—as if it were happening in the present. "I can remember all kinds of facts," he said. "But when I think about something from the past, an event or something, I feel like I am right back in that situation. There really is no difference in when it happened and when I remember it." 7. IT MAKES MEMORIES FROM YEARS AGO FEEL EMOTIONALLY INTENSE. Louise Owen, a hyperthymesiatic interviewed by 60 Minutes in 2010, had a strong reaction when the reporter brought up an unhappy day from her past: just the mention of a sad day, like the one in 1986 when Owen learned she'd have to change schools, and she relives it emotionally. "I felt like my whole world was collapsing. And you say that and it's like all of a sudden I feel like this really heartbroken little 13-year-old all over again," she explained. She said the feeling was vivid and awful, even after all these years. "I mean, my heart is actually pounding right now in telling you this," she told [reporter Lesley] Stahl. 8. IT CAN BE A BURDEN AT TIMES. Owen described some of the darker aspects to her gift to 60 Minutes. "Sometimes, having this sort of extreme memory can be a very isolating sort of thing," she said. "There are times when I feel like I'm fluent in a language that nobody else speaks. Or that I'm walking around and everybody else has amnesia." And Price, researchers wrote in 2006, "is bound by recollections of her past." She is constantly reliving moments from her personal history. Some, like cognitive psychologist Gary Marcus, who interviewed Price for WIRED magazine, points out that people with superior autobiographical memory share some traits with people with OCD, like obsessively thinking about dates and events. 9. IT DOESN'T MAKE YOU IMMUNE TO FALSE MEMORIES. A 2013 article in PNAS indicates that despite their superior recall, people with hyperthymnesia are still susceptible to false memories. Hyperthymesiacs were just as suggestible as the control group to incorrectly remembering nonexistent news footage, for instance. Facebook/Reddit/LinkedIn/Tumblr/Pinterest/Email Memory can be broken down into multiple types, including long-term memory, short-term memory, explicit and implicit memory, and working memory. Memory is a process in your brain that enables you to collect, store, and recall information from the world around you for future use. It involves complex mechanisms that allow you to receive information from your senses and experiences and store it long term in your brain. Experts have studied and explained memory from various perspectives, and each has a unique way of describing how it works. For example, some experts focus on memory duration (short term and long term), while others frame memory based on the type of information you store and how you use it. Here are a few ways to describe the various types of memory. Short-term memories stick with you for a limited amount of time. You might retain the information for seconds, minutes, or hours, but your brain doesn't necessarily save it for recollection years down the road. Examples of short-term memory include: recalling a phone number just long enough to dial itacknowledging the sound of a bird in the yard remembering that you placed the cap of the toothpaste on the back of the sink after you brush your teethLong-term memory involves the information your brain stores for extended periods of time. There are two primary types of long-term memory: Explicit (declarative) memory: Explicit memory is a type of long-term memory that involves consciously recalling information. Implicit (non-declarative) memory: Implicit memory is a type of long-term memory that involves unconscious recollection of information. Examples of long-term memory include: recalling details of a vacation or event you went to years agobeing able to read music or play a musical instrumentriding a bicycle speaking fluentlyWorking memory is the short-term storage of information for immediate use in decision making, problem-solving, and task performance. Examples of working memory include: doing mental mathholding a conversation in a coherent way following a recipe when cookingmultitaskingSensory memory is a type of short-term memory that involves your perception of sights, smells, sounds, tastes, and tactile information. These memories stick around for only a fraction of a second, and they help you draw in the moment conclusions about the world around you. Examples of sensory memory include: recalling the last word someone just saidlocking away from the billboard across the street and briefly retaining the image it showsacknowledging a familiar scentbriefly retaining the sensation in your finger after getting shocked with static electricityProspective memory is the ability to remember to carry out future tasks or keep previously planned obligations. It's considered a core neurocognitive ability that contributes to independent function. Examples of prospective memory include: recalling that you have a doctor's appointmentremembering to grab your car keys and cellphone before you leave your homeremembering to return a phone call you received earlier in the dayLong-term implicit memories that relate specifically to skills are procedural memories. These memories are usually learned through practice or repetition until you don't have to consciously think about them to perform them. Examples of procedural memory include: driving a cartrying out your shoeshinutting your phone passcodetyping on your keyboard without checking each keyYour semantic memory is a type of long-term memory. It's your ability to assign meanings to words, events, objects, people, and places and to remember those meanings. Examples of semantic memory include: knowing geographical locationsremembering celebrities and the movies they've starred inassociating certain dates with their historical eventsknowing what a word meansEpisodic memories allow you to recall experiences or events that have occurred throughout your life. These memories are often detailed. Unlike semantic memories, which also allow you to remember people or places from the past, episodic memory involves recollection of the exact time and place you gained the information. Examples of episodic memory include: remembering your 14th birthday partyrecalling your nerves during a past job interviewremembering how you looked on your wedding dayAll types of memory are important and have a role to play in your overall function and cognitive processes. But in general, long-term memory types are sometimes seen as more crucial because they hold indefinite information and guide meaningful decisions and behaviors over time. And short-term memories are also important, but they're temporary by nature. There are many types of memory, which are often categorized based on different frameworks of time and usage. In general, memory and sensory memory are examples of short-term memory processes, while episodic memory and semantic memory are examples of long-term memory processes. Healthcare has strict sourcing guidelines and relies on peer-reviewed studies, academic research institutions, and medical journals and associations. We only use quality, credible sources to ensure content accuracy and integrity. You can learn more about how we ensure our content is accurate and current by reading our editorial policy. David RobsonFeatures correspondentStockA handful of people can recall almost every day of their lives in enormous detail – and after years of research, neuroscientists are finally beginning to understand how they do it. For most of us, memory is a kind of scrapbook, a mess of blurred and faded snapshots of our lives. As much as we would like to cling on to our past, even the most poignant moments can be washed away with time. Ask Nima Veisesh what he was doing for any day in the past 15 years, however, and he will give you the minutiae of the weather, what he was wearing, or even what side of the train he was sitting on his journey to work. "My memory is like a library of VHS tapes, walk-throughs of every day of my life from waking to sleeping," he explains. Veisesh can even put a date on when those reels started recording: 15 December 2000, when he met his first girlfriend at his best friend's 16th birthday party. He had always had a good memory, but the thrill of young love seems to have shifted a gear in his mind: from now on, he would start recording his whole life in detail. "My memory is like a library of VHS tapes, walk-throughs of everyday of my life from waking to sleeping – Nima VeiseshNeedless to say, people like Veisesh are of great interest to neuroscientists hoping to understand the way the brain works. Quick explanations – such as the possibility that it may be associated with autism – have been offered, but a couple of recent papers have finally opened up the possibility of a more general short-term memory, however, in that working memory specifically involves the temporary storage of information that is being mentally manipulated. Short-term memory is used when, for instance, the name of a new acquaintance, a statistic, or some other detail is consciously processed and retained for at least a short period of time. It may then be saved in long-term memory, or it may be forgotten within minutes. With working memory, information – the preceding words in a sentence one is reading, for example – is held in mind so that it can be used in the moment. 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