



The blunder years

FEEL AS THOUGH YOUR BRAIN HAS TAKEN FLIGHT? HOW TO MANAGE THOSE MADDENING MISSING-MEMORY MOMENTS ON THE JOB



I

needed to contact her. I clearly remembered her face, voice and professional affiliation, but could not — no matter what mnemonic trick I tried — recall her name. Plowing in frustration through my email address book, I finally found her, way down in the R's.

I used to have a memory like a steel trap. Co-workers came to me for instant recall of forgotten facts. Now it seems that trap has rusted shut. But I'm not alone. According to Jerilynn Prior, a Vancouver-based menopause expert and a University of British Columbia professor of endocrinology and metabolism, those memory hiccups that routinely stalk busy people in fast-paced work environments begin to happen more often to women once they hit midlife.

Peachy timing, isn't it? No sooner do we reach our professional peak than our mental hard drive begins to unpredictably drop memory files into biochemical trash bins, forcing us to try and manage the glitches gracefully, while wondering what onlookers must be thinking.

Women's busy lives may not have changed by this point — in addition to job stress, we still take on the lion's share of domestic tasks — but we begin experiencing hormonal shifts during the decade or so of perimenopause that precedes actual menopause.

Stress triggers production of too much of an adrenal hormone in the brain called cortisol, which can cause intermittent memory failures. And, Prior says, "estrogen levels average higher in perimenopause, and that increases or amplifies the cortisol response to stresses in women's lives."

Increasing memory lapses can spark a new stress, adds Prior: We begin wondering if we're displaying signs of Alzheimer's or some other early-onset form of senile dementia. We're not, she says. It's normal to forget where we put our sunglasses or what that person's name is. Forgetting what sunglasses are used for, or who that person is, would indicate a

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more serious neurological problem.

“Memory glitches?” laughs 42-year-old Shannon Bowen-Smed, president and CEO of Calgary personnel firm Bowen Workforce Solutions. Her four-month-old baby, Kira, sister to seven-year-old Elacy, has thrown added challenges into Bowen-Smed’s already full life. “I also have sleep deprivation,” she chuckles. “I have no memory!”

To keep track of details, Bowen-Smed sends herself emails and voice-mails, and writes notes to herself, keeping pad and paper in her bedroom, and by the phone in her kitchen.

Meanwhile, 60-year-old Barbara Bowes, a human resources expert in Winnipeg, says her menopausal hormone storms are in the past, but she still relies on the tools she developed to cope with memory dropouts — because she still gets them. She depends on trusted colleagues to recall what she doesn’t, and delegates — something she notes successful businessmen have always done, whereas “women are used to doing everything ourselves, and if we try to delegate those details, we feel guilty,” she says.

She felt that guilt until she realized she was making too many errors. “Mistakes make you appear weaker,” says Bowes. “You can’t ever put yourself in a position where you look weak. You always have to be on top of the game.”

That applies even more if your work environment happens to be toxic or highly competitive, or if you’re a senior executive whose memory-related errors occur often enough to affect employees’ morale and confidence in you, Bowes adds.

Fortunately for Calgary’s Bowen-Smed, she’s in a workplace where co-workers like and respect each other. “I think vulnerability is a lovely quality,” she says. “I’m reminding my colleagues that I’m human, like them. I do my

very best — and my very best looks a little different now that I’m 42.” Like Bowes, she delegates, dealing with critical matters herself and “passing on what I define as the supporting things that need to be completed.”

Perhaps the most glaringly ubiquitous memory lapse is name recall. Bowen-Smed relies on colleagues at social events. “I tell them, ‘If I haven’t made an immediate introduction, it’s because I can’t, and need your help.’” If she’s on her own and forgets a name, “I invariably admit it,” she says. “People

Peachy timing, isn’t it? We reach our professional peak just as our mental hard drive crashes.

know when we fake things, so I think they prefer the honesty. And every single time, people say they really appreciate how busy my schedule is.”

Bowes sidesteps awkward moments when making introductions by saying, “I’d like you two to introduce yourselves.” Since she’s known locally as an information broker, that ploy also conveniently helps consolidate her image.

But sometimes we’re blindsided by blunders. In Vancouver, 47-year-old Lise Magee, PR manager at the Robson Street Hotel Listel, recalls with chagrin the moment she completely forgot the name of a woman who was the keynote speaker at an event they were both attending. During the pre-speech reception, the woman arrived while Magee was chatting with an acquaintance — and the normally unflappable PR manager had a sudden brain stall. “Usually, I can fake these things, but this was one where I had to introduce

her to someone, and she’d just popped up out of nowhere,” Magee recalls. “I said, ‘It’s gone. It’s just gone.’ She wasn’t impressed.”

Magee uses humour to cover slips — with colleagues she knows well. “I wouldn’t use it with people to whom I was trying to prove myself,” she notes. Bowes agrees with that caution. “You’re putting yourself down, and you don’t want to do that in the long term,” she explains.

When they can, both Bowes and Magee work from home; having fewer distractions helps to improve recall.

The good news: Our memories will bounce back. For most women, Prior says, estrogen levels decline following menopause, and that usually triggers a return to sharper recall skills.

In the meantime, if your memory dropouts cause real problems, Prior recommends asking your physician about progesterone. “It has a direct pharmacological effect on sleep. If you take it as a pill, part of it goes directly to the brain and encourages lovely, sleep-promoting metabolites,” she says. Recent European research does indicate that progesterone can help menopause-related sleep disorders, but few North American doctors are familiar with this use of the hormone.

So far, Bowen-Smed’s memory, bolstered by her coping techniques, is holding up well. As for Bowes, despite delegating, note taking and sidestepping glitches, she’s still waiting for her memory capacity to rebound.

And Magee just wonders sometimes if the best strategy might be to build a professional image as a flake. “Then if you become one, no one will notice,” she laughs. She wouldn’t make that observation to just anyone, but then, she knows me. And she knows we’re sharing the same leaky-memory boat these days. **M**