FIGHTING FORGETFULNESS


Cathryn Jakobson Ramin recharged her mind.

By her early forties, journalist Cathryn Jakobson Ramin was pretty sure something had changed in her brain, and not for the better. Here, she discusses her compelling new book, *Carved in Sand* (out next month from HarperCollins), which chronicles her search for reasons and remedies for her—and our—forgetfulness.

Q: Why do memory lapses upset us so much?

A: Because to recognize them means to acknowledge that you're getting older. Plus, it's embarrassing to be in a meeting and everyone knows you can't remember someone's name, or you can't make that scintillating remark because you've forgotten a proper noun. I realized this was happening to a lot of people. You go to a party and everyone's talking about memory failure, forgetfulness, losing track . . . I have a whole string of words for it, which of course are not coming to me now!

Q: What's going on?

A: From my research, I learned that in midlife, we experience changes in the way the frontal lobes function, changes in the way our axons, the fibers that transmit messages, are put together. Everything's slower because information is taking back roads. Also, you're getting less slow-wave sleep, and studies suggest that's the phase when a lot of memory is consolidated.

Q: The good news you report is that as people move into their sixties, they aren't as bothered by memory foul-ups.

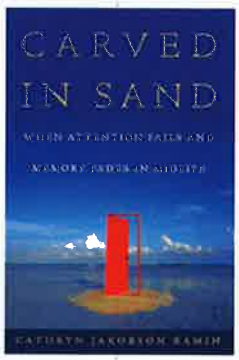
A: By 60, no one's asking you to multitask the same way as when you have kids at home and you're trying to run a household and keep your job.

Q: Women often tout their ability to multitask. But you say not to do it.

A: Because you're going to make mistakes and spend time cleaning them up.

Q: Of all the interventions you tried—everything from going on a brain-friendly diet to taking up salsa dancing—you were surprised and conflicted about the fact that Adderall, a drug prescribed for ADD, worked so well.

A: For me to try Adderall is probably like someone else taking heroin. But within a week, I was racing the online thesaurus and beating it. Unfortunately, I also had no emotions, and that made free association, imagination and intuition pretty much inaccessible. So, I switched to Provigil [a drug approved to treat sleep disorders, not widely prescribed for memory] and found it remarkable. I didn't lose information anymore, and I didn't have the problems I had on Adderall. In five years, taking Provigil will be mainstream.



"Everyone's talking about memory failure, forgetfulness, losing track . . . I have a whole string of words for it, which are not coming to me now!"

Q: A controversial recommendation in your book is that menopausal women consider taking estrogen (HT) briefly for brain health, despite well-reported health risks.

A: Researchers are realizing that there's a window of opportunity around menopause when estrogen is extremely helpful [if you have no contraindications]. If estrogen is taken too many years after menopause [as it was by the patients in the Women's Health Initiative], it can be very detrimental. Personally, I think I'll do about a year of hormone therapy to prevent memory loss.

Q: You pinpointed several culprits for your own cognitive problems: an undiagnosed thyroid condition, chronic insomnia, normal knocks to the head from sports. Other potential causes include a diet high in mercury, side effects from prescription drugs, depression, obesity and even diminished hearing. Isn't some memory loss inevitable?

A: The odds are stacked against us, but you can build cognitive reserves—meaning a storehouse of spare neurons. There's probably a genetic component, but people who are mentally and physically active are usually the ones who stay intact into old age. Have interesting challenges. Don't park your middle-aged ass in a chair. Pick up a musical instrument. Learn a foreign language. Rediscover things that turned you on when you were young.

—MELISSA SCHORR

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