



Faculty of Dentistry
The University of Hong Kong



mental floss

Tips for life-long learning & knowledge exchange

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Preparing to face any challenge, head on

After our formal education, whether at school, college or beyond, we can keep on learning and improving, such as through our everyday experiences, by being curious and finding answers, or through continuing education and professional development.

One way of learning is to reflect on how a recent problem was solved and to evaluate your performance and thought processes. Mentally prepare for the next problem, repeating what worked well and improving what didn't.

It takes energy, effort, and ideas to assess and modify methods, thought processes, and behaviours in a constructive way, so as to make progress and effectively tackle future challenges.

I hope this newsletter will provide some ideas that you can try. Please e-mail (dentke@hku.hk) if you have any comments or if you'd like to share some of your own ideas.

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Find the silver lining



Improve your problem-solving by rewriting the problem

Have you ever had a “toothbrush moment”: having a flashback when brushing your teeth, and regretting how you handled a past problem? Instead of dwelling on the negative, think positive and find the silver lining.

Reframing the problem

Every problem has a context, including past and present situations, motivations, personalities, and available resources. It's easy to focus on just one factor or approach, leading to a suboptimal solution. Considering multiple angles is usually better.

For example, imagine a company has a serious problem of a low retention rate for staff, or customers. Management could use the opportunity to proactively attract and retain staff/customers for the long term by learning of and addressing motivations and interests of both those leaving and those staying, showing timely appreciation, and cultivating a loyal, friendly company culture.

“Satisficing”, satisfying, or delighting?

Many problems don't have one ideal solution. With the time and resources available, it may only be possible to find a solution that “satisfices” (satisfies and suffices) for now.

However, when it comes to people (employees, clients, customers), it is best to find an optimal solution that truly satisfies and also encourages loyalty. Even better is to find a way to go beyond the minimum threshold so as to exceed expectations and foster delight. Delighted people tend to talk of their positive experiences, thereby adding value to your personal reputation and company brand.

Test yourself

At a party, the host gives you a glass of fruit juice. As you hold it, you wonder: Is the glass half empty or half full?



Your answer may reflect your optimistic (half full) or pessimistic (half empty) attitude to life. Or you may be over-optimistic and too hasty at making decisions, judging liquid height rather than volume and concluding the glass is more than half full. Or you may be a perfectionist or procrastinator, saying that you need to measure the volume accurately before coming to a decision.

But why spend so long thinking about this problem? The longer you hold the glass, the heavier it (and the problem) will feel, you'll lose sight of the bigger picture (the actual party), and you may lose juice through evaporation or by accidentally spilling it or dropping the glass. Why not ask for views of others and see both sides (both half full and half empty); then, drink the juice, get a refill, and enjoy the party!



Numberwise

To remember a phone number or PIN code, or Pi to 10 decimal places (3.1415926536), try these:

- **Chunking:** split the number into smaller groups to remember more easily; for example 59426886 becomes 594 268 86.
- **Add meaning:** such as 59 42 688 6 if your birthday is 5 September, your flat is on floor 42, your regular bus is No. 688, and you have 6 pets.
- **Find relationships:** such as 59 42 6886 since the difference between 5 and 9 is 4, 4 is 2 squared, $4+2=6$, $2+6=8$, and 68 reversed is 86.
- **Using letters:** assign consonants based on the sound of the number or letter shape (0=s/z; 1=d/t; 2=n; 3=m; 4=r; 5=l; 6=j/sh or soft g/ch; 7=k/c or hard g/ch; 8=f/v; 9=b/p) so, ignoring vowels, 59426886 is | a b o r - a n c h o v i e - f i s h.

- **Using images:** assign objects based on rhyme, shape, or meaning, such as 0=hole, 1=partridge, 2=shoes, 3=triangle, 4=four-pronged fork, 5=hand, 6=fly, 7=lucky horseshoe, 8=spider, 9=cat. Make up a silly story, so 59426886 becomes a hand that strokes a cat, takes a fork out of its mouth and uses the fork to pick up a pair of shoes, out of which a fly flies away, chased by two spiders and a giant fly.

Learning by numbers



Tricks to boost memory

Do you find memorising things a challenge? When learning a list of facts, you can use the “Peg and link system”. First, learn a list of numbered objects; then, create visual links to your list of facts.

Create your pegs: One method is to associate each number with a rhyming word.

1=sun, 2=shoe, 3=tree, 4=door, 5=hive, 6=bricks, 7=heaven, 8=weight, 9=wine, 10=hen

(Another method is to use words that resemble the shape of the number: 1=candle, 2=swan, 3=heart, 4=sail, 5=hook, 6=snail, 7=axe, 8=hourglass, 9=balloon, 10=bat and ball.)

Link items to your pegs: Make up scenes involving both the peg and each item in your list to be learnt. The sillier the image, the more memorable it will be. For example, if remembering the top five most populous countries—China, India, US, Indonesia, Brazil—you can picture the following:

- (1) the sun shines on the flag of China;
- (2) a shoe fills up with Indian curry;
- (3) a US flag grows out of a tree;
- (4) a door opens onto an Indonesian paddy field;
- (5) bees fly out of a hive pictured in the flag of Brazil.

Then, recalling each peg will help you recall each linked fact.

Sources: Michelin P. *Max Your Memory*. Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2012; Wikipedia.

Test yourself

Shop till you drop

Time yourself reciting the following shopping list (**bread, eggs, chocolate, bananas, milk, yoghurt, cake, olive oil, butter, tomatoes**), first without the peg and link system, and then with it. With the system, you should be faster and even able to list the items backwards or out of order by peg number.



Hints:

- (1) the sun is drying out a loaf of bread;
- (2) a shoe fills up with eggs;
- (3) chocolate drops fall out of a tree;
- (4) bananas swing from the knob on a door;
- (5) bees fly out of a carton of milk, using it as their hive;
- (6) pots of yoghurt pile up like bricks and self-assemble into a wall;
- (7) a big cake in heaven is being eaten by angels;
- (8) a bottle of olive oil is acting as a weight, weighing down a plate;
- (9) a wine glass is overflowing with melted butter;
- (10) a hen lays a tomato.



Mind maintenance

Optimising brain power

The saying “use it or lose it” seems to apply to our memory, attention and concentration, language skills, mental agility, and problem-solving ability. Some research suggests that stress management, physical exercise, healthy diet, and brain training can help improve brain function and combat the effects of ageing.

Brain boosters: You can keep your brain active and enjoy healthy ageing by reading books, newspapers, and magazines regularly; doing puzzles and playing board games; listening to the radio; going to museums and galleries; taking part in discussions; and doing intellectually demanding tasks.

Lifestyle matters: Long-term stress negatively affects body and mind, so effective stress management is important. Examples of good methods are relaxing (eg, yoga, meditation, deep breathing), exercising, and getting enough sleep (eg, by avoiding work, caffeine, and heavy meals late at night). Also, try reframing problems positively and getting support from friends and family.

Head start: See if you can use the information in this newsletter to (1) recite Pi to 10 decimal places, (2) recall the earlier shopping list and phone number, (3) name the five most populous countries.

Sources: Michelon P. *Max Your Memory*. Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2012; *The Mind Gym*. Time Warner Books, 2005.

Keys to creativity



When brainstorming during problem-solving, try the following: (1) Remember quantity is better than quality; (2) allow lots of time for the process; (3) write everything down so you don't forget; (4) suspend judgement, criticism, or reality-checks until an editing step later on; (5) take breaks and use what's written to inspire more ideas, however tenuous or abstract; (6) keep your objectives in mind so the ideas are at least vaguely relevant to the problem.

Source: *The Mind Gym*. Time Warner Books, 2005.

QUIZ: E-mail dentke@hku.hk by 31 December 2014 to win a souvenir:

“Insert Symbol”...What are the next five items in this sequence?

1 1/2 1/3 2/3 1/4 3/4 1/5

[Last issue's answer (next symbol in MS Word Wingding menu): ☺]



Create Boxing Days

Taking a break from your routine is important for refreshing your body and mind.

Peter Jones, author of *How To Do Everything and Be Happy*, recommends making a monthly Boxing Day, named after the UK holiday following Christmas Day.

Save the date

Set one day a month for Boxing Day; it can't be cancelled but can be moved, so you can have two in a month if one is skipped.

Be spontaneous

Do the first thing that comes to mind when you wake up on each Boxing Day, trying to be unique each time.

Prepare but not plan

You're not allowed to do work, and you're not allowed to plan in advance what to do. But you can prepare beforehand if you are a care-giver and need to make alternative care arrangements for the day or part of the day.

Share and share alike

You can spend Boxing Day with others, if they are free at short notice. If you have a partner, you can agree to do each other's choice of activity on each Boxing Day, such as try a new restaurant or have a bake-off or DVD day.

Wants not needs

Boxing Day is for living in the moment and having fun. You can't do chores like e-mailing or paying bills, unless you really want to.

Other “YOU” days

Similarly, you can set one day a month to plan or do items on your (1) Now List (same as Bucket List of things to try before dying) and (2) Goals List (things that will make life fulfilling).

Source: Jones P. *How To Do Everything and Be Happy*. HarperCollins, 2011.