


A dark blue banner for Delta Airlines. On the left is the Delta logo (a white triangle) and the word "DELTA" in white. Below the logo is a stylized red and blue geometric shape. In the center, the text "BOOK AT DELTA.COM" is written in white. On the right, "delta.com" is written in white. Below that is a white button with the text "Book Now" and a blue right-pointing arrow.

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Good news for the forgetful: Aging needn't wipe memory

By Lisa Anderson and
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NEW YORK - Can you remember your best friend's address? Your cousin's birthday? Your own child's cell phone number? The name of the attorney general of the United States?

No? You're not alone, and you're not necessarily on the far side of 40.

The proliferation of cell phones, BlackBerries, Outlook calendars and other "smart" technology – not to mention frenetic multitasking and easy Googling– has left many of us feeling, well, stupid in the memory department.

Thereams of addresses, dates and numbers that people once routinely rattled off have become mental mysteries for those of us who rely on electronic directories, pop-up reminders, speed dialing and global positioning satellites to get what we need to know or where we need to go.

Experts say it's unlikely such gadgets actually are harming our capacity to remember. But when it comes to memory, there's little doubt that it's a case of "use it or lose it."

"It's the same as physical fitness. We know we have to get into the gym, but how many are in the gyms? ... Memory is the exact same process: Are you willing to do the work?" said Tony Dottino, a management consultant who founded the USA Memory Championship 11 years ago to "showcase people who exercise their minds." The next championship competition is March 8 in New York City.

For the nearly 80 million Baby Boomers concerned about Alzheimer's and dementia, the threat of memory loss is no small issue. And, as they age, it is not only the target of promising research and medications but the basis for a growing number of businesses, products and services.

Type "memory" into the search line on Amazon and a library's worth of book titles bloom on the screen. Do the same thing on Google and discover an expanding array of "memory aids" ranging from "Brain Games" to dietary supplements.

This spring, Westin Hotels & Resorts plans to introduce Brain+Body Fitness, a program incorporating a series of custom mind-and-body exercises that will be distributed to guests at check-in. In addition, some properties in the chain will offer "brain teasers" on the coasters provided with their-room coffee service and Sudoku games for poolside loungers.

"It's not just Westin. There are many companies that are thinking about this in many different ways," said Gary Small, a professor of psychiatry and biobehavioral sciences at UCLA's Semel Institute who designed the mental exercises for Westin.

"Memory, in a way, is a low-hanging fruit, and people notice the changes. At least half of people, by the time they reach their 40s and 50s, notice cognitive decline," said Small, who is launching a one-day Brain Boot Camp at the UCLA Memory and Aging Center.

Asked about the effectiveness of such programs on sharpening memory, Small chuckled.

'We can fix your brain'

"We can fix your brain in a few hours. I'm laughing, but we really can," he said. "The evidence becomes more and more compelling that we can do something about it. The challenge is to get people to do it."

Small's program, which runs about \$500 for the six-hour version and about \$250 for a three-hour "Boot Camp Lite," first assesses campers' memory, stress and fitness levels. Then it teaches them basic memory techniques and introduces a "healthy brain diet" including fish, antioxidant-rich colorful vegetables and fruits, and wine in moderation.

Because stress impedes memory, the program demonstrates relaxation exercises to improve mental focus. It also provides a daily lifestyle plan, including physical conditioning, to maintain brain health over time.

The object is to minimize the symptoms of normal age-associated memory impairment and, perhaps, lower the risk of getting Alzheimer's disease, Small said.

Because people are living longer and many remain active for many years after retirement, there is a greater incentive to keep the brain healthy, said Stephen Salloway, director of the Memory & Aging Program at Rhode Island's Butler Hospital and professor of clinical neurosciences at Brown University's Alpert Medical School.

Nonetheless, nearly all people will experience some aspect of memory loss as they age. The question is how to identify the point where normal loss becomes something more serious.

In general, people who think they have serious memory problems generally don't, because "people who have a more serious memory problem tend to be less aware of it," Salloway said.

There are other "telltale signs," he said.

Telltale signs

People should get examined if they can't remember a word or name and it doesn't come to them at some later point.