

# ***Geriatrics Consulting Services of Greensboro, P.A.***

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## **CONVERSATIONS WITH “SILVER DOC”**

### ***Issue #2: Now That I’m Here, Why Did I Come to the Kitchen?***

I saw my doctor the other day for a routine physical. Knowing I am a geriatrician who specializes in the care of seniors, she asked if I had any recommendations for preventing memory loss. She told me that one of the most common concerns she hears from her patients is memory loss in parents or “losing it” themselves. Sound familiar?

Just as we experience changes in our bodies with age, so, too, are there normal age-associated changes in memory. For a simple analogy, think of your brain as a big filing cabinet. While your file drawers as a child or teenager were virtually empty, by the time you reach 45, those drawers are jam-packed with file folders stuffed with all kinds of experiences and the knowledge you have accumulated over the years. When asked to pick out a specific piece of data, say, your youngest niece’s name, you have 45 years worth of files to sort through. No wonder it takes time for the correct name to pop into your mind! With fewer file folders, as when you were 16 years old, your retrieval process was much quicker.

What we are talking about here is not really memory, but recall. Usually, there is awareness that information being sought; in other words, you remember that you forgot something. This so-called *simple forgetfulness or benign senescent forgetfulness* or *age-associated memory impairment* is generally thought to be just another part of the normal aging process which is accentuated by stress, fatigue and information overload.

Returning to our filing cabinet analogy, when 45-year old tries to learn something new, it takes longer to find the correct file in which to store the new information. In fact, it may take several repetitions before the correct folder is located. It's not that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks", only that it takes longer for that "old dog" to learn.

Another way of looking at the ways in which memory changes with age is to think of different kinds of memory. These include attention, immediate recall (often called primary memory), delayed recall (often called secondary memory), visual-spatial ability, language, and reasoning. Components that are most affected by age are episodic memory which is typified by recall of what you ate for breakfast, timed memory tests, tests requiring focused attention, recall, and processing of new information. These are the changes commonly observed and experienced by most of us, and they generally fall within the realm of normalcy. Those aspects of thinking and memory that are least affected by age are language and vocabulary, abstract reasoning and problem solving, visual-spatial ability, and recall of events in your personal past. Changes in these latter areas *may* be cause for concern and should signal consideration of a professional evaluation.

The simple answer to my doctor's question about how to preserve memory: "Use it or lose it; play a game of Scrabble, work a crossword puzzle or read rather than watch TV. Also, as much as possible, maintain a healthful life style, take good care of yourself, and give yourself a minute; you'll remember why you went to the kitchen in the first place.

*This column explores issues of health and aging pertaining to people of all ages, focusing on normal changes, preservation of function, and knowing when to pursue assistance for ourselves and the others in our lives. I look forward to your comments, questions and any suggestions you have for future topics.*

Silver Doc

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