

A Clear Mind and Good Memory with Ayurveda

Source: "The Ayurvedic Insight" newsletter, Banyan Botanicals, August 2007.

When the mind is functioning optimally, you have a keen sense of awareness, a sharpness of focus and attention, good memory recall and decisiveness. Typically, memory function is as natural as breathing. It is only when there are problems with recollection that we become aware of the process of recording information in the brain. A dull or cloudy mind can lead to scattered thoughts, forgetfulness and a feeling of heaviness.

There can be many causes to having a dull mind and poor memory. Most commonly, the brain does not receive necessary nutrients from the blood. Other possible causes can be a chemical imbalance in the brain's neurochemistry or certain toxic drugs that have affected the brain detrimentally. Unprocessed thoughts, feelings, experiences and emotions can result in mental indigestion. This mental ama (toxins) becomes stored in the connective tissue and stuffed into the subconscious mind. If feelings, emotions and thoughts are never dealt with and assimilated, there can be added stress, impaired mental function and weakened immunity. Old age is another factor that can lead to the deterioration of memory.

According to Ayurveda, most memory problems are related to either kapha dosha, with its dense qualities, or vata dosha, with its light and airy qualities. Stagnation of kapha typically results in a heavy feeling and a dull mind. An example of high kapha could be a thick, unctuous quality to the blood due to high triglycerides, allowing low flow of blood across the blood-brain barrier. An example of a vata disturbance is when a person is so scattered or spacey, due to stress or anxiety, that they cannot remember a conversation they had even an hour earlier. Typically, in this example the person is not experiencing memory loss, it is just that they were not paying close enough attention in the first place to successfully record the memory. Too much vata can result in "in one ear, out the other" syndrome.

Vata dosha is necessary for all functions of the nervous system. The quality of movement carries the experience to the brain where it is recorded on the brain tissue which acts as a film, governed by kapha dosha. So in order to improve memory problems, it is best to balance vata and kapha doshas in the body. Pitta dosha also plays a key role in having a clear mind. When balanced, pitta contributes a keen focus of attention and sharp intellect.

Diet

In Ayurveda, each person is treated as an individual and dietary advice may vary from person to person. Generally a diet which is light and cleansing will help to enhance your perception and help strengthen memory. A balanced diet of fresh, organic fruits and vegetables is best including some nuts and ghee. Avoid cheeses and meats. These are very heavy and dense in nature and tend to weigh the body down, clogging the energy channels, causing stagnation, and resulting in slower function of the mind.

- Add carrots and beets to your diet. Try fresh raw vegetable juices to help build blood and nourish the brain.
- Limit refined sugars and carbohydrates which "turn off" or "short circuit" the brain.

- Avoid alcohol, marijuana and other drugs which directly damage brain tissue and affect memory.
- Limit caffeine which stresses the nervous system, causing the mind to jump from thought to thought.

Ayurveda emphasizes the benefits of fasting in order to clear the body of toxins, improve digestion and strengthen the nervous system and brain. During a fast, the body's energy is redirected inward in an effort to cleanse and detoxify. For this reason it is recommended to do as little work as possible, planning your fast for a period of time when you can remain close to home and have lots of rest. After beginning a fast, note your energy level each day. If there is a dramatic decrease in energy, a feeling of weakness or dizziness, the fast should be terminated. As a safety precaution, it is wise to request the supervision of a trained Ayurvedic physician or other medical professional.

A single food fast on kitcheri, which is a nourishing dish of equal parts split mung dal and white basmati rice, can be done for three to five days. For more information and a simple recipe for kitcheri visit http://www.banyanbotanicals.com/ayurveda/kitch_ghee.html

Another beneficial fast is a three to five day fruit fast. Dr. Lad, from the Ayurvedic Institute, recommends different fruits for people of predominantly different doshas: for vata - papayas, prunes and mangoes, for pitta - grapes, pomegranates and apples, for kapha - apples, cranberries and pomegranates. This should only be attempted by a person in a reasonably balanced state of health who does not suffer from low blood sugar.

Lifestyle

Brisk walking can increase circulation and improve memory. Walking regularly can help to reduce stress and improve all functions of the body.

Warm oil, such as brahmi oil, massaged into the scalp and top of the head, along with shirodhara (one of the five cleansing therapies of panchakarma) is excellent therapy for calming the mind.

Take notes. Keeping journals to record your daily events can help to improve memory recall. Writing lists of things to do will help the brain to remember specific tasks. The process of writing is a small movement in the body which helps to focus the attention and commit the subject to memory.

Herbs

Mental Clarity, Banyan's unique formula, combines the most important Ayurvedic herbs for brain and memory. Brahmi helps to dilate the cerebral blood vessels improving circulation to the brain. Bacopa, bhringaraj and shankhapushpi help enhance mental performance and promote intelligence.

Other herbal therapies:

- Brahmi oil can be rubbed on the soles of the feet and massaged into the scalp to both relax and stimulate the nervous system.
- Nasya oil has been used for centuries to improve voice, vision and bring clarity of mind. Lubricating the nasal passages helps to keep the sinuses clean and protect the nasal membranes.
- Include Triphala as part of your nightly regime to support elimination, detoxification, and tonification of the gastro-intestinal tract. Constipation in the bowel can contribute to "constipation" of the mind. It is important to keep the colon clean with regular movements.

Yoga

Sun Salutations help to increase circulation and open the entire body. Ancient texts advise that you should practice as many rounds of Sun Salutations as you are years old, but even including 6-12 rounds into your yoga practice will bring great benefit to your mind and body. Inversions are especially helpful to increase the blood flow to the brain. Include inverted poses such as Camel, Plow, Shoulder Stand and Headstand. For more information on balancing the body through yoga visit <http://www.banyanbotanicals.com/yoga/>

Meditation

Mediate daily to relieve stress and anxiety. Stress can cause people's minds and bodies to go haywire. Meditation is a way to take a mini-vacation from all of life's stressors and your personal responsibilities. It is a way to get in touch with your core and be fully present. Your mind has the ability to watch your thoughts and emotions. Simply observing your thinking without judgement gives you the space to practice compassion and brings a clear, quiet mind. Finding a bit of peace each day will give your nervous system a rest and all the memories will come flooding back.

Pranayama

Yogic breath work or pranayama is an excellent way to revitalize prana and to train the mind to be present and alert. Pranayama cleanses and strengthens the physical body while calming and clearing the mind. Try alternate nostril breathing to balance the brain and improve mental clarity.

Position the right hand (you may choose to alternate with each practice) in vishnu mudra by folding the index finger and third finger inwards to lightly touch at the base of the thumb. Your pinkie finger rests by the side of the ring finger. You will alternately use your thumb to close your right nostril and your ring and pinkie fingers, working as one, to close your left. Rest your left hand comfortably in your lap. The breath should never feel forced. Envision the breath as a light thread of silk, lengthening effortlessly with each inhalation and exhalation.

Keeping the breath relaxed, subtle and light:

- Close the left nostril and exhale completely through the right.
- Inhale fully, through the right nostril.
- Close right nostril and exhale through the left nostril.

- Inhale through left nostril.
- Close left nostril and exhale through right nostril.

This is one round. Begin a slow and regular practice of 5-10 rounds. Rest after your practice and notice how you are feeling. Once comfortable with this practice, you can begin mentally counting to four on your inhalation, pause at the space between the breath and then count to four as you exhale so that the length of your inhalation and exhalation are equal.

Ayurveda offers us timeless wisdom, providing advice on diet, lifestyle practices and exercises, and herbal therapies that can help to lift the clouds and nourish the brain so that the mind can operate to the fullest of its capacity.