

Purposeful Forgetting

RENEWING TECHNIQUE

We often have memories pop into our minds seemingly from nowhere. But usually, memories surface because of cues or associations. For example, the smell of crayons can cue your hippocampus to retrieve your memory of the flower you drew for your mother or the rainy afternoon you spent coloring with your child. And one memory may be associated with another.

Each time a memory is recalled it is subsequently rewritten to the brain. In my experience those rewritten memories get slightly exaggerated. The taste of your grandmother's biscuits was probably not as good as you remember. Your first car wreck was far less dramatic than the actual fender bender. Even "the good old days" weren't as good as we remember them to be.

Memory of an event can cause some of the same physical reactions as the original event. Drug addicts experience dopamine elevation just by thinking about their next hit. Your heart rate increases when you remember your first roller coaster ride. Unfortunately, some of our memories are ones we would rather forget and some can even draw us back into sin.

But can you purposefully forget a memory? There's been decades of research about why people forget, but far less on how to control memories and thoughts. But the Bible suggests two effective techniques.

God created our frontal cortex so that it can overrule the activities of other parts of our brains. You do this often throughout the day. For example, your tastebuds may crave a brownie, but your conscious desire to lose weight overrules the craving and your frontal cortex inhibits the craving and helps you choose an apple instead.



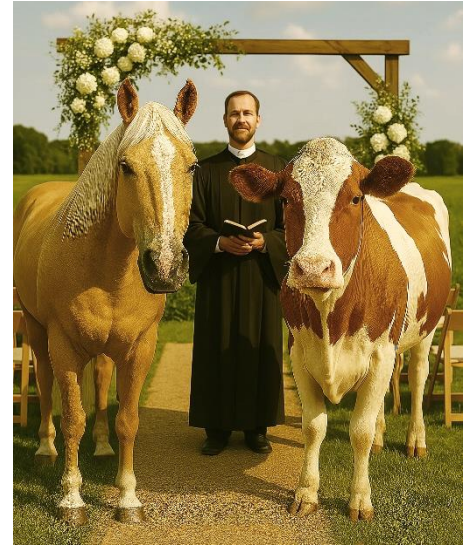
In the same way, we can inhibit our brains from certain thoughts by consciously choosing other thoughts. When a sinful or unwholesome memory arises, we need our frontal cortex to say, "Don't go there. Go over here instead."

Paul described this 'Don't go there' technique in his letter to the church at Philippi. He said "...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." (Philippians 4:9)

A second method of purposeful forgetting doesn't actually involve forgetting. But it has a similar result.

When I was a boy, I made an assumption about all horses and cows: Horses were boys, Cows were girls. After all, Mr. Ed was a man and Elsie was a woman. To my little kid brain, this seemed to be a logical association between species and gender. Unfortunately, that errant association, like many others, got encoded into my neural network.

Eventually I realized my assumption was wrong. I learned that there are boy and girl horses and boy and girl cows. To fix this, I moved some neural axons so they would connect to different dendrites. This inhibited the charge of the ions in the neurotransmitters between the synapses so they would represent the correct associations between species and gender.



Of course, little kids don't really know how to do all that, but the God that created their little brain does. So, after these neural changes were made, I know the truth about both cows and horses and birds and bees.

I find it interesting however that my original thoughts are preserved. I still remember what I initially thought about horses and cows. But now I also know the truth about them. I didn't forget the initial thought; I just corrected it with the truth. The two memories in my mind are now associated, not as equally valid thoughts, but in a positive way that seems to highlight the truth.

When Jesus prayed to this Father about us, he said, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (John 17:17) If we flood our minds with God's Word, Truth will make changes in our thoughts and correct our errant memories. Those memories may still be in our minds, but they will no longer influence the way we think. The associated Truth will be highlighted if the original memory returns.

Memory is one of the fundamental components of our minds. We can use our minds to think on things that are pleasing to God and replace errant thoughts by exposure to the Truths found in God's Word. Both are God given tools to help us renew our minds. If we use these tools to purposefully forget, we can claim the promise of Isaiah 26:3, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee."