

Forgetting Is Part Of Remembering

October 17, 2011

It's time for forgetting to get some respect, says Ben Storm, author of a new article on memory in [*Current Directions in Psychological Science*](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#). "We need to rethink how we're talking about forgetting and realize that under some conditions it actually does play an important role in the function of memory," says Storm, who is a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"Memory is difficult. Thinking is difficult," Storm says. Memories and associations accumulate rapidly. "These things could completely overrun our life and make it impossible to learn and retrieve new things if they were left alone, and could just overpower the rest of memory," he says.

But, fortunately, that isn't what happens. "We're able to get around these strong competing inappropriate memories to remember the ones we want to recall." Storm and other psychological scientists are trying to understand how our minds select the right things to recall—if someone's talking about beaches near Omaha, Nebraska, for example, you will naturally suppress any knowledge you've collected about Omaha Beach in Normandy.

In one kind of experiment, participants are given a list of words that have some sort of relation to each other. They might be asked to memorize a list of birds, for example. In the next part of the test, they have to do a task that requires remembering half the birds. "That's going to make you forget the other half of the birds in that list," Storm says. That might seem bad—it's forgetting. "But what the research shows is that this forgetting is actually a good thing."

People who are good at forgetting information they don't need are also good at problem solving and at remembering something when they're being distracted with other information. This shows that forgetting plays an important role in problem solving and memory, Storm says.

There are plenty of times when forgetting makes sense in daily life. "Say you get a new cell phone and you have to get a new phone number, do you really want to remember your old phone number every time someone asks what your number is?" Storm asks. Or where you parked your car this morning—it's important information today, but you'd better forget it when it comes time to go get your car for tomorrow afternoon's commute. "We need to be able to update our memory so we can remember and think about the things that are currently relevant."