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## FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

by: **Chester E. Brost**

One of the most overlooked and unthought about aspects of our everyday lives is our memory. But if you think about it, without our memories, we are, in a sense, devoid of content there is just emptiness. Memories are the glue that ties the fabric of our life together.

Subjects don't get any larger than the subject of memory. It is the stuff of biology, philosophy, science, and poetry, it is, in so many words, who we are and why. Memories are so essential to our lives that they define us, they are whom each of us happens to be.

The memory is such an enormous and versatile facility that I can stop typing this article and do mental time travel. I can think of my childhood' my first motorcycle ride, I can think of my first rock concert of my very first date.

However, researchers claim that memories are not like snapshots in the brain, there is no single imprint, but rather there are many. Sites, sounds and other information about an event are stored in various parts of the brain, the parts that initially processed the information. And, what happens when we recall a memory is that all of these various parts of the brain work in concert to reconstruct the sites, sounds and other information about the event that they have stored, almost like a net, or a series of connected roadways or pathways.

These pathways are made of special nerve cells that connect at special junctions called synapses. The more connections, or synapses, the better the memory of the event will be.

Using the latest fMRI (frequency Magnetic Resonance Imaging) brain imaging techniques researchers can hear into hour brains and watch memories actually being born.

The hippocampus (hip-eh-kam-pes) located in the limbic system of the brain is one of the various parts of the brain responsible for storing long term memories. This sea-horse shaped structure is responsible for our earliest memories.

We start to form basic memories at birth, possible even earlier remembering our mothers voice for example. However, as an adult it is extremely rare to remember anything before the age of 3 or 4. It is theorized that that is because the hippocampus is not fully developed. (For more about the hippocampus and its functions see FOR

WHAT IT'S WORTH, FREE RIDERS PRESS, March, 2005).

Even at a young age our brains are capable of storing extra-ordinary quantities of information into our memory system. However, all memories are not created equal. University of California Irvine researcher Larry Cahill studies how emotion effects memory. His test subjects view a slide show of emotionally charged pictures, and pictures that are more innocuous, they then immerse their hand in ice water to trigger stress hormones.

When an emotional event happens and the stress hormones are flowing, those stress hormones serve as the activator of the fight or flight response mechanism. But it is also theorized that these same stress hormones have a second long term reaction.

That second reaction? Stress hormones feeding back into the brain, through the amygdala (a-mig-dug-luh). Located a couple of inches in from your ear on either side of your brain, the amygdala helps you to remember more clearly and for longer periods of time. Have you ever wondered why a smell can trigger such a strong memory? Once again the amygdala may hold the answer.

The amygdala is the key structure to the whole emotional and memory world and the sense of smell is directly connected to the amygdala. There are basically only 2 synapses from an odor hitting your nose and activation the amygdala. (For more about your fight or flight response mechanism and the amygdala check out INSTINCTS: Motorcycle Safety and the Caveman Brain, Free Riders Press October, 2004.)

Although stress does activate the amygdala helping you to remember events more clearly and for longer periods of time, stress unfortunately causes our minds to remember fewer details of the event itself.

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