

# FORGETTING

## Meaning and Definitions of Forgetting

✓ After learning either we remember or forget the learned material. Nothing else can happen. Due to this reason, learning has been compared with a coin which has its two facets. On the one side, it is memory and on the other side it is forgetting.

✓ In fact, forgetting is the opposite of memory. Memory implies the retention of learned material or past experiences whereas forgetting implies the failure to retain or recall the learned material or the past experiences.

Generally people regard memory as an asset and forgetting as a liability. But from a psychological point of view, this is an erroneous view. (From psychologist's point of view, forgetting is also necessary in individual's life. Our lives may have become miserable, had it not been the phenomenon of forgetting to come to our rescue in case of the most painful and unpleasant experiences of our life. Forgetting sometimes may also help us in performing better intellectual activity, better adjustment and better development of personality. But for this, one has to learn to forget the improper, irrelevant or unessential events of life.)

Following are some of the important definitions of forgetting:

### 1. Freud

✓ "Forgetting is a tendency to ward off from the consciousness those experiences of life which are unpleasant and painful."

### 2. James Drever

"Forgetting means failure at any time to recall an experience when attempting to do so, or failure to perform an action previously learned."

### 3. Adams

✓ "True learning reflects judicious forgetting."

*due to lack of practice - when we learn*

4. **Munn**

"Forgetting is the loss, permanent or temporary, of the ability to recall or recognize something learned earlier."

5. **Nunn**

"Forgetting is failing to retain or recall whatever has been acquired."

6. **Bhatia**

"Forgetting is the failure of the individual to revive in consciousness an idea or group of ideas without the help of original stimulus."

### **Causes of Forgetting**

Following are the main causes of forgetting:

1. **Failure to learn**

Failure to learn is one of the most common and the basic cause of forgetting. We should talk of forgetting only when some appropriate learning takes place. But it happens in case of many students that they fail to recall answers to examination questions simply due to the reason that they did not learn up to the appropriate or the mastery level. Hence failure to learn becomes the cause of forgetting.

2. **Forgetting due to fading or decay or disuse or passage of time**

Forgetting is a process of fading with the passage of time. According to this view, memory traces formed in the cortex in the central nervous system fade away as more and more time is lapsed between the time of learning and the period of recall. Forgetting due to this reason is also called as the theory of disuse or decay. In our daily life, we experience many events which are forgotten with the passage of time.

*Due to passage of time at the experience*

### 3. Interference of memory traces

Two or more than two memory traces of two different activities, when formed in the cortex in quick succession, may cause forgetting due to interference with each other. It sometimes happens that memory traces of first activity may interfere with the memory traces of the second activity and cause forgetting of the second activity. This phenomenon is called as proactive interference or proactive inhibition.

It also happens sometimes that memory traces of second activity may interfere with the memory traces of first activity and forgetting may take place in case of first activity. This phenomenon is called as Retroactive interference or Retroactive inhibition.

#### Example:

| Activity I | Activity II | Result                           | Type of interference     |
|------------|-------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Learn A    | Learn B     | Some Forgetting takes place in B | Proactive Interference.  |
| Learn A    | Learn B     | Some Forgetting takes place in A | Retroactive Interference |

### 4. Nature of the learning material

More forgetting will take place if the learning material is difficult, meaningless and unpleasant. There will be less forgetting when the learning material is easy, meaningful, purposeful and pleasant for the learner.

### 5. Lack of interest

Lack of interest in the task causes forgetting. If we do not work on a task with attention and concentration, the result may be forgetting. But when we work on the task with interest, attention and concentration, there are less chances of forgetting.

## 6. Degree of learning

Underlearning or overlearning of a task, both may cause forgetting. Any task learnt below the level of required learning will be more prone to forgetting. In the same way, if the individual overlearns a task with more and longer practice without taking proper rest and spacing, it would put unnecessary strains on mind and the result will be forgetting. Moreover, in overlearning the individual develops fatigue and tiredness. Various types of toxins are also formed in our body which badly affect brain functioning and hence cause forgetting.

## 7. Forgetting due to repression

Dr. Sigmund Freud, the well known psychoanalyst, was the first to put forward the psychoanalytic theory of forgetting. According to him, "Forgetting is the pushing of the unpleasant thoughts or experiences into the unconscious." He used the term repression to describe the tendency in the human beings to ward off from the consciousness into the unconscious those experiences of life which are unpleasant and painful. Freud believed that human beings repress the sorrowful, painful, unpleasant and saddest thoughts because these will cause pain, tension, distress and frustration if remembered. Freud's theory is also called as pathological forgetting, morbid forgetting or motivated forgetting.

## 8. Emotional excitement

Sometimes, emotional excitement also becomes a cause of forgetting. When the individual is under the effect of emotional excitement, he is more likely to forget. Emotional excitement blocks the process of recall. Excess of emotions like fear and anger paralyses our thought and memory process. Forgetting in the examination hall or on the stage is a familiar example of such type of forgetting.

## 9. Physiological factors

We may come across many instances where an individual

suffers a brain injury and he forgets many experiences and incidents of his life. Sometimes, there is partial loss of memory and sometimes there may be permanent loss of memory. The extent of forgetting may depend upon the damage done by the injury.

Alcoholic drugs and other stimulants also badly affect the functioning of the brain. Continuous or frequent use of all narcotic drugs weakens the memory and forgetting is increased.

Constant mental tensions, mental shocks and long and chronic illness may also become the cause of forgetting.

## **10. Information processing model and forgetting**

According to the information processing model of STM (Short term memory) and LTM (Long term memory) the incoming information or learning material first reaches the short term memory in the form of input. The input material must be processed in some way in the short term memory i.e. it must be properly coded, rehearsed and given a particular meaning. It is only successfully coded information which enters into the Long term memory and remains there. Improper and unsuccessfully coded information are not allowed to enter into the storage of Long term memory. This clearly indicates that we remember or retain only those informations which are properly coded and rehearsed. Hence according to this explanation, the material which is not allowed to enter into the Long term memory is lost and forgotten.

## WHAT IS FORGETTING?

We frequently hear the expression: "I am sorry, but I have forgotten." A student feels ashamed of having forgotten what he had learned, a housewife feels embarrassed because she forgot to season the food she cooked, or a professional feels bad because he forgot to keep an appointment. We are thus generally quite well acquainted with the phenomenon of forgetting. Let us see how the eminent writers on the subject scientifically define "forgetting".

*Munn (1967):*

Forgetting is the loss, permanent or temporary, of the ability to recall or recognize something learned earlier.

*Drever (1952):*

Forgetting means failure at any time to recall an experiences, when attempting to do so, or to perform an action previously learned.

Bhatia (1968):

Forgetting is the failure of the individual to revive in consciousness an idea or group of ideas without the help of the original stimulus.

In all these definitions, forgetting is termed a failure. Let us see how it counts towards the failure of an individual.

The power of long retention and rapid reproduction (recall and recognition) makes for a good memory. It counts towards the success of an individual in the task of learning or memorizing. Forgetting on the other hand, contributes towards failure. "I have forgotten" implies that I have failed to retain or have been unable to recall what was learned or experienced by me earlier. In this way, forgetting is just the opposite of remembering and is essentially a failure in the ability to reproduce experienced or studied material.

### Ebbinghaus's Curve of Forgetting

Studies done by the psychologist Ebbinghaus (1885) represent the earliest systematic work in studying the phenomenon of forgetting. He himself worked as a subject for these studies and described his results by plotting a *curve of forgetting*.

He memorized a list of non-sense syllables and then tested himself at intervals varying from 20 minutes to a month to see how much of the list he remembered. The results in terms of the percentage of material forgotten with the lapse of time were as follows:

| <i>Time elapsed</i> | <i>Amount forgotten</i> |
|---------------------|-------------------------|
| 20 minutes          | 47%                     |
| One day             | 66%                     |
| Two days            | 72%                     |
| Six days            | 75%                     |
| Thirtyone days      | 79%                     |

He plotted the data as a graph as shown in Figure 15.3 and he termed the

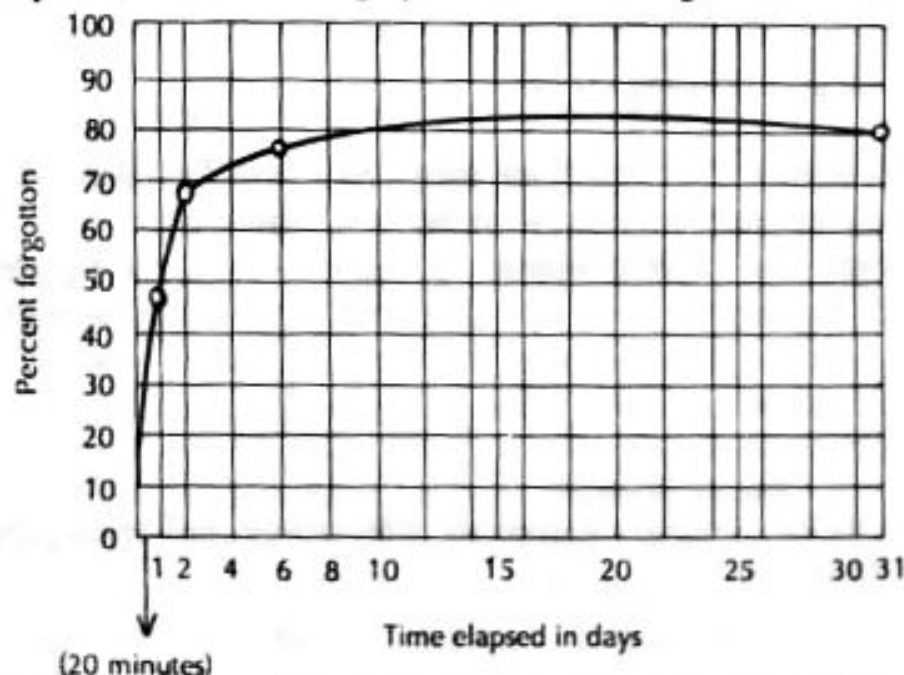


Figure 15.3 Ebbinghaus's curve of forgetting.

graph which he obtained by plotting the amount forgotten as a function of time, as the *curve of forgetting*. From his experimental data and the presentation in the form of the above curve of forgetting, Ebbinghaus concluded that: (a) the amount of learnt material forgotten depends upon the time lapsed after learning; and (b) the rate of forgetting is very rapid at first and then gradually diminishes proportionately as the interval lengthens.

### **Types of Forgetting**

Forgetting may be described in a number of ways based on the nature of forgetting and the manner in which it occurs. It may be broadly classified as natural and morbid forgetting. In *natural forgetting*, forgetting occurs with the lapse of time in a quite normal way without any intention of forgetting on the part of the individual while in *morbid* or *abnormal forgetting* one deliberately tries to forget something. This type of forgetfulness, as Freud explains, results from repression and is wishful as one happens to forget the things which one does not wish to remember.

According to another view, forgetting may be classified as *general* or *specific*. In general forgetfulness, one suffers a total loss in one's recall of some previous learning, while in specific forgetfulness the individual forgets only one or the other specific parts of his earlier learning.

Yet another view related to the cause of its occurrence classifies forgetfulness as physical or psychological. In case a person loses his memory on account of the factors of age, diseases, biological malfunctioning of the brain and nervous system, accidents, consumption of liquor or other intoxicating materials, etc., it is termed as physical or organic forgetting. However, when loss of memory occurs on account of psychological factors like stresses, anxiety, conflicts, temper provocation, lack of interest, aversion apathy, repression or similar other emotional and psychological problems, the resulting forgetfulness is termed as *psychological*.