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Why Men Never Remember Anything

By Melissa Dahl

Recently, I was visiting my family, and we were doing that thing families do: retelling old stories. As we talked, a common theme emerged. My brother hardly remembered anything from our childhood, even the stories in which he was the star player. “Boys never remember anything,” my mom huffed.

She’s right. Researchers are finding some preliminary evidence that women are indeed better at recalling memories, especially autobiographical ones. Girls and women tend to recall these memories faster and with more specific details, and some studies have demonstrated that these memories tend to be more accurate, too, when compared to those of boys and men. And there’s an explanation for this: It could come down to the way parents talk to their daughters, as compared to their sons, when the children are developing memory skills.

To understand this apparent gender divide in recalling memories, it helps to start with early childhood—specifically, ages 2 to 6. Whether you knew it or not, during these years, you learned how to form memories, and researchers believe this happens mostly through conversations with others, primarily our parents. These conversations teach us how to tell our own stories, essentially; when a mother asks her child for more details about something that happened that day in school, for example, she is implicitly communicating that these extra details are essential parts to the story.

And these early experiments in storytelling assist in memory-making, research shows. One recent study tracked preschool-age kids whose mothers often asked them to elaborate when telling stories; later in their lives, these kids were able to recall earlier memories than their peers whose mothers hadn’t asked for those extra details.

But the way parents tend to talk to their sons is different from the way they talk to their daughters. Mothers tend to introduce more snippets of new information in conversations with their young daughters than they do with their young sons, research has shown. And moms tend to ask more questions about girls’ emotions; with boys, on the other hand, they spend more time talking about what they should do with those feelings.

This is at least partially a product of parents acting on gender expectations they may not even realize they have, and the results are potentially long-lasting, explained Azriel Grysman, a psychologist at Hamilton College who studies gender differences and memory. “The message that girls are getting is that talking about your feelings is part of describing an event,” Grysman said. “And for boys, emotions are something to be concerned with when they are part of a larger issue, but otherwise not. And it’s quite possible, over time, that those tendencies will help women establish more connections in their brains of different pieces of an event, which will lead to better memory long-term.”

Because a memory doesn’t exist the way we tend to imagine it; it’s not a singular, fully formed thing buried in some small corner of the mind. Instead, it’s “a pattern of mental activity, and the more entry points we have to what that pattern might be, the more chances we have to retrieve it,” Grysman said. Researchers call those entry points “retrieval cues,” and they can be as seemingly mundane as what you were feeling, what you were eating, or what you were wearing.

The more entry points you’ve got about an event, the more likely you are to remember it. It’s how Grysman advises his students to study for tests. “I tell them to try to make links between the material they’re studying and other parts of their lives, and those other parts of their lives serve as entry points,” he said.

So Grysman’s theory is that those early conversations with your parents implicitly told you which details are important to remember about the things that happen to you, and which are not. And because parents’ conversations with girls include references to both more information and more emotion, they’re setting their daughters up to have stronger memories over their lives.

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