



# The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers

By Daniel L. Schacter

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Daniel L. Schacter, chairman of Harvard University's Psychology Department and a leading expert on memory, has developed the first framework that describes the basic memory miscues we all encounter. Just like the seven deadly sins, the seven memory sins appear routinely in everyday life. Although we may hate these difficulties, as Schacter notes, they're surprisingly vital to a keen mind.

Schacter, whose previous trade book, *SEARCHING FOR MEMORY*, was called "splendidly lucid" (*The New Yorker*), offers vivid examples of the memory sins — for example, the absent-mindedness that plagued both a national memory champion and a violinist who forgot that he had placed a priceless Stradivarius on top of his car before driving off. The author also delves into the recent research — such as imaging that shows memories being formed in the brain — that has led him to develop his framework. Together, the stories and the scientific findings examined in *THE SEVEN SINS OF MEMORY* provide a fascinating new look at our brains, and at what we more generally think of as our minds.

*THE SEVEN SINS OF MEMORY* is a groundbreaking work that will provide great reassurance to everyone, from twenty-somethings who find their lives are too busy, to baby boomers who mutter about "early Alzheimer's," to senior citizens who worry about how much (or how little) they can recall.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Illustrating decades of research with compelling and often bizarre examples of glitches and miscues, Daniel L. Schacter's *The Seven Sins of Memory* dusts off an old topic and finds material of both practical and theoretical interest. Chairman of Harvard's Department of Psychology, Schacter knows his stuff and how to present it memorably. Organizing the book by examining each of seven "sins," such as absent-mindedness and suggestibility, Schacter slowly builds his case that these sometimes enraging bugs are actually side effects of system features we wouldn't want to do without. For example, when we focus our attention on one aspect of our surroundings, we inevitably draw attention away from others:

Consider this scenario: if you were watching a circle of people passing a basketball and someone dressed in a gorilla costume walked through the circle, beat his chest, and exited, of course you would notice him immediately--wouldn't you? [Researchers] filmed such a scene and showed it to people who were asked to track the movement of the ball by counting the number of passes made by one of the teams. Approximately half of the participants failed to notice the gorilla.

Scientists concerned about interesting a general audience would do well to use more gorilla suits. Schacter elegantly weaves this curiosity into his text along with clinical stories and frontline research. Recent advances in brain imaging have boosted his field considerably, and the formerly remote psychological territory has yielded plenty of exciting discoveries. Though some of the practical material seems like reheated common sense (Haunted by a traumatic memory? Talk about it.), it's backed up by solid scientific work. Write a note, tie string around the finger, or hire an assistant for reminders, but by all means remember to pick up a copy of *The Seven Sins of Memory*. --Rob Lightner

#### From Library Journal

To Ben Franklin's adage concerning the certainty of death and taxes, one ought, after reading this book, to add memory failures. Schacter (chair, psychology, Harvard Univ.; *Searching for Memory*), illuminates the curious processes of memory by classifying its malfunctions into seven categories: transience, absent-mindedness, blocking, misattribution, suggestibility, bias, and persistence. Schacter illustrates each of these "sins" with examples of routine misfortunes common to all (misplacing keys, forgetting someone's name) and cases of debilitating memory errors. Though memory failure can amount to little more than a mild annoyance, the consequences of misattribution in eyewitness testimony can be devastating, as can the consequences of suggestibility among pre-school children and among adults with "false memory syndrome." Lest we assume that memory is a badly engineered system, however, Schacter suggests that "the seven sins are by-products of otherwise adaptive features of memory." Drawing upon recent neuroimaging research that allows a glimpse of the brain as it learns and remembers, Schacter guides his readers on a fascinating journey of the human mind. Highly recommended for all libraries. Laurie Bartolini, Illinois State Lib., Springfield  
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#### From Scientific American

You've put your glasses down somewhere, and now you can't find them. That is the memory's sin of absent-mindedness. Schacter, chairman of the psychology department at Harvard University, cites that and six other sins of memory: transience, the weakening of memory over time; blocking, the inability to recall a familiar

name or fact; misattribution, in which one assigns an item of memory to the wrong source; suggestibility, the implanting of memories through leading questions; bias, the unconscious reshaping of a memory under the influence of later events or opinions; and persistence, the repeated recall of disturbing information or events that one would prefer to forget. Do these aberrations serve a useful function? Yes, Schacter says, they protect against overload, helping the memory "to retain information that is most likely to be needed in the environment in which it operates."

*Editors of Scientific American*

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