

Hearts and minds the game of the name

By Ruth Ostrow

I WAS at a party the other night. A few of us were sitting around, and we began introducing ourselves: "Hi, I'm Karen", "I'm Betty", "I'm Ruth", and so it went.

We all spoke to each other for a few moments, and then I heard one of the women say: "I'm sorry, I have forgotten your name."

"Yes, I've forgotten yours," said the other woman. I burst out laughing. "Actually I don't remember any of your names," I admitted, and we all laughed some more.

The topic came up about the condition we all seemed to be suffering from – "name Alzheimer's" as one girl called it.

I've had it for years.

For instance, a new owner has taken over my local convenience store. She told me her name – let's say, Sally. I did the thing the self-help books tell you to do. In order to get the human brain to register a person's name it has to be repeated up to 10 times within three minutes of meeting them. "Hi Sally, are these grapes fresh, Sally? Is that Sally with an S or a Z? And how is the new business going, Sally? Sally, that's a lovely name. It reminds me of an exotic lake in France (association). Goodbye Sally."

Two days later I walked into the shop grinning confidently. "Hello Nina."

"My name is Sally."

"Oh didn't you say it was Nina? Gosh you look like a Nina."

"What does a Nina look like?"

"Ummmmmm. Very beautiful," I stuttered, as my cheeks turned red.

Worse is when someone you are supposed to know joins your group. "Hey, everyone this is my good friend, my great friend . . . it's ummmmmm . . . Someone . . ."

The thing is that most people I talked to for this story have the same problem. We tend to remember faces, not names. But we all agreed that having an emotional connection with someone really helped. One woman said she needed a good two-hour deep connection in order to remember the name.

Which brings up the whole question of why we bother with the superficiality of even trying to remember silly five-letter words in association with someone we don't have any care about. It's like having to learn a different term in a foreign language for the word "apple" every day, for no good reason.

There are 2.1 million mentions on the web of how to remember names – basically because no one ever can. One site claims that one of the reasons people forget names almost immediately when meeting someone new is that they are so nervous and self-conscious that they don't really hear the other person's name when being introduced.

The solution: "Use three descriptive sentences about this new person, using their name each time. For example: 'Chris is fat'; 'Chris has bad breath'; 'Chris has a crooked nose'."

I say if you have to go to that extent, give it up!

The truth is that if we don't care about someone, we have no reason to want to know or retain the name. And needing it for business or career advancement is often not deep enough to etch that name into memory.

Only the heart counts.

New research professes that our heart has a powerful memory. Dr Paul Pearsall, psycho-neuroimmunologist, PhD, and author of best-seller *The Heart's Code* has put forward his controversial findings – that the heart is actually the main "brain" in our body, that it has its own cellular memories, personality, ideas, that the heart houses the mind.

The Institute of HeartMath in California, a non-profit, educational body made up of physicists, psychiatrists, cardiologists and scientists, also promotes "heart intelligence" after conducting research into the matter for over a decade.

The role of the literal heart in memory is highly controversial in medical circles. More acceptable are views that talk about "heart intelligence" in a metaphorical fashion. Daniel Goleman in his bestseller *Emotional Intelligence* argues that emotional lessons sculpt the brain's circuitry and people who use feelings and understand impulses have the edge in society.

He defines emotional intelligence as self-awareness, altruism, personal motivation, empathy, and the ability to love and be loved by friends, partners, and family members.

Whether you believe the literal or symbolic school of thought, it would seem that current wisdom professes our "hearts" and emotions need to be engaged in order for us to be working full-throttle. In keeping with the theory, it stands to reason that passion is better than any other party trick in terms of triggering memory – which involves linking a name to a bonding experience rather than a superficial cue. Or perhaps even to hateful feelings – envy, anger, pain. Try forgetting the name of someone who's "done you wrong".

Researchers also suggest multiple associations help memory, letting the heart conjure up a colour, a smell, a vibrant feeling in other parts of the body, which often comes from people sharing life stories.

We get so hung up on identity we forget the stories – good or bad – that make a name come alive. My new motto at parties: "Forget trying to remember. Just enjoy."

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 12 FEB 2005