

CAN PAUL MCKENNA *fix my memory?*

Paul McKenna's new book promises he can help us be smarter and stay sharper, so we sent LA writer Elaine Lipworth along to see if hypnotherapy could fix her forgetful ways



I've always had a terrible memory. I forget where I've put my car keys and frequently arrive home from the supermarket without milk or other necessities. My excuse is that, as a working

mum with two teenagers, it's hard to keep track of everything.

I'm ashamed to admit my worst memory lapse (now entrenched in family history), which happened years ago when we were leaving the house to go on holiday. We loaded the car, set off, got to the end of the road and my older daughter, Chace, piped up: "Where's Ava?" Yes, I had left my one-year-old home alone, asleep on my bed! (Luckily, she was still sound asleep and blissfully unaware when we raced back to the house to retrieve her).

Paul McKenna's new book *I Can Make You Smarter* is full of techniques to help you increase concentration, become more creative and learn new skills, as well as delivering what he calls "The Ultimate Formula for Exam Success". He also professes to reveal the secrets of a "supercharged memory". I have serious doubts about that claim, but I'm willing to give it a try. Some of his

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PHOTOGRAPH CAMERAPRE BY AUSTIN HARGRAVE

suggestions sound obvious: retrace your steps in your head if you've lost something, he says. I'm also supposed to put my keys back in the same place every time. Well, if I could remember to do that, I wouldn't need help!

I arrange to meet the author for a private session. Paul McKenna lives at the end of a winding road in a mock chateau, nestling high up in the Hollywood Hills, hidden from view behind tall iron gates.

Once owned by legendary filmmaker John Schlesinger (*Midnight Cowboy*) – the Rolling Stones lived here for a while, as did Julie Christie. The latest celebrity

owner of the mansion, looking LA casual in a shirt hanging out over jeans and converse trainers, comes out to greet me, two loping Great Danes at his side. I follow him into a large airy kitchen. He's in the middle of cooking breakfast: fried eggs, baked beans, tomatoes and mushrooms, and makes me a cup of tea.

We sit down across from each other in the living room: all mirrors and cream walls, pale grey sofas and Pop Art paintings. French windows open out onto the patio and swimming pool with sweeping views of West Hollywood.

Paul starts by instructing me to picture a bookshelf in my house and imagine picking up a specific novel. I choose a second-hand copy of *Pride And Prejudice* and describe it: blue, old, hardback. He tells me I don't have a memory problem (phew), I just need to get organised and employ a range of strategies. Some sound like common sense: write lists, write down everything important in my diary. "You've got to have a religious system," he tells me, "this goes here and that goes there."

He also recommends a technique using "the power of association" to remember names, objects, anything. "If you meet someone new with the same name as someone you already know (say Dave), picture the new Dave you've just met with two heads." An effective memory tool is to paint a wildly exaggerated and vivid picture in your head, which can be funny, shocking, sexual or just bizarre. I actually tried this one and it worked.

A good memory tool is to build a wildly exaggerated and vivid picture in your head

A friend recommended a book by author Diana Athill and, to remember her name, I envisaged a giant-sized Princess Diana climbing a mountain.

Before going shopping, Paul suggests walking around the kitchen, identifying what you need and making a kind of cartoon of the food in your head. I tell him I need to buy Parmesan.

"Imagine a great big Italian man in the supermarket grating the cheese as he sings opera... 'here is your Parmesaaaaaan!'" belts out Paul. "Make it over the top".

In short, Paul believes the key to getting smarter and having a good memory lies in using the left brain (responsible for

rational thinking and logic), along with the right (artistic and intuitive) brain. He claims we can effectively reprogramme our brain. "You have to upgrade the software, if you like," he says.

He proceeds to hypnotise me (my first experience) to allow the techniques to sink in. (In the book, he tells you how to do a kind of self-hypnosis with visualisation). Soft, new-agey music plays as Paul tells me to relax. I have to focus on a spot on the ceiling "to still the mind", then close my eyes. He whispers a series of numbers starting with 300, going down, tells me to relax and asks me to remember a time when I felt peaceful. I conjure up a family holiday. "Float into that relaxation," he murmurs. "Feel twice as relaxed."

At first, the process makes me giggle, but I quickly find myself lulled into a state of deep relaxation. I'm aware that he's talking to me, but I do drift off and lose track of time. After 15 minutes (I later learn), he counts down from ten to one and instructs me to open my eyes. I can't remember much of what he's said. But when I play the tape back, I find that he's given me the main strategies earlier, instructing "my unconscious mind" to make changes, so I remember everything important – as well as making me more organised. Feeling light and inexplicably happy, I leave "Chateau McKenna" re-energised and optimistic.

Now the acid test: will my memory improve? A week later, I can report that I haven't lost my keys – once. I feel

calmer and more organised. I still have lapses, though. Right now, I am baffled as to where I put my husband's birthday present (safely hidden so he won't find it).

But whether or not I end up with a razor-sharp memory, I am definitely having fun with Paul's techniques. I often interview film stars and, while chatting to them, I don't like to keep peering down at my notebook, so I often forget to ask key questions. Before interviewing Matt Damon last week, I wanted to remember to ask him about his friendship with George Clooney. So I sat at my desk, closed my eyes and visualised George coming round for dinner (on an evening that my husband is out). We drank some wine, chatted for hours in front of the fire and well... I'm afraid, I am drawing a blank. For the life of me, I just can't remember what happened next... **w&h**

PAUL'S TIPS TO STAY SHARP

+ CARRY A NOTEBOOK AT ALL TIMES and whenever you have an idea, jot it down. Leonardo da Vinci considered this essential. When you have a notebook, you will find that you have lots to write down.

+ MAKE AN A, B AND C LIST EVERY DAY
A: these are things that absolutely have to be done! **B:** things that are important, but can wait. **C:** everything else. So, it's easy, prioritise. Always do the As first, Bs second and the Cs when you have time.

+ TAKE A FEW MINUTES EVERY DAY to imagine what you would look like if you were smarter than you are now. How do you sit? What kind of expression do you have? Now imagine stepping into that smarter you. This will tell your brain to find ways to make you smarter.

+ CHOOSE A SKILL YOU'D LIKE TO MASTER and identify someone who is a model of excellence for that skill. Spend time studying that person in action. Imagine stepping in your role model. Copy their posture, see through their eyes. This will accelerate your learning in any skill.

Paul McKenna's book, *I Can Make You Smarter*, published by Bantam, is out now.

