

## Memories and the Name Game



**When my three kids were little, we often whiled away long car rides by playing something called The Name Game. It worked like this:**

Someone would say the first and last name of either a real person or a fictional character everyone in the car knew, which meant we had a lot of Star Wars and Harry Potter references.

Going clockwise around the car, the next person had to come up with someone whose first name started with the same letter as the last name that was just mentioned.

So, if you said Hermione Granger, the next person would have to come up with someone whose first name started with a "G."

The game seems so simple. At first. We know hundreds, probably thousands of names. However, apply a time constraint or pressure to come up with someone whose first name starts with a "G" and suddenly, it becomes difficult. After going a couple rounds, it seems as though your brain constricts and actively prevents you from accessing the information that you know is locked away someplace inside. It can get incredibly frustrating.

Now throw in multiple sclerosis, and the always-present question of whether one's memory lapses can be attributed to MS or to simple aging, and the word "frustrating" doesn't seem strong enough.

I faced this question about memory gaps a while ago at a social event. I started to introduce a friend to my brother-in-law Keith, someone I've known for 20 years. But, as I uttered the words, "Sharon, meet ..." I had ... **nothing**. If I was a cartoon character, an oversized Acme

padlock would've appeared out of nowhere as the chain to which it was tethered wrapped itself around my head so as not to allow my mind to cough up Keith's name.

Everybody noticed my flub. As a few laughed and raised their eyebrows, I was left to question whether my memory lapse was "normal" or related to MS.

A few years ago, I was evaluated by a cognitive neurologist to establish a baseline assessment of my working memory. The neurologist's report indicated that I "may encounter difficulties spontaneously retrieving information from memory when under time constraints; however, with practice and extra time she will be able to compensate." She added that this finding is consistent with my MS diagnosis, suggested I avoid multi-tasking, that I get sufficient sleep and take notes when I'm getting new information.

On the night I couldn't dislodge my brother-in-law Keith's name from the recesses of my brain, I was seriously fatigued. I spent the entire day at a writers' conference and got home late from work the previous night. Afterward, I couldn't shake the question of whether MS was the real culprit or whether this was a garden variety, accidentally-calling-your-kids-by-the-dog's-name kind of lapse.

I'll never get a real answer to the question and will always be guessing, the way anyone with MS questions the many symptoms he or she experiences to discern if they're disease-related or simply something with which everybody else contends as they get older.

In the meantime, I'll have to work on getting enough sleep, slowing down, concentrating, and laughing off mistakes. For the rest of the evening on the night I forgot Keith's name, I periodically draped my arm over his shoulder and loudly said, "Have you all met my brother-in-law Keith?"

The Name Game, indeed.