

‘Tip-of-the-tongue’ phenomenon: Does it signal cognitive decline and dementia?

[A] person is certain she knows the word she is searching for. It may seem as if the AWOL term is just on the tip of her tongue, but for some reason she can’t produce it, at least at that moment. In fact, psychologists refer to such experiences as tip-of-the-tongue (TOT) states. But are they really the harbingers of befuddlement that they appear to be?

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On the one hand, these retrieval failures can be [taken as evidence](#) of weakening connections between the meanings of concepts and the words that denote them in long-term memory. It’s also possible that the increase in word-finding problems with age reflects something very different.

Psychologist Donna Dahlgren has [argued](#) that the key issue is not one of age but one of knowledge. If older adults typically have more information in long-term memory, then as a consequence they will experience more TOT states. It’s also possible that TOT states are useful: They can serve as a signal to the older adult that the sought-for word is known, even if not currently accessible.

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[Research](#) suggests you might have fewer such episodes if you maintain your aerobic fitness. So the next time you have trouble thinking of a word, you can also try looking for it around the block.

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