

The New York Times

Science

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JAN. 9, 2017

To Improve Your Sense of Direction, Lose the Technology



Using a compass instead of a map app or a GPS device is one way to improve your sense of direction, experts say. Credit Les Stone for The New York Times

Are you one of those people who get lost in walk-in closets? Do you build in extra travel time to account for getting lost? Is your sense of direction like a weather vane spinning in strong winds?

For the directionally challenged, getting from Point A to Point B can be a frustrating, time-wasting ordeal. If the idea of trying to get someplace unfamiliar makes you anxious, fear not: Experts say there are steps you can take to improve your sense of direction.

Create a mental map

Review a map of your proposed route before heading out, and perhaps even trace it with your finger, Dr. Brendan Kelley, a neurologist at [Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center](#), said in an email. It will help provide context for the route. Once you arrive, review the map and the route you traveled to reinforce the memory of how you got there.

By reviewing a map before your travel, you can take note of “handrails” — landmarks such as bodies of water, stores and streets — that will visually guide you, Ben G. Oliver, the director of outdoor education at [Colgate University](#) in Hamilton, N.Y., said in an interview.

Be mindful of place

Stop and enjoy the scenery. Set your phone to vibrate every 15 minutes to remind you to note where you are, [Richard S. Citrin](#), an organizational psychologist from Pittsburgh, said in an email.

Take notes and comment about what you see. That will help orient you and strengthen connections in your brain about where you are and have been.



Sue Barry wearing a hat outfitted with a device designed by her husband that buzzed when she turned north. Credit Andrew J. Barry

Try not to get stressed, because that makes it more likely you will become disoriented and confused. “When our automatic responses take over, we usually wind up lost emotionally and sometimes physically,” he said.

Put the technology away

Experts say that technology like GPS devices or apps on smartphones can be crutches that inhibit the development of a better sense of direction.

The devices can be good “adaptive strategies” to navigate to unfamiliar places, Dr. Kelley said. However, it can be challenging to learn on our own if we rely too heavily on them.

[David R. Widman](#), a professor of psychology at Juniata College in Huntingdon, Pa., said in an interview that paper maps, with their foldout pages, offer a better overview of where you are headed than the small screens of smartphones.

He recalled that during a trip his family took from central Pennsylvania to Vermont, the GPS device never made it clear that they would have to cross Lake Champlain. The trip ended up taking 11 hours.

“The GPS is as likely to get you to where you want to go as it is to get you lost,” he said.

Take different routes to the same place

Mr. Citrin said that when traffic is bad, he takes a different route even if it takes longer.

“As my mind begins to understand that option, I increase my awareness of how going in different directions helps me get to where I am going,” he said.

Figure out where north is

[Sue Barry](#), professor emeritus of biological sciences and neuroscience at [Mount Holyoke College](#) in South Hadley, Mass., said in an interview that her sense of direction was “really quite pathetic.” She understood what was at her point of origin and what was at her destination, but had no understanding of what was in between or how the two points related to each other.

Her husband, Dan, an engineer, was inspired by [a 2007 article in Wired magazine](#) that described the “feelSpace belt,” which was outfitted with a power supply and 13 vibrating pads. A sensor detected [Earth](#)’s magnetic field, and whichever pad pointed north would buzz to alert the person wearing the belt.

As a Mother’s Day gift in 2010, Ms. Barry’s husband embedded compass circuitry into a sun hat. The circuitry was connected by a wire to a battery-powered motor, which she would [hold in her hand or tuck into the hat](#). When she was pointing north, the motor would buzz.



North! Sue Barry on "Place Blindness" Video by Oliver Sacks
https://youtu.be/til_xXzq538

It offered a tactile sense of where north was, she said, adding that the experiment had left her with a greater sense of “connectiveness to the Earth.” She said she started to gain an awareness of where she was in relation to streets, buildings and landmarks.

“The results of that was I started to think more about the two-mile journey to work as being on a map,” she said.

She also began to use the position of the sun and her shadow to plot north. She now carries a compass, and when she has difficulty sleeping, she works on building a “spatial memory” by mentally recreating her trip and mapping what buildings appear in what order.

“You have to teach yourself,” she said. “You have to pay attention to make these changes, and it’s hard.”