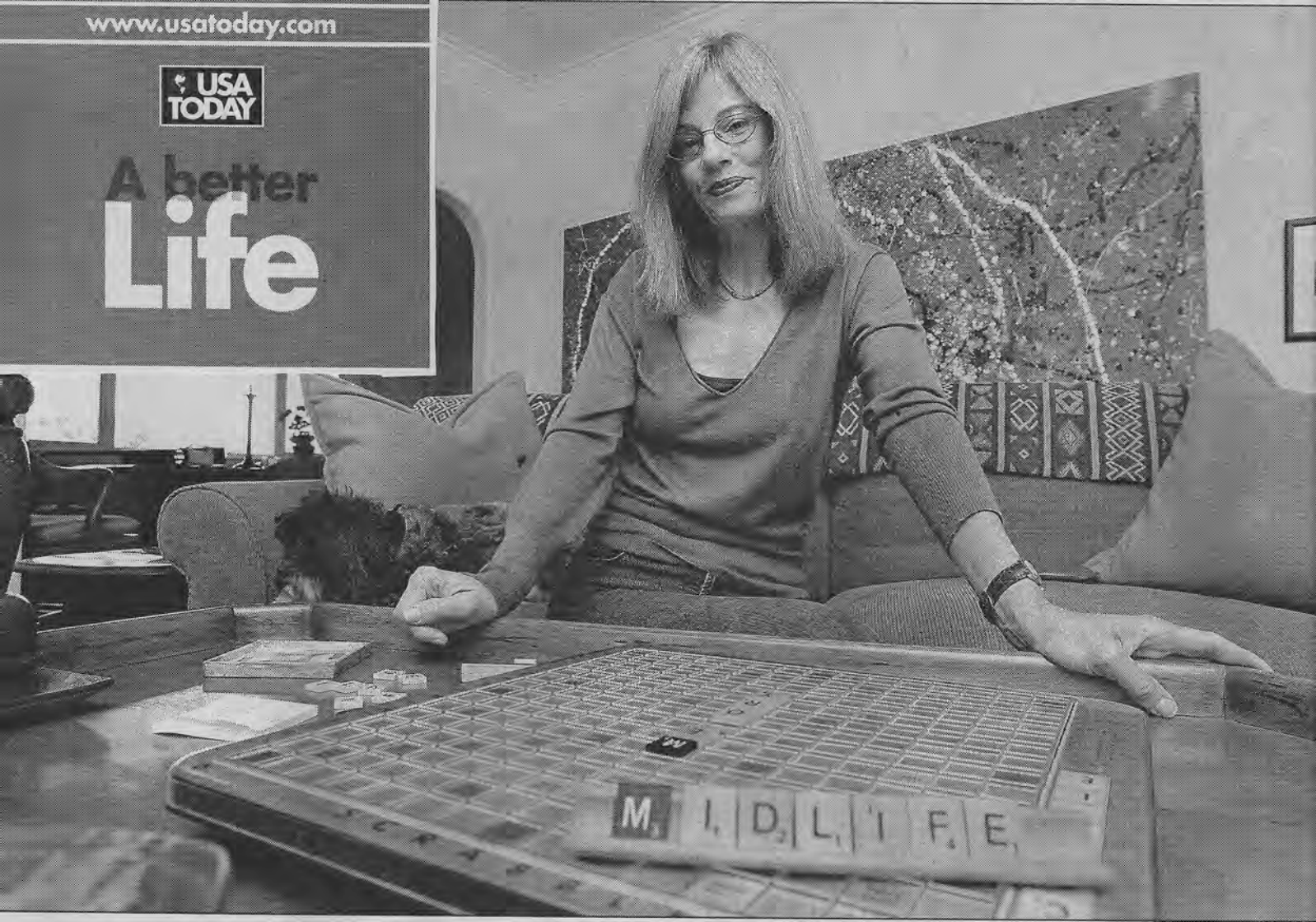




A better Life



Aging on the brain: Cathryn Jakobson Ramin, 50, started noticing memory problems in her late 30s. An investigative reporter, she approached the problem as she would any other story and wrote *Carved in Sand: When Attention Fails and Memory Fades in Midlife* about how she "got my mojo back" and how others can, too.

Is it aging or Alzheimer's?

Journalist investigates why her midlife mind seemed to be going

By Kathleen Fackelmann
USA TODAY

At first Cathryn Jakobson Ramin didn't pay much attention to the forgetfulness that first surfaced in her late 30s and early 40s.

She chalked up the brain fog to lack of sleep and a busy schedule that included her work as an investigative reporter and keeping track of two young sons.

Then Ramin started having trouble finding the right word. She would get to the end of a page in a book and have no idea what she had just read. She could no longer multi-task and became distracted easily.

"I felt like I was losing my edge," she says.

Starting at age 50, most people develop some signs of a brain that's slowing down, says memory expert Gary Small of UCLA. "The brain ages just like the rest of the body."

In most cases, the occasional memory lapse is nothing to worry about, Small says.

But some people do develop a more serious memory problem known as mild cognitive impairment, says Ronald Petersen, a spokesman for the Chicago-based Alzheimer's Association. People with mild cognitive impairment are at high risk of going on to develop Alzheimer's, he says.

'I got my mojo back'

Was Ramin's forgetful behavior typical, or was she slowly losing her mind?

A journalist living near San Francisco, she decided she had to find some answers to that question. For three years, she consulted doctors, interviewed neuroscientists and explored a host of potentially brain-building interventions. The experts linked her memory problems to conditions common in midlife: sleep deprivation, a thyroid problem and a history of mild head injuries. Even better, Ramin discovered some treatments that helped restore her mind.

"In time, I got my mojo back — ideas meshed, names made themselves readily available and words flew from my brain to my fingers to the monitor screen," she writes in her just-released book, *Carved in Sand: When Attention Fails and Memory Fades in Midlife* (HarperCollins, \$24.95). Ramin, who just turned 50, says she now has a mind she can trust.

Petersen says the aging brain has more trouble retrieving information and doing more than

Dementia vs. everyday lapses

Five ways to tell the difference:

Alzheimer's	Normal
1 Forgetting recently learned information is one sign of serious memory loss and possible Alzheimer's.	Occasionally forgetting a task on a to-do list.
2 It is difficult to complete everyday tasks such as dialing the phone.	Sometimes drawing a blank on what you were about to say.
3 Simple words such as "toothbrush" or "car" cannot be recalled.	Occasionally forgetting a friend's name, only to remember it later.
4 Frequently placing things in odd places such as putting a shoe in the freezer.	Most people temporarily misplace things such as keys or reading glasses, but not in odd places.
5 Rapid mood changes for no apparent reason.	Feeling sad or moody at times.

Source: The Alzheimer's Association

one thing at a time, and at times it can forget a name.

But Ramin could rattle off a long list of lapses, such as the time she left the front door wide open as she exited through the garage. Several times she stopped cooking to send an e-mail and left the gas stove flaming for hours.

So she wasn't inclined to write off the follow-ups as the usual age-related decline.

Ramin went to see Small, director of the UCLA Memory Clinic. She had a brain scan and got some good news: She had no sign of Alzheimer's, an incurable brain disease.

But brain scans show signs of only advanced stages of disease and cannot detect subtle memory deficits — problems that can be caused by a whole host of conditions that are common in midlife, Small says. And though the brain scan was normal, Ramin scored poorly on some memory and attention tests.

She continued her search for answers.

This time she consulted Jonathan Canick, a neuropsychologist at the California Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco. He said Ramin's poor test scores looked like the result of a series of head injuries. She told him she remembered some mild knocks to the head as a child, and Canick said those injuries could have been enough to disrupt the brain.

A stimulant such as Adderall, usually prescribed for attention deficit disorder, might help, he said. So she got a prescription and it did help — at least for a while.

"Within a week I had much more working memory," Ramin said. She could find the word she was looking for quickly and was much better at recalling names.

But Adderall made her tense, so she

switched to Provigil, another medication that is thought to boost alertness. That drug also helped, but she was still having some difficulties.

Ramin already had gotten a heads-up that fatigue could explain a large part of her forgetfulness. Research studies suggest that sleep deprivation can cause memory problems and slow cognitive processing speed and reaction times. And Ramin was getting just five hours of sleep a night.

So she made her way to Tracy Kuo, a psychologist at the Stanford University Sleep Disorder Center. Kuo suggested Ramin intentionally cut back on sleep until she was very sleepy, then set the alarm a little later. That helped her eke out an extra hour a night, still not enough to offer her a rested, agile mind.

But Ramin found another treatable condition that could have contributed to her brain fog: a thyroid disorder. She had an underactive thyroid and low levels of a hormone that helps brain cells work properly.

Sure enough, when Ramin took medicine to treat her thyroid problem, she had less trouble finding the right words.

Lessons learned

Over the course of writing the book, Ramin tried a long list of interventions aimed at giving her a sharper mind. She went to a longevity guru and now takes a handful of vitamins every day. She tried meditation and games to boost her concentration, and after learning that physical activity might build a better brain, she started to work out twice a week.

And when she has to be in top form, she'll take Provigil now and again.

Ramin didn't erase all signs of aging. She still can't multi-task that well, and she occasionally forgets an important task or someone's name. But she has much better recall. And she no longer has days that are filled with a long string of memory lapses.

"The fog has lifted," she says.

