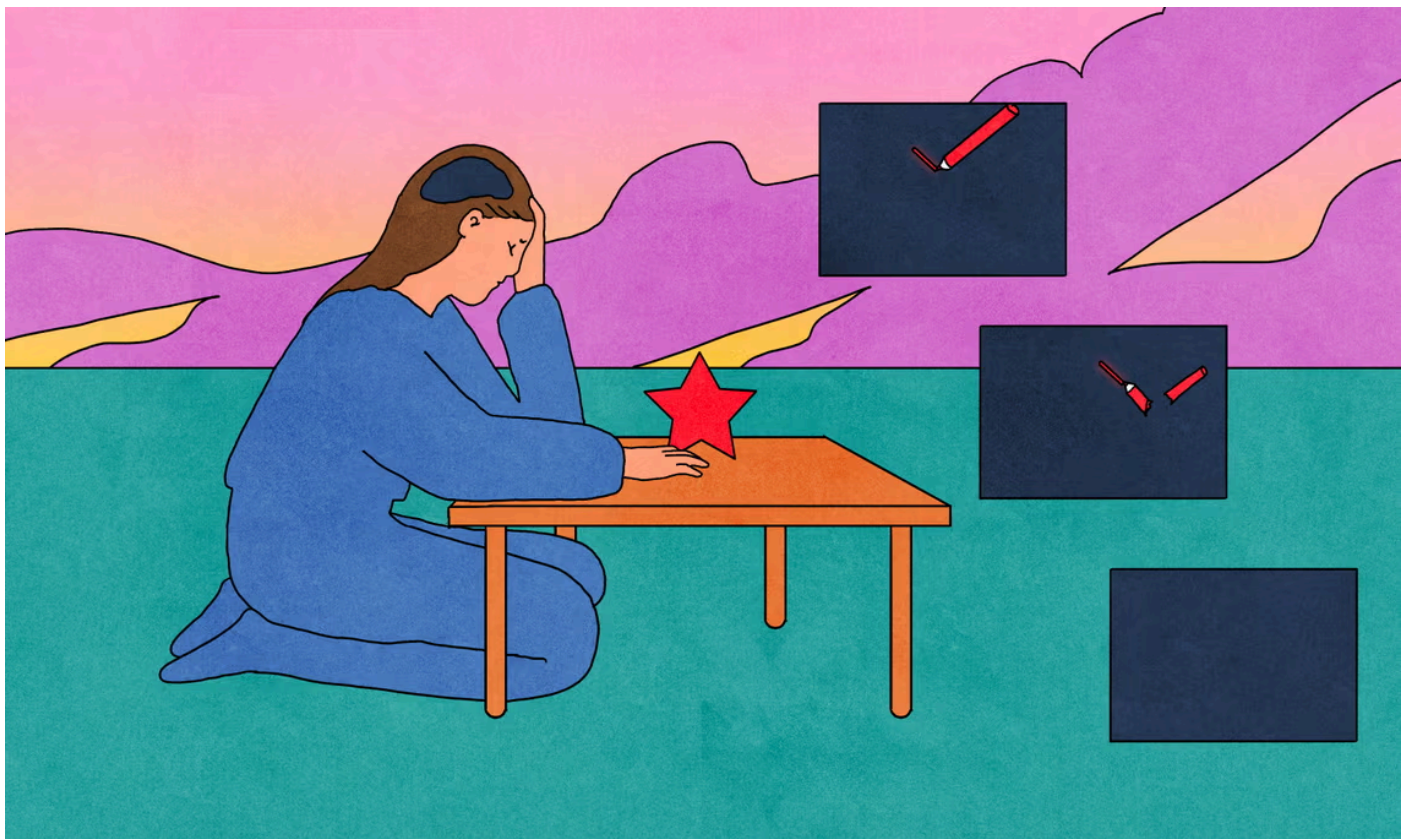


Well actually

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I can't picture things in my mind. I didn't realize that was unusual

People with aphantasia can't mentally visualize things. Mental imagery is a spectrum, and we lie outside it, in the dark



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I discovered I had aphantasia by accident. When you live your entire life without a “mind’s eye”, it seems completely normal to visualize nothing when remembering people and places, or imagining the future.

Two years ago, I wrote [an article](#) about pupillometry, or the measurement of a person’s pupils to infer their cognitive state. Joel Pearson, a psychologist and neuroscientist at the University of New South Wales, was trying to use pupils as a biomarker to assess aphantasia, a condition thought to affect about [3.9%](#) of people.

A quick at-home test for aphantasia, I learned, was called the [red star](#) or red apple test. Close your eyes and picture a [red apple](#). How well can you see the apple visually on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the most vivid? Can you see its color, shape and the length of the stem? Is it a bit hazy, coming in and out of focus? For me, I saw nothing - no fuzzy outline, no hint of any image at all. While working on my story, I thought, “Well, no one can *really* see an apple when they close their eyes. It’s just a metaphor.” Then, I asked some friends. Not everyone was a 1, but most could see between 1 and 4. (There’s also a more official questionnaire, called the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire, or the [VVIQ](#).)

“But can you *really* see it?” I pressed, confused. I know what an apple looks like. I can easily describe many varieties of apples to you right now, even the subtle differences in their coloration. But when I do so, I don’t “see” anything - I retain these details in a different way.

Though I had been reporting on the brain for years, it never occurred to me that having no visual imagery was unusual.

■ I wrote about a man I was seeing, ‘Why can’t I hold what he looks like in my mind?’

Aphantasia is relatively new to being named. In the late 19th century, scientists, notably Francis Galton, wrote that some people were better able to picture objects in their minds than others. But it wasn’t until

2003 that the University of Exeter’s Adam Zeman published the first case report on aphantasia, after meeting a 65-year-old who lost the ability to mentally visualize familiar people and places after a surgery.

After hearing from those who had never been able to mentally visualize, Zeman published [a paper](#) on 21 people with “congenital aphantasia” in 2015. Since then, more and more people like me have come to realize that mental imagery is a spectrum, and we lie on the outer bounds of it, in the dark.

When I was going on dates after a breakup in 2022, my friends would often ask how people looked, compared with their profile photos. I would describe their mannerisms, how they made me feel, how they behaved in certain situations; a friend might say, frustrated, “Yes, but what do they *look* like?” This was a clue that something was off in my visual representation of others. In a journal entry from July 2022, I wrote about a man I was seeing, “Why can’t I hold what [he] looks like in my mind?”

There’s been a surge of research on how aphantasia affects our lives. There are probably different subtypes of aphantasia, as Pearson and his colleagues showed in [a recent paper](#): for some it affects images alone; some can’t imagine other sensory information, like sounds. Some people with aphantasia have visualizations when they dream (I do), and others don’t. There’s evidence that it can [make it harder for people to recall visual details](#), though other studies show that aphants perform better on [some memory tests unrelated to imagery](#). “I remember stories, facts and trivia about my own life, but I can’t experience it in any way,” said Tom Ebeyer, the founder of the [Aphantasia Network](#). “It also makes it difficult to properly sequence and remember lots of specific details.”



📷 The red star test for aphantasia. Illustration: Rita Liu/The Guardian

But overall, people with aphantasia don’t seem to have serious problems navigating their day-to-day lives, unlike those with more severe memory conditions like episodic amnesia.

The ways it affects me have been more understated. In therapy, I struggled with therapeutic techniques that relied heavily on visualization. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) manuals are full of such techniques, said Reshanne Reeder, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of Liverpool. For example, [one exercise](#) asks people to practice responding to different situations by “imagin[ing] a scene as if it were a photograph”, followed by “imagin[ing] the action starting as if it were a movie”.

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People who know me would agree that I have a very strong memory, but I have noticed that my memory works a bit differently. I can remember visual details, just not visually. I can rattle off what a person was wearing or what a scene looked like by remembering a list of what was there, not by seeing it. Mostly, I remember how experiences felt - emotionally and physically. I'm best at remembering concepts and themes from books or conversations.

I don't have face blindness. I'm very good at recognizing people, often remembering people from long ago who don't remember me: people I've served in restaurants, went to college with, or reported on many years ago. But when I am not physically with someone, I can't call up their face. As a result, I also have a somewhat unusual relationship with my own looks - it's not that I forget what I look like, but I am sometimes a little surprised, and don't feel connected to my outward appearance as a matter of identity. It's not what makes me who I am.

What I find most striking is how much variety there is in people who have aphantasia. Andrea Blomkvist, a researcher in philosophy of cognitive science at the Centre for the Study of Perceptual Experience at the University of Glasgow, said that her group had met aphants who are not just skilled at non-visual jobs and hobbies, but are artists, writers, animators. "Aphantasics have no problem producing highly creative work," Ebeyer said. "Our process can be very different."

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For instance, visualizers might imagine their work before they begin.

“Aphantasics, myself included, tend to have a general ‘sense’ or idea of what they want to create,” Ebeyer said. Ebeyer begins working, then edits and refines until he is satisfied. He often hears from other artists with aphantasia when they’re in the process of making art: *I know it when I see it*. This teaches us that imagination extends beyond mental imagery.

Zeman has [written](#) that people with aphantasia may have more of an interest in the visual arts, because their minds are devoid of it.

I love visual art - I originally majored in art history alongside journalism - but it makes sense to me that my medium is words. They suit my internal sense-making best, as well as the concepts and monologue that constitute my daily experience. In October, the writer John Green [tweeted](#) about the red apple test, revealing that he can’t see mental imagery either. “I always thought ‘visualize’ meant thinking of the words/ideas/feelings associated with a thing, not actual visuals,” he wrote, adding that his choice of profession aligned with this. “For me everything has always been made out of language, so language is a natural fit.”

This has revealed itself in other preferences too: I seem like someone who would love science fiction novels, but growing up I found books with lengthy visual descriptions of scenery or characters boring. As a journalist, when reporting, I have to make sure to take photographs of everything I’m seeing so that I can refer back to it later. It’s not my instinct to describe physical details in my writing - it’s something editors often have to remind me to do. What someone looks like, what they are wearing - it’s not as interesting to me as what they are feeling, or the ideas that they have.

Some people consider aphantasia to be a deficit and wish they could reverse it. People have claimed they can [train](#) their way out of aphantasia, or use psychedelics to regain some sense of mental imagery (the [jury is out](#) on whether that works). I have no desire for this - my mind is plenty busy without a stream of imagery. If I was born with imagery, it would be commonplace for me, and I’m sure I’d enjoy it. But I already can find myself overwhelmed with thoughts and feelings that have no visual aspects to them.

Aphants often ask Pearson what imagery is like. It's not quite as simple as seeing an apple floating in front of you, he said, as someone who can mentally visualize. "I have a conscious experience, often fleeting, but I do experience something in my mind's eye of what an apple looks like," he said.

Blomkvist has heard that some aphants find it hard that they can't visually remember loved ones that might have died or moved away. This rings true for me: a best friend of mine, who died in 2020, had an infectious smile, and to see it - really see it - I have to look at photos of him, which I do often. An ex-boyfriend who I haven't seen since we split up is often in my memories, but not in visual form. He can feel like a ghost.

But my memories of people I've loved are visceral to me in other ways. My favorite description of aphantasia comes from an [essay](#) by Mette Leonard Høeg in *Psyche*. She wrote that her imagination and memories have a strong spatial component. When Høeg remembers the house she grew up in as a child, "I can feel it, almost physically, when I think of it," she wrote. My memories are very physical too, and these sensations map on to concepts and emotions. Recently, when remembering something that my current boyfriend and I discussed last spring in London, I recalled that we were on an escalator while talking; I could sense the memory of the movement of my body going up the moving stairs.

I like to experience my memories of people and places this way, just as I enjoy knowing that people can really "see" me in their minds. Conditions like aphantasia remind me how distinct our view of the world is compared with the person standing next to us on the street, or even our closest friends - we're all perceiving each other in our own ways. "Aphantasia is part of the range of neural diversity," Pearson said. "Some people think in pictures and some don't."

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