

## Tips for Improving Memory & Thinking

**C**ognition refers to thinking activities such as remembering, paying attention, learning new things, planning, and making decisions.

Some changes in cognition are normal as people get older. For persons who are aging with physical disability, cognitive changes may impact your ability to cope with challenges related to your disability.

Some people have minor changes in thinking that occur every once in a while and others have larger thinking problems that occur more often. Even minor changes in thinking as you age can cause challenges in your daily life and affect your overall quality of life.

### What are some causes of cognitive problems?

- Some disabling conditions, such as multiple sclerosis, directly affect structures of the brain, which can lead to cognitive problems.
- Symptoms that are often part of a medical condition, such as fatigue, depression, and pain, can cause or contribute to thinking problems.
- Cognitive problems can also make medical symptoms worse, creating a negative cycle. As your other symptoms get worse, your thinking problems also get worse.

- Some medications may cause thinking difficulties, and older adults may be more vulnerable to cognitive problems related to certain medication. It is important to discuss any concerns you have with your health care provider.

### What kind of thinking problems can happen with aging?

- Memory problems are the most common type of thinking problems in aging.
  - ◆ It is more difficult to hold information in our mind for a brief period to perform a task, such as following instructions or figuring out how much to tip (referred to as working memory).
  - ◆ Details like names and places are harder to recall.
  - ◆ It is more difficult to remember something you are supposed to do in the future, such as taking your medication or going to a doctor's appointment.
- Attention or the ability to concentrate is also commonly affected. You may be more distractible, and multi-tasking is much more difficult.
- Thinking can become slower so

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completing simple tasks can require more concentration and time. Problems with communication may also happen. For example, you may have difficulty finding words or keeping up with a conversation.

- Making decisions can be more difficult.

## How can thinking problems impact your daily life?

Cognitive problems limit how much you may be able to participate in daily activities such as work and social relationships.

- Thinking problems may impact your independence.
- If you have difficulties with attention and your thinking has slowed, driving may become dangerous.
- You may also have problems managing your finances due to challenges staying organized and making decisions.
- Thinking problems can lead to premature retirement or unemployment.
- Changes in thinking can also cause added anxiety and stress in your life.

Fortunately, there are ways you can improve your thinking and reduce the negative impact thinking problems may have on your life.

## What You Can Do - Tips for Addressing Your Thinking Problems

Changes in thinking can be managed by increasing awareness about your thinking problems, doing activities to improve your thinking, and developing planning strategies. It is important to get started early to put supports in place to help with your thinking problems.

### Understand your thinking problems

Being aware of your thinking problems and how they may affect you is an important first step.

Problems with cognition are often gradual and may not be immediately noticeable to others, but they may be noticeable to you. Here are some ways to help you understand your thinking problems.

- Identify triggers that can worsen your thinking problems, such as lack of sleep, stress, or certain medication and write down these triggers.
- Talk with your health care provider about your thinking problems and triggers.
- Your health care provider may refer you to a neuropsychologist. A neuropsychologist can provide an assessment of your cognitive function to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. This may be particularly important if you are working or there is concern about safety.

### Simplify your day

- Set up a daily routine. This can make your day more predictable and less stressful.
- Pace yourself during the day.
- Break complex activities down into multiple easier parts.
- Do one thing at a time when possible. Multitasking can often make thinking more difficult.
- Prioritize what needs to be done. Do those things first, then less important things later.
- Schedule activities that will require more focus and concentration during times of day your thinking is typically better.
- Avoid triggers in your environment that

make thinking more difficult.

- Avoid visual or sound distractions.
- For example, keep your desk neat at work, and turn down the radio or close the windows if it's noisy outside.
- Avoid socializing in crowded and loud environments.

## Learn new methods that help with thinking

Try different methods that may help with your thinking problems and see what works best for you. Be open to trying new methods. Some methods you may find helpful include:

- Writing things down.
- Using memory aids such as post-it notes, daily planners, or calendars.
- Setting a timer on your watch or phone can be a helpful tool to remind you to take medication or go to an appointment.
- Your health care provider may also refer you to a Speech Therapist or a Rehabilitation Psychologist, who are both skilled professionals that can help you learn new methods and problem-solve. They may also suggest activities and making lifestyle changes that can help reduce problems with thinking or even improve thinking skills.

## Maintain an active and healthy lifestyle

- Get physically active. Research has shown that physical activity, such as walking, can help maintain good cognitive health and may prevent cognitive decline. Physical activity can also help improve sleep, fight fatigue, and improve mood, all of which contribute to your cognition. See our factsheet on **Exercise**.

- Engage in mentally stimulating activities you enjoy.
- Read a new book, do crosswords or Sudokus.
- Challenge yourself by learning something new. Research suggests that this may be particularly effective, as it helps build new neural connections in the brain.
- Be socially active. Good conversation can stimulate new thinking.
- Play an instrument or listen to music.
- Get enough sleep. See our factsheet on **Sleep**.
- Take frequent rest breaks during the day. Some people find that resting in silence is most effective (turn off phone, TV, etc). This will help minimize fatigue and refocus your thinking.
- Maintain a healthy diet. Eating right can help you avoid fatigue and increase your energy level.
- Improve your mood; depression can significantly affect your ability to think. See our factsheet on **Depression**.
- Try to minimize stress and anxiety.
- Things to avoid: smoking, abusing alcohol, using illicit drugs, and misusing prescription or over-the-counter medications.

## Resources

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/aging/healthybrain](http://www.cdc.gov/aging/healthybrain)
- National Council on Aging (NCOA) Center for Health Aging, Behavioral Health: <https://www.ncoa.org/healthy-aging/behavioral-health/>
- National Institute on Aging: <https://www.nia.nih.gov/>

- National Institute of Health Senior Health:  
<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/>

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