

Cognition: Attention, Concentration & Memory



This leaflet is about how damage to certain parts of the brain can affect your attention, concentration and memory.

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Cognition is the way we use our brains to think and learn. If the brain is damaged our thinking skills can be affected.

At first these problems may not be as obvious as physical or speech problems, but often the cognitive changes make it much harder to get back to work, to do everyday things and socialise.

How can cognitive problems affect a person in everyday life?



You may experience memory problems:

- Remember what you see, but not what you hear
- Forget where you put things

You may have difficulty with concentration and attention:

- Trouble sticking to one thing at a time - your mind may wander when watching TV and you might lose track of the storyline

You may have difficulty getting things in the right order:

- Leave out key steps in an activity, such as forgetting to add the washing powder when doing the laundry

You may want to do things but have trouble getting started:

- Spend most of the day in front of the TV and not feel like doing anything else
- Have a number of things to do but takes all day to get the first thing done

Cognition is the way we use our brains to think and learn to get through each day

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You may become inflexible:

- Frustrated by unexpected changes to your routine
- Not feel comfortable trying new things
- Get stuck on one idea

You may have difficulty understanding things:

- Find it difficult to follow conversations
- Find it hard to change to the next topic of conversation
- Take longer to process verbal or written information
- Not enjoy reading anymore
- Confuse similar-sounding words or numbers

You may have difficulty saying what you mean / expressing yourself

- Find it difficult to get to the point of a conversation
- Have trouble finding the words you want and need more time to reply
- Feel uncomfortable in situations and avoid eye contact
- Find it difficult to put ideas together so they make sense

You may have trouble solving problems:

- Difficulty operating simple, every day appliances
- When things go wrong you may not understand why

You may have difficulty learning new things:

- You may need to be shown the same thing over and over again
- Things may not make sense even when they are explained
- Finding new places may be more of a challenge

You may be less organised:

- Have trouble finding things
- Miss appointments and forget to prepare things that you need to take

Things that can be helpful

Here are some ideas that can make your life a lot easier:

For **memory problems:**

- Make a note of things you want to discuss at appointments
- Use a notebook or diary to write things down and carry it everywhere
- Use calendars and whiteboards to remind you of things you need to remember
- When scheduling appointments include date, time, place and person's name
- Use an alarm to make you move to the next thing you need to do
- Keep things in the same place
- Organise information so that it is easier to remember
- Repeat information so that it is easier to remember
- Practice what you have learned
- Use different memory tricks / tips:
 - Form a visual image of what you are trying to remember
 - Use first letters of things you are trying to remember as a cue
 - Use rhymes
 - Use colour coordination
 - Make up sentences / stories and verbalise to help remember

When planning or organising **activities:**

- Create a routine - Do things at the same time of day such as taking your pills at 9:00 am, or doing things in a particular sequence such as taking your pills after breakfast or taking a nap after lunch
- Get a friend to help set up a daily routine
- Write down the steps in doing a task with someone
- Tick things off as they are done
- Keep all the things for a hobby or task in one place
- Allow enough time to do work so that it is done properly
- Choose hobbies which are enjoyable
- Choose reading material which is enjoyable

For **Communication:**

- If you don't understand someone ask them to repeat or say it in a different way
- Tell people you need time to think
- Meet up with family and friends when you are fresh and rested



For **concentration** and **attention**:

- **Reduce distractions** - find a quiet place, use earplugs, keep the radio / TV turned down or off.
- **Watch out for signs of fatigue** - one of the main causes of poor concentration is fatigue. Don't work on any one task too long. Take regular rest breaks.
- **Call for a time out** - When you are beginning to feel overwhelmed, find a way to get out of the situation.
- **Do one thing at a time** - If you attempt to do more than one thing at a time, it makes it all that more difficult to get anything done.
- **Take time to think and make decisions** - Don't be rushed into making decisions. Let people know that you need time to think.
- **Use active listening skills** - ask questions, paraphrase or repeat back in your own words what a person has just said to you.
- **Modify your lifestyle accordingly** - you may have to make some changes to your lifestyle such as staying out of noisy restaurants or shopping malls. Schedule activities at a time when there will be the fewest distractions. Drive your car at off peak times and shop when stores are least crowded.

Useful External Aids:

- **Calendar** - schedule future meetings, and note important dates
- **Diary** - record what you have done and what you have to do each day
- **Checklists of things to do** - cross off each item after you have done it
- **Phone numbers and address book** - record all contacts in one place
- **Place a pencil and note pad by the phone for phone messages**
- **Keep** maps, timetables for buses/public transportation in a convenient place
- **Wall calendars and planners** - place it where it is obvious such as on the refrigerator door
- **Use mechanical organizers such as pill boxes**
- **Cell phone reminders**

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Some of the other leaflets in this series may help or you can contact your local Brain Injury Association, ACC, Ministry of Health or Disability Resources Information Centres.

For more information go to www.brain-injury.org.nz