

General Cognitive Strategies

“Cognitive” refers to how you think, learn, remember, and pay attention. “Cognitive complaints” are common for people at some point in their lives. Memory is a common cognitive complaint. Sometimes, what seems like a memory problem is normal forgetfulness. Normal forgetting or common “memory lapses” can include:

- walking into a room and forgetting what you wanted to do,
- misplacing items, and
- forgetting if you have done a task (like turning off the stove or locking a door).

Memory issues can also be caused by a lack of attention. Attention can impact memory. If you are not paying attention when talking with someone, then you may forget details from that conversation later. Distractions impact your focus and attention. Distractions can be internal (such as pain, worries, hunger, fatigue) or external (such as smells and noises). This handout reviews strategies to help with these issues.

General Tips

- Use your cognitive strengths to help reduce your cognitive weaknesses.
- Combine strategies.
- Adjust the strategies to fit your needs.
- If a strategy is not working, try a different one.

Strategies

- Use a “home place” to keep important items (such as keys, phone, wallet, glasses) in the same place every day.

- Organize things to remember. For example, group lists of things into categories, such as frozen items to buy at the grocery store.
- Connect new tasks (like taking a new medicine) to something you already do (like eating breakfast).
- Keep a daily routine. Do the same task at the same time every day.

Use Tools/Reminders

- Repeat important information aloud or in your head at least 5 times while visualizing it. (Examples might be repeating an appointment date and time as you make your way to the calendar or repeating the name of someone you just met.)
- Organize information by making it into a story or linking it to something you already know.
- Use “chunking” to break down information into fewer pieces. (For example, turn 8-9-6-8 into “eighty-nine, sixty-eight.”)
- Sort tasks into 3 categories: Must, Should, and Could. Do the “Must” list first, then the “Should” list, and if time permits, the “Could” list.
- Recheck your work at a later time. This helps to catch mistakes.
- Create deadlines. Don’t delay tasks.
- Place Post-It notes where you’ll be sure to see them (such as the refrigerator, mirror, coffee pot).
- Use a checklist or dry erase board to list daily tasks. Check off items when done.
- Use a pill box for sorting and managing medicines.
- Use alarms as reminders.

- Use a small notebook or calendar to write down important things (such as dates, phone numbers, tasks).
- Ask for written instructions from medical staff or supervisors.

Use Your Energy Wisely

- Do your hardest tasks when you have the most energy.
- Take regular breaks. For every 50 minutes of focus time, take a 10-minute break.
- Use a timer to get more done.
 - Set a timer for 15-20 minutes and work hard during that time. When the timer goes off, take a 2-5-minute break to do something relaxing.
 - Repeat this series 3-4 times, then take a longer (20-30 minutes) break.
 - Adjust these times as needed to match your attention span.
- Do important tasks (like finances) when you feel relaxed and focused.
- Use relaxation techniques to restore attention and focus. Examples might include:
 - stretching,
 - yoga,
 - meditation,
 - progressive muscle relaxation
 - listening to music, or
 - deep breathing.

Stay Focused

- Do one task or activity at a time; don't try to multitask.
- Break down larger tasks into small, manageable tasks.

- Work in a quiet place without distractions.
 - Use a separate room to work.
 - Wear noise-cancelling headphones.
 - Use a white noise machine.
 - Turn off TVs, radios, email alerts and cell phones.
 - Reduce visual distractions.
- When talking with someone, face them. Make eye contact.
- Take notes in meetings and appointments to stay focused.
- Say aloud what task you are doing. (For example, "I am closing the garage door." Or, "I am turning off the coffee pot.")

Tips to Promote Brain Health

- Keep a regular sleep schedule. A lack of sleep impacts focus and attention.
- Stay hydrated.
- Eat a healthy diet (for example, Mediterranean diet, MIND diet). Always discuss dietary changes with your doctor or dietitian.
- Work with your doctor to monitor and manage chronic health conditions, blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose.
- Adults aged 18–64 should do at least 150 minutes of physical activity per week or as approved by your doctor.
- Treat mental health symptoms, such as depression or anxiety.
- Choose activities that use your thinking and social skills such as reading, volunteering, puzzles, and being with friends or family.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright © 10/2020 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#8167