

Stress and Cognition

Stress is not always easy to recognize. It does not always cause worry or depression. Stress can be too much for our bodies and brains over time. Even with no stressful events, or if you have been able to cope in the past. When this happens, you may feel like you are on “auto-pilot.” This can affect how well you pay attention, process information, and remember things.

Stress and Cognition (Thinking Skills)

Stress can affect our **memory, attention, or other thinking abilities**. There are many ways that stress and thinking skills are related. Some ways we have known about for many years, and some are still being discovered. The more we manage stress, the better our thinking skills are in the short and long-term.

Stress and the Brain

Stress is linked with changes in brain chemistry. Brain cells “talk” with each other by changing brain chemistry. Brain cells “talk” better when stress is low (with a healthy chemical balance).

Attention and memory problems are reduced when the brain is working **without** stress. A better-balanced brain is a healthier brain that ages better over the years.

How to Manage Stress

There are many ways to better manage stress to improve how well you feel and how well you think. Here are some things to talk with your healthcare provider about to see which option(s) may be best for you:

Lifestyle

A healthy body makes a healthy brain. What works for your body also helps your brain, including:

- Regular physical exercise
- Healthy diet
- Good sleep
- Limiting alcohol.
- Stopping smoking and other drugs that affect your brain chemistry
(Quit Line: <https://quitline.wisc.edu/>)

Counseling

Working with someone who is trained to help people cope with stress can lead to brain changes. Some people may choose to work with a counselor on ways to better cope with mild attention or memory problems to improve brain performance.

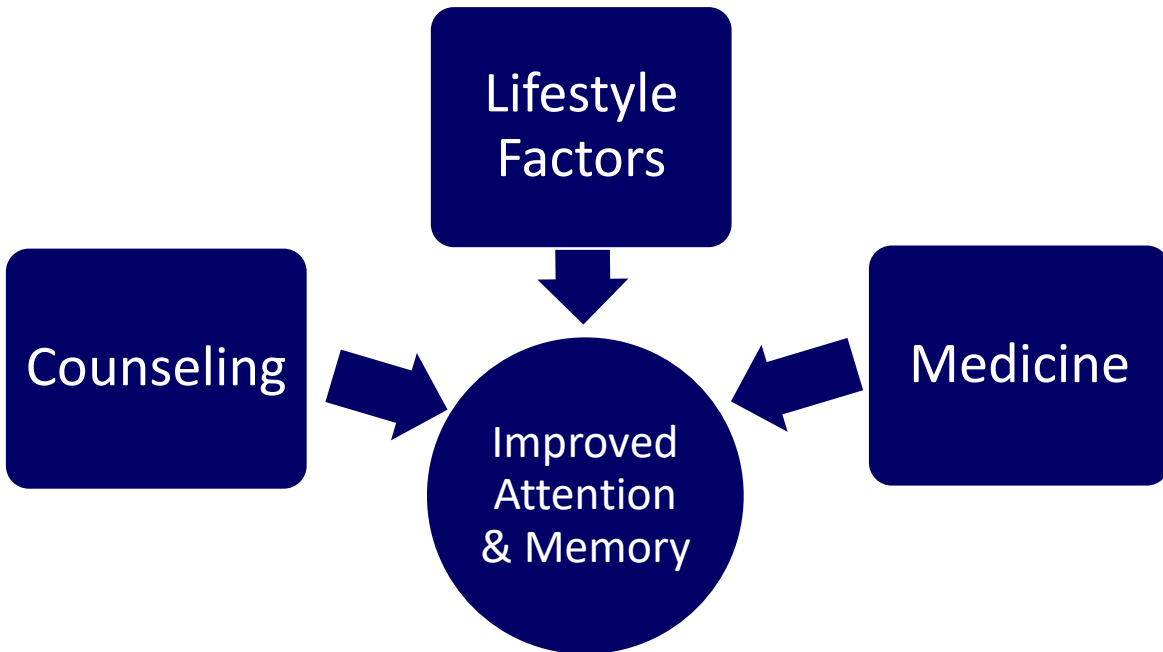
Medicine

Some people benefit from medicine that focus on brain chemical balance. Remember, brain chemicals don’t just affect mood or sleep, they affect how well brain cells “talk.” It is not uncommon when starting a medicine for mood, to notice an improvement in how you process information, focus, and remember things.

Make it work for you

Most of the time it is easier to know what we should do to improve our health than it is to stick with it and make a change.

If the plan or medicine you try first does not work, follow up with your healthcare provider about other options.

**Finding Help**

Research shows that most people who keep trying to find help will sooner or later find a way that helps them make a change or reduce symptoms.

Improved Quality of Life

There is no perfect solution. For many people feeling 60% or 80% better can lead to a better quality of life and improve thinking skills like attention or memory.

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 © 1/2022 University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HFFY#8230.