

Living Well With Cognitive Challenges: Tips and Strategies

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1



2

Cognitive Symptoms Vary From Person to Person and Can Evolve

- May include difficulties in any of the following areas:
 - Short term memory----> Longer term memory
 - Focusing attention
 - Speed of processing
 - Language- understanding and/or communicating
 - Making decisions
 - Initiating
 - Planning

3

Potential Impacts of Cognitive Changes in Day to Day Life

- Feeling less cognitively “crisp” and clear
- Feeling less confident/competent
- Feeling adrift without familiar responsibilities (at work, in the home, in the family)
- Feeling more reliant on others
- Feeling self-conscious, private, and/or withdrawn
- Feeling scared, overwhelmed, or even “lost”

4

What can be done about cognitive difficulties?



- Focus on **EMPOWERMENT** and being **PROACTIVE**
- When possible, use **STRATEGIES** and **SYSTEMS**
 - These techniques support cognitive efficiency and independence
 - Some interventions may prevent or slow functional decline over time
- Try to be consistent
- Ask partners/family members to support the approach



5

What can you do to improve attention/focus?



6

Strategies to Improve Attention and Focus



- Make sure that you can hear and see adequately!
- Minimize distractions around you
- Declutter your environment
- **Simplify and prioritize**
- Focus on one task at a time to completion- “**single minded focus**”
- Avoid multi-tasking
- Acknowledge if you are thinking about other things and redirect back to task

7

What can you do if you cannot find a word?



- Don't panic!
- Breathe, take a moment
- See if the word comes to you
- If not, use a similar word or describe what you are trying to express
- Realize that it is more important for a listener to be able to understand you than for you to find the exact word you wanted



8

How can you keep track of your belongings?

The awkward moment when you put something in a safe place so you don't lose it, then you forget where that safe place is.



your eCards
www.ecards.com

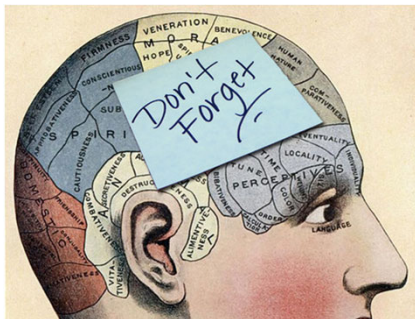
9

Strategies to Prevent Misplacing Items

- Make a consistent “home” for items like your keys, glasses, wallet/purse, hearing aids, phone
- Be **mindful** when you are doing activities
- Take a moment to locate necessary items especially at transition times (before leaving the house)
- Give yourself a verbal cue (talk to yourself) as a reminder- “I am putting this document for the doctor in my day planner”

10

How can you recall important information?



11

Strategies to Promote Memory Carryover

- Use ONE memory aid- not multiple calendars or scattered Post It notes
 - Choose the format that is most natural for you
 - Smartphone
 - Day Planner/Wall Calendar
 - Document everything there
 - Document information **immediately**
 - Make it portable so it is with you throughout the day
 - Establish a routine around checking your calendar- each morning, the night before, add “checks” during the day as needed
 - Ask your partner/family to review upcoming events/appointments with you

12

Memory Aids



13

Memory Aids



14

Memory Aid Details

• Smartphone Benefits

- Portable
- Everything is in one place
- Apps can organize information for you (Calendar, Contacts, To Do Lists)
- Backups prevent loss of information
- Schedules can be shared with other smartphone users (family)
- Alerts/alarms can be set as reminders
- Dictation can be used to add information as ideas arise

15

Memory Aid Details

• Smartphone Drawbacks

- New technology may be difficult to learn and adjust to
- You cannot see two screens simultaneously- requires “working memory” to flip back and forth
- Various applications/windows can serve as a distraction
- Some people prefer paper and pencil
- You need to remember to charge it and take it with you!

16

Memory Aid Details



17

Memory Aid Details

• Day Planner Benefits

- Many people are more comfortable with this format
- Writing information down can improve memory encoding
- Organized sections help a lot
- Three ring binders are useful for adding information (loose papers)
- Should be small enough to carry on your person but big enough to give you sufficient room to write and see your entries! (2 days per page recommended)

18

Memory Aids Cont'd

• Day Planner Drawbacks

- If it is not well organized, it can be very hard to find necessary information
- If you lose it, you lose everything!
- If you try to coordinate a day planner with a wall calendar or online schedule (Outlook calendar), information may be lost
- It can get bulky, heavy over the year

19

How to remember details from a past event or conversation?

- Try to recall the context- who were you with, where were you, what was the “big picture”?
- Refer to your memory aid to reconstruct the situation
- Ask someone else to prompt you to help you ”set up” or contextualize the memory

20

How do you try to learn new information effectively?



- Focus on that one thing to be remembered- be “mindful”
- Minimize distractions
- Write yourself notes in day planner or Smartphone
- **Try to give it meaning** for yourself
- Chunk information into smaller groups or clusters
- If you are more of a visual learner, **imagine carrying out the task** (i.e., going up and down the aisles at the supermarket)
- If you are more of a verbal learner, say it out loud and **rehearse or repeat the information** a few times

21

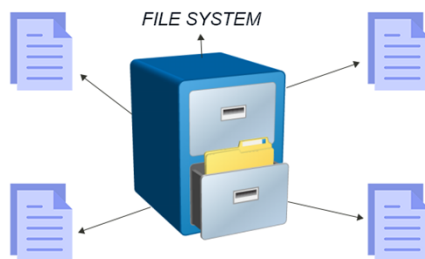
How do you improve accuracy in taking medications?



- Use a consistent system
- Pair medication administration with other routines (e.g., brushing your teeth)
- Medication boxes are helpful but may require assistance with weekly set up
- Create a checklist with medication name and administration times- post that document close to where medications are taken (e.g., bathroom mirror)
- Set electronic reminders on Smartphone or Alexa

22

How can you organize your home/paperwork better?



23

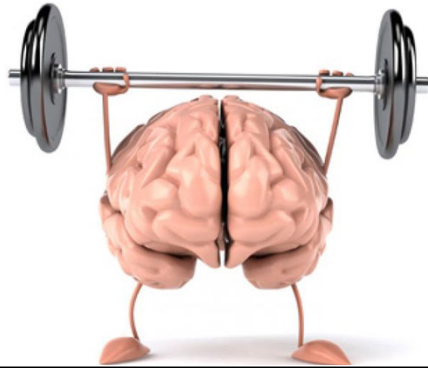
Strategies to Promote Organization



- Declutter your work space
- Establish a simple and clear system (e.g., all mail goes in one place and is reviewed/sorted on arrival)
- Simplify bills with autopay
- Create a file drawer and keep it current
- Put reminders in your Smartphone or day planner
- Go paperless when possible if you are comfortable with viewing documents online- create a folder on your desktop

24

Conclusions: Cognitive Strategies



25

Why Cognitive Strategies Are Useful for People with Milder Cognitive Impairment



- Cognitive strategies help manage/compensate for problem areas
- Single-minded attention improves focus and presence
- Systems keep us organized
- Documenting information in memory aids give us opportunities to solidify new learning and serve as a reference later when needed
- Consistency is key
- Strategies and systems make us more efficient and independent
- Recruiting loved ones to support these approaches is key

26

What other activities are beneficial for cognition?



- **Physical exercise** has a great evidence base- **move your body as much as possible!**
- Do things that **stimulate your mind**- reading/listening to audio books, doing crossword puzzles/Wordle, doing jigsaw puzzles, practicing a language, playing interactive games (bridge, cards, Rummy Cube), making art, taking an adult learning class, playing an instrument
- Pay attention to **current events** and other newsworthy information- discuss with friends/family
- Participate in **volunteer work**
- **Stay involved** in meetings or groups with your colleagues

27



28

How Do I Create a Roadmap for the Day? McLean HOSPITAL HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

- Concept of **Behavioral Activation- structured meaningful balanced activities**
- Find a good match between cognitive abilities, functional level, and personal style
- Allow For:
 - FUN
 - STIMULATION- COGNITIVE, CREATIVE, INTELLECTUAL
 - SOCIAL CONNECTION
 - PHYSICAL ACTIVITY
 - REST/DOWNTIME

29



30

Activity Roadmap Continued- For Care Partners McLean HOSPITAL HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

- ASK what they would like to spend time doing and with whom
- If that person cannot generate ideas, focus on what you know about the person
- How did they spend their time in the past? In a career? In hobbies? In social/family contexts? In creative pursuits? In a civic organization or religious community?
- Do they like to join groups or do activities one to one?
- Do they prefer to be indoors or outdoors?
- What type of physical activities would they enjoy most?
- What kinds of activities/themes do they **dislike**? Or that **trigger negative responses/behaviors**?

31

Structured Recreational Interest Surveys Can Help McLean HOSPITAL HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE

- If it's really difficult to determine what that person might like, you can use of an interest survey may generate some ideas
- Examples:
 - Leisure Interest Assessment (broad-based questions; also has photo prompts for people who are less verbal)
 - Cognitive and Leisure Activity Scale (used in Alzheimer's studies)

32

Leisure Interest Scale Sample Items



- 1. Play Football (A) _____ or Hunting (G) _____
- 2. Cooking (D) _____ or Pilates (B) _____
- 3. Hiking (G) _____ or Collecting Figurines (F) _____
- 4. Playing Cards (C) _____ or Playing an Instrument (D) _____
- 5. Karate (B) _____ or Going Shopping (E) _____
- 6. Playing Darts (C) _____ or Geocaching (G) _____

33

Leisure Interest Scale- Continued



- 7. Woodworking (D) _____ or Going to a Restaurant (E) _____
- 8. Meditation (B) _____ or Fishing (G) _____
- 9. Storytelling (D) _____ or Antique Collecting (F) _____
- 10. Car Collecting (F) _____ or Attending a Play (E) _____
- 11. Collecting Rocks (F) _____ or Getting a Massage (B) _____
- 12. Play Soccer (A) _____ or _____

34

Example of Daily Schedule- Person with Milder Cognitive Problems



- Morning routine- self-care, breakfast, coffee
- Review day's appointments/plans in memory aid
- Read the newspaper or listen to radio
- Appointment/volunteer opportunity/senior center
- Lunch
- Go out for a walk with partner, go to the gym
- Connect with family over dinner, by phone/Zoom
- Watch a favorite show
- Consistent bedtime

35

Framework for Person with Moderate Cognitive Problems



- More focused on CONSISTENCY, ROUTINE, CARE NEEDS
- Still try to maintain balance and appropriate stimulation but with fewer activities
- Try to avoid tasks and locations that are OVERSTIMULATING or PROVOKE negative responses/behaviors (i.e., crowded malls, large group meals/gatherings)
- No need to put pressure on person with cognitive problem or care partner to "do it right"
- Maintain a predictable and soothing environment
- Match tasks to person's functional level/abilities
- Limit unnecessary noise and other input (e.g., loud t.v. in background)
- Emphasize reminiscence, familiar places/people/tasks

36

Example of Daily Schedule- Person with Moderate Cognitive Problems

- Consistent wake up time
- Self care activities- with assistance- as needed
- Breakfast, coffee
- Day program- 3-4 days a week
- Or involvement in home-based activities with care partner- puzzle, listening to music, call family/friend, play game
- Lunch
- Afternoon walk in neighborhood, activity in community
- Rest/quiet time
- Dinner
- Consistent nighttime routine/bedtime

37

Conclusions: Daily Routines

- Establishing a range of activities based on interests, personal style, and cognitive level is important
- Maintaining “rhythm” to the day is regulating
- Find the appropriate level of stimulation
- Emphasize strengths, values, and connections
- Mix physical, social, self-care, recreational, “practical” activities
- Avoid provocative tasks/situations when possible
- **Focus on living well despite cognitive changes!**

38

Thank you...



39