

Living Well With Cognitive Challenges: Tips and Strategies

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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

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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- Feeling self-conscious, private, and/or withdrawn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”

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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



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What can you do to improve attention/focus?



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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

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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



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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 cards
www.yourcards.com

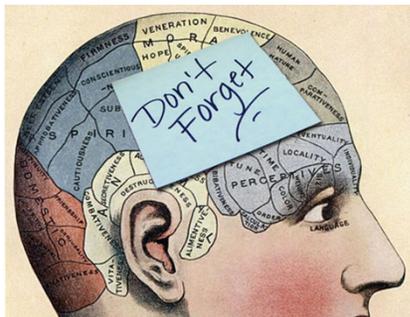
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Strategies to Prevent Misplacing Items

- 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”

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How can you recall important information?



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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

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Memory Aids




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Memory Aids




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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

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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!

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Memory Aid Details



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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)

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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

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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

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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

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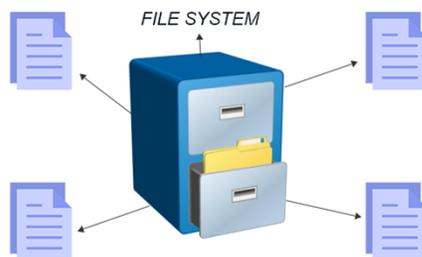
How do you improve accuracy in taking medications?



- 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

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How can you organize your home/paperwork better?



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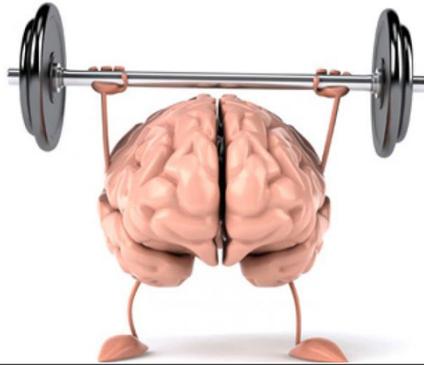
Strategies to Promote Organization



- 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

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Conclusions: Cognitive Strategies



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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

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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

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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

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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**?

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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)

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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) _____

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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 _____

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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

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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

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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

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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!**

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Thank you...



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