

Cognitive loss and how to cope
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As people age, it is common to have more episodes of being forgetful, of not remembering a name or a word, of feeling overwhelmed by plans and schedules. This can occur with having an overloaded life, medication effects, emotional disturbances and/or an actual change in the brain and how it functions.

Cognition refers to all thinking skills such as recall or remembering, problem solving, reasoning, sequencing, planning and judgment. People rely on their cognitive skills to do everyday tasks and manage relationships.

Imagine trying to plan a birthday party with all the related steps to assure that everything that is needed is there, that it is all coordinated and sequenced to happen in the right time and the right way. Several thinking skills are utilized for to accomplish the event.

Now try to imagine that getting washed, groomed and dressed feels just as complex. Imagine not being sure of what to do when and not remembering if a step already completed has truly been done. Imagine not being able to move from one step to the next. What was once simple and routine has become a major chore.

As people age, as the brain changes, and as people develop signs of dementia or Alzheimer's, there are many things that can help maximize their capabilities and cognitive functions for as long as possible.

Maximizing Cognitive Function

- ▯ Keep your physician aware of changes that are being noticed. Ignoring changes or problems will not make them go away and you may lose valuable time in treating the problem. Your physician will look at medical conditions that may be affecting your cognition, medications you are currently on and possibly prescribe medications or supplements that may slow deterioration and/or enhance current skills.
- ▯ Mental exercise is crucial! Research shows that people who routinely use their brains, keep their brain function sharper longer. Play bridge, canasta, work crossword puzzles, "play" Jeopardy or Trivial Pursuit, take classes, learn a new hobby or maintain one from your past. Keep interested in life, be active.
- ▯ Journal and/or write things down. The very act of writing is "mental exercise" but it also is a known way of helping your brain "store" information. So, if you have dinner out with friends or family, jot their names down on your calendar along with the event. Again, it's establishing a habit or pattern that will make it easier to recall information if you have a harder time in the future.
- ▯ Get in the habit of keeping appointment books, being organized with bills, being organized in general. The more routine these habits are, the easier they'll be to maintain and utilize when you really need to rely on them.
- ▯ Allow for "downtime" during your day. Rest breaks, breaks from talking or thinking are important to "recharge". Engaging in meditation, meditative walking, listening to music, etc. will release tension and help the brain to function more easily.
- ▯ Consider what can be eliminated from your day or routine to decrease stress and allow for there to be less pressure and potential frustration. This can be true for both the person with the cognitive changes as well as the family/caregivers. It is important that everyone take care of themselves and perhaps give up doing some things that aren't necessary to reduce the stress.
- ▯ Continue to build in routines as much as possible—our memory will function best with things that were learned long ago and things that are habit. But also balance this with new stimulation, doing things different at times—for everyone's sake. It's important to watch to see what the stimulation does to the person with cognitive changes. If emotional upset (anxiety, fear) occur, be careful with these changes.

- ▯ Develop photo albums with pictures from throughout a person's/family's life. Include key people in these albums, even those that are deceased. You also might want to include pictures of where someone has lived, dates they lived in certain places, jobs they had, etc.
- ▯ Have meaningful or serious conversations during the time of day that is best for the person with cognitive changes. For some that may be in the morning, although perhaps not right when they wake up. Having conversations when people are tired, hungry, frustrated, overloaded or distracted will not produce the best results.
- ▯ Most of all, have fun. Lighten the atmosphere. Watch and laugh at funny movies, sitcoms, jokes. Do the things that people enjoy and bring a smile. The brain will function better with the endorphins being released with laughter and happy thoughts!