

Maximising your thinking and memory abilities



About this handout

This handout is for anyone who is experiencing problems processing visual and spatial information due to brain illness, and for their friends and family.

It describes:

- Some of the visual processing difficulties that people can experience
- Tips and suggestions for managing these difficulties
- Ideas about how friends and family can help, including ways to avoid frustration, and maintain involvement in social and family activities
- Other sources of information and support.

Managing visual processing difficulties

Vision is an important sense that helps us to understand and navigate our world. Unfortunately, vision can be affected by a range of brain diseases. In such cases, the eyes often remain healthy. The problem may occur because the brain can no longer interpret and process the information received from the eyes. Some people may think there is a problem with their eyes and that they need new glasses. They may only start to realise there is a 'brain' problem after an optician finds their eyes and basic vision are okay.

Common brain diseases that can affect visual and spatial processing include the early stages of a progressive dementia such as Lewy Body dementia, Parkinson's disease or Alzheimer's, or in rare cases, Posterior Cortical Atrophy. Often in such cases other aspects of thinking and everyday function can remain okay for many years— it may still be possible to communicate easily (e.g., write and speak well) and to remember without difficulty.

Types of visual processing problems

The visual problems experienced may vary widely but often include some or all of the following:

• **Difficulties seeing things accurately**

This includes:

- Perceiving objects as having an unusual colour
- Experiencing increased sensitivity to bright light or shiny surfaces
- Particular difficulty seeing clearly in fading or low light conditions
- Experiencing double vision or a feeling that eyes are not completely under their control

• **Difficulty recognising objects**

In particular, there may be difficulties in:

- Recognising objects that are represented in diagrams or pictures (e.g., in a catalogue)
- Recognising objects from an unusual angle
- Recognising objects that are incomplete
- Being able to perceive more than one object at a time
- Finding objects around the room

• **Difficulty recognising faces**

- For example, problems recognising the faces of relatives, friends and TV characters

Managing visual processing difficulties

● **Problems with spatial awareness**

This includes difficulties:

- Judging distances—a person may miss when reaching out to pick something up, or struggle to go up and down stairs
- Judging speeds—A person may struggle to judge the speed of moving traffic. Stationary objects may also appear to move

● **Difficulty with reading**

This can include:

- Problems finding the next line of text when reading
- Experiencing particular words or letters moving around or become superimposed over one another
- Difficulty in reading certain types of text (e.g., large print such as newspaper headlines, handwritten notes)

Other common difficulties that can occur when someone has visual processing problems can include:

- Difficulties with handwriting, such as with spelling, or remembering the shape or name of particular letters or numbers
- Problems getting dressed. This can include choosing what to wear as well as the process of getting dressed
- Problems with sitting down on a chair, or trying to sit on the wrong seat in a car
- Problems dealing with money and small change
- Difficulties with co-ordination, leading to awkwardness when making gestures (e.g., waving) and problems using particular tools (e.g., cutlery or scissors)
- Visual hallucinations, such as seeing people or things that are not actually there, can occur for some people

Tips and suggestions for the management of visual processing difficulties

A large range of approaches and practical visual aids can be helpful in coping with visual difficulties. Some general advice for managing difficulties include:

Address safety concerns first

When you first become aware of visual processing and spatial difficulties, it is important to make sure that you are safe:

- You may no longer be safe on the road and a driving assessment may be required
- Cooking in a safe manner, particularly if you are living alone with no one to help, may become a challenge. Small adaptations may assist. It may be helpful to get some assistance from an occupational therapist
- You may need to find ways to navigate the outside environment. Friends and family can help to guide you at times or you may be able to use a walking stick

Adapt the environment

Simple changes to the environment can make enormous differences:

- Reduce clutter (e.g. pot plants, chairs or toys in corridors and open spaces)
- Wherever possible, mark the environment:
 - Place brightly coloured or raised dots on the “play” and “stop” buttons of a cassette player
 - Paint the edges of steps with high contrast paint or tape
 - Use large tactile room numbers
 - Contrast the colour of the toilet seat with the colour of the wall and floor



Ideas about how friends and family can help

- Ensure items are well-organised and stored in consistent locations
- Avoid complex clothing; for instance, use shoelaces that stretch or buy shoes without shoelaces

Practise and try new approaches to doing things – using your strengths

- Try to learn (or ask an occupational therapist to teach you) how to pour cold drinks or other tasks that require fine motor control with eyes closed (only using information from touch) in order to avoid confusing visual information
- If you are having trouble recognising faces, look for distinguishing visual features that you can recognise to identify people (e.g., by height or hair colour) or don't be afraid to ask their name
- Practise regularly used routes in the community with family and friends – use landmarks you recognise as key reference points

Aids can assist with communication and participation in community activities:

For example:

- Talking clocks and watches
- Mobile telephones with simplified displays or pre-programmable direct-dial buttons
- Talking books and audio recordings are often available on CD or online, ranging from romantic novels to biographies and technical manuals. Audio guides are also available for many cultural events including theatres and museums
- Software programs that can translate text to speech are helpful for some

- Treat people with visual processing and spatial difficulties as adults; allow and encourage independence in activities of daily living unless otherwise advised.
- Make sure that key people (family and friends) understand the nature of the visual processing and spatial difficulties, and the ways they can assist. For example, if someone is having trouble recognising faces, it may help if everyone makes sure they introduce themselves by name when they first come in contact.
- Be aware that visual and spatial difficulties are often inconsistent or hard to understand. For example, small print may be easier to read than large print – or objects that are 'just under someone's nose' are not recognised and then suddenly 'seen'. Avoid comments such as, "You saw that yesterday, so why can't you see it today?"
- Encourage normal activities (such as dinner with family or going out to sporting or cultural events). Remind family or friends to keep finding ways to keep the person experiencing difficulties involved in activities as much as possible. If requested, it may be helpful to narrate what is happening.
- Visual and spatial difficulties may be very frustrating and require a lot of adjustment for both the person with difficulties and their relatives and friends. It can also be difficult if offers of help are not forthcoming. It may be helpful to consider seeing a counsellor or attend a support group to provide support to cope and adapt.



References

Mendez, M. F., Ghajaranian, M., & Perryman, K. M. (2002). Posterior Cortical Atrophy: Clinical characteristics and differences compared to Alzheimer's disease. *Dementia and Geriatric Cognitive Disorders*, 14:33–40.

Roca, M., Gleichgerricht, E., Torralva, T. & Manes, F. (2010). Cognitive rehabilitation in posterior cortical atrophy. *Neuropsychological Rehabilitation*. First published 18 March 2010 <www.informaworld.com>.

Other sources of information and support

Alzheimer's Australia

Phone: 1800 100 500 (National dementia helpline), for interpreter service phone: 131 450

Website: www.alzheimers.org.au

Alzheimer's Australia is the peak body providing support and advocacy for the 245,400 Australians living with dementia. It provides a range of services including education, counselling and support and provision of information.

Alzheimer's Society UK

Website: www.alzheimers.org.uk

The Alzheimer's Society in the UK has a special help sheet written for people with posterior cortical atrophy.

Australian Psychological Society

Phone: 1800 333 497

Website: www.psychology.org.au

This organisation represents psychologists from across Australia. It can assist you to find a specialist neuropsychologist to conduct an assessment of your cognitive function (including visual and spatial skills). It may also be able to assist you to find a psychologist who can provide counselling and support.

Occupational Therapy Australia

Phone: +61 3 9415-2900

www.ausot.com.au

This organisation represents occupational therapists in Australia. It can help you to locate a private occupational therapist who can help devise strategies to cope at home.

Vision Australia

Phone: 1800 847464

Website: www.visionaustralia.org.au

Vision Australia provides blindness and low vision services in Australia. Its role is to assist Australians who are blind or have low vision to help maximise independence and participation in the community. It provides a range of services and education.