

Maximising your thinking and memory abilities

Adjusting to thinking and memory difficulties



About this handout

This handout is for anyone who has recently been told that they are having problems with their thinking and memory, and for their friends or relatives.

It describes:

- The news that you have memory or thinking difficulties
- Thinking and memory difficulties and day-to-day life
- How you can help yourself
- Depression and anxiety
- When you should seek help
- Some places to get information and support
- Information box: Tips for reducing stress.

Finding out that you have thinking or memory difficulties can result in a range of responses. Every person copes with the news in their own way.

For example, you may feel one or a combination of the following:

• **Unconvinced**

Some people may not have noticed that they are having any difficulties with thinking or memory. They may feel as if others are exaggerating the problem.

• **Shocked**

Some, particularly if thinking and memory abilities were always a key strength in the past, may feel shocked. They may find themselves asking “Why me?” or “What have I done to deserve this?”

• **Confusion**

What might the news mean? Some may be particularly upset or worried if a doctor has suggested that they are at an increased risk of developing dementia in the future.

• **A sense of relief**

This happens when a person has been aware of the problem for some time and is relieved to hear that they are not imagining things.

Thinking and memory difficulties in day-to-day life

Once you become aware that you do have problems with your thinking and memory, you may become increasingly aware of its impact on your life, including:

- Activities such as shopping, driving or managing finances
- Increased reliance on others and loss of independence
- Ability to follow conversations
- Relationships
- Time taken to complete work activities (e.g., writing).

You may begin to feel:

- **Embarrassed and worried** that you may ‘let yourself down’ by making a ‘stupid’ mistake in a public place.
- **Frustrated** that you can no longer do the things you used to or as easily as you used to.
- **A sense of loss:** You might be worried that you will lose your independence and no longer be consulted about what you want.

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How you can help yourself

A number of things can help you come to terms with and find the best way to manage thinking and memory difficulties. These include:

- If you are confused or worried, don't be afraid to ask your doctor more questions about your thinking and memory difficulties. It may also help to seek out useful information (e.g., recommended books).
- Learn as much as you can about the positive strategies that can be used to maximise thinking and memory abilities (e.g., using a diary). This can help to retain independence.
- Try to connect and share your concerns about thinking and memory with the people who mean most to you. Social support is very important when you are trying to adjust to thinking and memory problems:
 - To avoid any embarrassment, it may help to approach others on a one-on-one basis. If they don't fully understand it may help to give them an example of the difficulties you have been experiencing with thinking and memory in day-to-day life. You could also ask them directly for assistance or support to help manage – or to help you out by letting you know if you are making a mistake.
 - BUT, always keep in mind that you decide who you tell about your difficulties. If you are worried that someone may react negatively you do not have to tell them.

Depression and anxiety

Unfortunately, when a person is told that they have a problem with thinking or memory they may become very anxious or down in mood. This can, in turn, make thinking and memory difficulties worse for a time.

Usually, after a week or two of receiving the news, the person starts to feel a little better. These people are able to find new ways to cope with and manage their thinking and memory difficulties. They are likely to have supportive friends and family to help.

However, for some people—especially if they are single or isolated, or are experiencing a lot of stress in their lives—it is hard to cope with the news that there is a problem with thinking or memory. They may continue to feel a sense of loss for some time. They may start to pay a lot of attention to any mistakes they make. For some, it becomes a lot harder to go out and socialise with others due to embarrassment about their difficulties. A small number of people may become clinically depressed or anxious.

You may be clinically anxious or depressed if you have any of the following symptoms:

Anxiety feels like:

- Constant worrying thoughts or fears, often about things getting worse
- Physical symptoms. For instance, being very aware of our hearts beating, tension and pains in our muscles, being unable to relax, sweating or breathing too fast.

Depression feels like:

- Feelings of unhappiness that don't go away (after two weeks), and are there nearly all the time
- Losing interest in life and being unable to enjoy things
- Losing self-confidence and feeling useless, inadequate or hopeless
- Feeling irritable and moody
- Thinking of suicide – this is common in depression. It is much better to talk about it than to try to hide it
- Physical symptoms. For instance, feeling very tired, eating too much or not enough, difficulty in sleeping and waking up earlier than usual, problems with sexual function or drinking too much alcohol, smoking, or misusing drugs.

When you should seek help

It is important to realise that there are effective treatments for depression and anxiety. An improvement in your mood may in turn help with your thinking and memory abilities.

You should seek help if you:

- Experience one or more of the symptoms of depression and anxiety and don't seem to be getting any better over time (that is, if it continues for more than two weeks)
- Lose interest in your usual social and community activities
- Feel very isolated and find it difficult to talk to friends or family about your thinking and memory difficulties.

There are several different types of professionals who may be able to help you. These include your family doctor (GP), trained counsellors, psychotherapists, clinical psychologists, and psychiatrists. Any treatment suggested will depend on your symptoms, the severity of your anxiety and depression, and your circumstances. It may involve talking, antidepressant tablets or both.



Tips for reducing stress

Don't set expectations of yourself that are too high

- Remember that stress and anxiety associated with unrealistic expectations can worsen problems with thinking and memory.
- Try not to worry about your mistakes. Sometimes it is better to 'let go' rather than to spend too much energy feeling worried and frustrated.

Learn to take time out and use relaxation techniques and meditation

- This may be as simple as making sure you take some time out of your day to relax and think. For example, spend time in a garden.
- It may also help to learn deep breathing, meditation or progressive muscle relaxation from a health professional such as a psychologist.

Take care of yourself

- Get regular exercise, eat healthy food and maintain a healthy weight.

Participate in social and community activities

- This may include your local senior citizens' club, bowls or golf activities, exercise or dance class.
- Social activity and a sense of giving to your community increases self-esteem and may reduce stress.

Try to stay focused on positive things

- Avoid negative thoughts such as "I can't do that because my memory is so poor"; instead, focus on the things you can do and things you value in life.
- Try to find ways to deal with your thinking and memory difficulties instead of allowing yourself to feel helpless.
- Try to do more things that you enjoy (socialising, walking on the beach etc.) and fewer of the things you don't.
- Remember the techniques that you have used to cope with difficulties in the past and try to use them again.





Further information and support

Dementia Australia

(www.dementia.org.au) provides support for people who have been diagnosed with dementia. They have also developed a set of information materials called “Your Brain Matters” designed to inform all Australians about ways to reduce their risk of developing dementia. They also run support groups and information evenings for people with mild thinking and memory difficulties (without a diagnosis of dementia).

Australian Psychological Society

(www.psychology.org.au) has developed some resources about coping with depression and anxiety. You can also find a psychologist by using their website.

Beyondblue

(www.beyondblue.org.au, phone: 1300 22 46 36) provides a range of support services and information for people suffering from depression, anxiety and related disorders, including older adults. It also provides information about how to locate psychiatrists or other mental health practitioners such as psychologists to provide support.

Lifeline

(phone: 131114) 24-hour counselling, information and referral.

Mindspot - “Wellbeing Plus”

(www.mindspot.org.au) is an online program for stress, worry, anxiety and depression in adults aged 60 and above.

Moodgym

(www.moodgym.com.au) is an interactive web-based program designed to prevent depression and anxiety. Moodgym was developed by The Centre for Mental Health Research at The Australian National University.

My Aged Care

(www.myagedcare.gov.au; phone: 1800 200 422) is a starting point to access all Australian Government-funded aged care services. The phone line and website can help older Australians, their families and carers to get the help and support they need.

National Ageing Research Institute

(www.nari.net.au) conducts research into ageing and aged care services to try to improve the health and quality of life of older adults. You can volunteer to be part of research studies.