



Dealing with changes in your thinking skills: some tips and strategies

Information for patients and their carers from the Kent Clinical Neuropsychology Service

It is very common for you to experience changes in your thinking skills (also known as 'cognitive skills') when you have a brain injury or other neurological condition. We understand that this can be distressing and even frightening at times. Difficulties such as remembering new information or organizing tasks can, in the longer term, also affect your confidence and mood.

In nearly every case, the people we see tell us that they find it more difficult to process information as well as they once did. At the heart of this is usually a problem with overriding distractions (such as focussing on the person who is speaking to you whilst blocking out the voices of others). Because of this, it often takes a great deal more energy to carry out tasks that need concentration or problem-solving.

We always recommend that people get into the habit of using 'compensatory strategies'. These will help you to keep up your energy levels and continue with your daily tasks without feeling too tired. When individuals try to override their difficulties, it can make them more fatigued. Fatigue (tiredness) is a common problem and can, in itself make thinking even harder (we all make more mistakes when we are tired).



Baring all this in mind we have put together a few tips and strategies that you may find useful when dealing with the changes you are experiencing with your thinking skills. The following is just advice and it is your decision as to whether you try any of it.



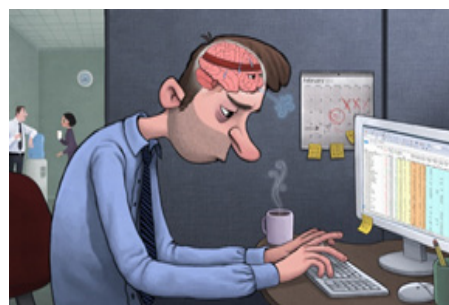
If you have any concerns or would like to discuss any points raised in this leaflet further please speak to your neuropsychologist or neuro occupational therapist.

How can I create coping strategies?

Awareness of your strengths and limitations, and the impact of other factors is a necessary first step in learning how to deal with your cognitive difficulties.

Fatigue (tiredness)

- As mentioned, fatigue can cause problems with people's thinking skills. Indeed, it has such a powerful effect that you may worry that your cognition is getting worse. Becoming aware of your fatigue levels and the links between dips in your thinking abilities and tiredness is therefore really important.
- If you have a brain injury or other neurological condition, you may notice that your concentration and alertness levels go up and down. With this in mind, it can be helpful to keep a diary of any mistakes that you make so that you can get a sense of the times of day when you are feeling at your best.
- You may wish to plan to complete tasks such as paperwork during these times and avoid the times when you know that you will be more fatigued. This is your 'window of opportunity' for cognitive work. Be kind to yourself and recognise that you may feel overwhelmed or out of control if you attempt these tasks at other times.
- Your 'cognitive reserve' (the length of time during which you can engage in tasks that need significant cognitive effort, such as benefits' forms or tax returns) may be reduced following a diagnosis of a brain injury or other neurological condition. You may find that you work much better if you take regular breaks (every 10 minutes or so) whilst working on tasks that need a high level of concentration.



Be kind to yourself

- A diary can help show how your thinking difficulties are affecting your mood. You may notice that you are more likely to feel frustrated when you are fatigued or when cognitive demands are being placed upon you. In this way, a dip in your mood or an increase in your frustration may show that the cognitive demands that are being placed upon you at that time are too high.
- If you find it difficult to stay focussed whilst reading, try to reduce the length of time that you read. You may also want to try audio books. These can easily be rewound in 30 second chunks, meaning that you can quickly address lapses in concentration.

- Try to prioritise sleep and rest as much as possible. Try to cut back on caffeinated drinks such as coffee and fizzy drinks, and have a cut off in the day when you stop drinking these (for example no caffeine after 6pm). Try to avoid carrying out cognitively stimulating activities in the late evening such as computer work. You need to allow your brain to rest at least two hours before you go to sleep, in order to get a good night's sleep.
- The importance of rest cannot be overstated. Mental fatigue is commonly experienced by people who have had a brain injury or neurological condition. It reflects, at least in part, the additional concentration and effort needed to compensate for cognitive difficulties. Many people try to fight their fatigue because they may believe that the brain is a muscle that needs to be worked to improve. Unfortunately the opposite is true and working when very fatigued leads to an increased number of mistakes/failures. The end result of this is that it can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and depression.



“Some individuals continue to struggle to complete tasks to the point of exhaustion and then ‘crash,’ resulting in recurrent periods of high effort followed by negative consequences of severe fatigue” (Jackson, 2014).

- If possible, schedule in time for a regular afternoon rest of at least 30 minutes. This should help you to ‘recharge your batteries’ and feel more focussed and alert.

Pain

- Many people tell us that pain can interfere with and undermine their thinking skills. Effective pain management is therefore very important.
- We also know that thinking skills can be affected by the side effects of some pain medications; indeed you may find that your thinking skills improve as the side effects of your medication wears off. It may be helpful to factor this in when you plan to complete new or difficult tasks.

External memory aids

- Many people use reminders programmed into the calendars on their smartphone to remember important events. People tend to remember to take their mobile telephone with them above other items and so this can be a very effective compensatory strategy. Online calendars can also be accessed by your computer.
- Reminders can be used to address the common problem of ‘prospective memory’ errors (forgetting to complete a task or remember a planned future event). In everyday life, people may remember that they need to go shopping but forget what it was that they needed as soon as they enter the supermarket. Reminders can be useful for these situations. Online supermarket shopping (with the option of accessing previous orders or ‘favourites’) is of course another option!
- Many smartphones also have a voice recorder option. This can be helpful for recording reminders throughout the day. If you do not have a smartphone then a small dictaphone can be used instead.

- Diaries and calendars/wall planners are a useful alternative to a smartphone.
- Try using post it notes to remind yourself of important tasks, such as locking the doors before you leave the house.
- If you find it difficult to remember the details of telephone conversations, try taking notes. Many smart-phones now come with personal assistants, with a bit of practice, you can use this function to address many common memory failures, such as forgetting where you have parked your car. Smartphone manufacturers have downloaded helpful videos explaining how you can use different aspects of the personal assistant.



- You may also find it useful to use a notes-app on your mobile phone to plan the steps needed for certain tasks before beginning them. This may be particularly useful for tasks at work where you may suddenly find yourself unable to recall a key process or sequence. Your colleagues at work may be able to help you to develop a series of templates with step by step instructions that you can refer to in the event that you become distracted.
- Try keeping important items that you need to take with you every time that you leave the house, such as your keys and wallet/ purse, in a designated place.
- In the event that you find it difficult to write quickly, there are now apps that will record your telephone conversations, allowing you to review them at a later date. However, you must let others know that you record your calls (that is the law). Some recording apps automatically tell the caller in advance that the telephone call will be recorded.
- There are also cloud-based systems that can record telephone calls and also transcribe them directly to text. There would however be a cost for this software.
- External cues or prompts have been shown to be helpful to draw people's attention back to a task. If you notice that you can get distracted or switch off, then try setting an egg timer, stop watch, or an alert on your mobile telephone.

Internal memory aids

- When writing shopping lists, try 'chunking' items based on their location in the shop. For example, write down all of the cleaning products together and all of the vegetables together.
- Some people find that using visual imagery or a phrase can help them to remember new people's names for example 'Mr Hogg has a dog'. You may need to repeat the phrase whilst thinking of an image of a dog.
- It is also worth trying the 'PQRST' method to remember information about news (newspaper or online):
 - P: Preview - read again and get an overview of what the story is about.
 - Q: Question - who, what, when, where, why.
 - R: Read - read through it again.
 - S: State - answer your questions (write answers).
 - T: Test - test yourself to see if you remember the answers to your questions.

Managing your environment

- Many appliances, such as electric hobs and irons, now come with an automatic mechanism to shut off power. This may give you peace of mind and help to reduce any worries that you may feel about your memory abilities.

People around you

- It is really important that people close to you are aware of your thinking difficulties. It is also helpful if they are aware of the factors that can make these worse (such as pain, fatigue, low mood, cognitive demands).
- Of course, at the same time, they also need to be aware of the factors that lead to an improvement in your cognition (such as rest, the ability to pace yourself sensibly, and trying to do one task at a time).
- If people are not aware of your difficulties then they may make unhelpful assumptions. For example, if you switch off or become distracted during a conversation, others may assume that you are not interested in what they have to say.
- If you experience difficulties finding the right word or recalling the names of people or objects, you might find that people jump in and try to help you. This can be frustrating, particularly if you would have remembered the information yourself, given more time. It may be worthwhile having a conversation with those close to you about how you would like to be supported.
- Some people might agree that those close to them can provide them with cognitive support such as first letter cues, multiple choice options, such as “are you referring to x, y or z”? or other prompts to help them to remember information. Again, it will be important to have an open discussion with others about this to make sure that you are happy with any strategy that is used.
- Once others understand the nature of your difficulties, then you may find that they are better able to recognise and predict when you might be struggling. Consequently, they are then better equipped to support you by, for example, repeating information or writing it down for you.
- With the above in mind, it may be helpful to share this information leaflet with others and your weekly thinking skills diary with others.



Further support

- **Headway**, the brain Injury charity, produces lots of useful information booklets free of charge
Web: www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/information-library/
- The **Multiple Sclerosis Society** have an excellent website which features lots of useful tips
Web: www.stayingsmart.org.uk/
- The **Parkinson's Society**
Web: www.parkinson.org/Understanding-Parkinsons/Symptoms/Non-Movement-Symptoms/Cognitive-Changes

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This leaflet has been produced with and for patients

If you would like this information in **another language, audio, Braille, Easy Read, or large print** please ask a member of staff.

Any complaints, comments, concerns, or compliments please speak to your doctor or nurse, or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) on 01227 783145 or 01227 864314, or email ekh-tr.pals@nhs.net

Further patient leaflets are available via the East Kent Hospitals web site www.ekhufft.nhs.uk/patientinformation