

# Attention and memory

This Help Sheet describes the attention and memory changes that are often experienced by people with younger onset dementia. It also provides suggested strategies to compensate for difficulties in these areas.

One of the most common symptoms of dementia is memory loss. Memory relies on a number of different processes including learning new information, storing that information in the brain and then retrieving it when needed; any or all of which can be affected by dementia. For example, some people may still be able to learn things but have trouble recalling them later, while others may have more difficulty in learning new information.

Another function that is often impaired with younger onset dementia is attention. That is, the ability to focus on specific tasks and maintain concentration. Although functionally separate from memory, problems with attention can also impact on a person's ability to learn or recall information.

Some of the tips below may help a person with younger onset dementia improve attention and memory or to compensate for changes they experience. It is important to remember that every person is unique and that there will be differences between how effective different strategies are, depending on the type of dementia the person has and the progression of the dementia. Note that some people with younger onset dementia may not be able to learn or retain any new information due to the way that dementia impacts on their brain and memory.

## Learning new information and improving memory

### Tips for people with younger onset dementia to improve attention

- Don't try to fit too much into the day and take regular breaks.
- Keep distractions to a minimum. For example, turn off the TV or radio when reading or talking.
- Break large tasks down into smaller more manageable tasks and work through each separately.

- Have a set time each day to do specific tasks. For example, return phone calls in the early afternoon.
- If possible, try to avoid putting time pressures on tasks and allow plenty of time to tackle lengthy or more complex tasks.
- Eat well and exercise regularly. This can help in maintaining attention during the day as well as helping with sleep at night.

### Tips for people with younger onset dementia to improve and assist memory

- Simplify information that needs to be learned— both verbal and written. Use familiar, simple language, and keep it brief.
- Link information to something you already know. For example, a person's name might be better recalled if it is associated with that of a relative such as "Alan, dad's brother".
- Group information that needs to be remembered, for example try putting items for a shopping list into groups such as vegetables, dairy products, stationary, etc.
- Use visual cues around the home or in the community. For example, to help remember where the car is parked, take note of a nearby landmark such as a shop or a coloured sign. If you have a camera phone, take photos of important cues or locations, such as the car park level.
- Research has shown that information storage (whether spoken or written words, instructions, or new behaviours or actions) can be improved by repeating the new information at intervals after it has been learned.
- Place things that need to be remembered (task lists, medications, pet food, etc) in a prominent place where you are likely to see them.

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- One way to improve storage of information is to repeat information at increasing intervals. For example, repeat the information as soon as it is seen, heard or demonstrated, and then repeat again after a short delay, and again after a slightly longer delay. Continue this process at gradually increased intervals.
- Try to learn new information in more than one way. For example, when trying to remember a person's name, it might be useful to repeat the name verbally, write it down and picture the person's face in different places. Or when trying to learn where something is kept, it can be useful to walk to, or reach for, the location numerous times (learning physical actions can sometimes be easier than learning through language and words for people with dementia)
- Set reminders. This can be done using a diary, alarm, calendar or phone/tablet application. Prompts can be especially useful for regular needs such as when to take medication. Using prompts and devices with large clear print can also be helpful.
- Write a daily checklist and cross items off as they are completed.
- Create a 'memory corner' where important items can be located in an organised manner. Labelled or colour coded boxes or trays may be useful. For example, in this spot there could be a box or hook for keys, a tray for a diary, a tray for phone number lists, a message section and to-do list on a white board and so on.

## Tips for families and carers

- Provide verbal information to the person in small simple steps.
- Try gentle prompts when the person's focus strays from a task or conversation.
- When providing information, check that it has been understood by asking the person to repeat it back to you, or ask them to re-tell it in their own words.
- When assisting the person with dementia to learn or remember something new, use the rule of 'little and often'. Generally, it is better to work at remembering one or two new things that can be repeated several times a day, rather than a number of things in one session.
- Provide cues. For example, provide the first letter of a name or word to help the person recall the whole name or word (but only after the person with younger onset dementia has made an attempt).
- Recall can be assisted by using rhymes, songs or by association, visualisation, or categorisation. Later, you may be able to prompt the person with just the beginning of the rhyme, a tune or the associated idea, image, or category.
- Try not to get frustrated if the person with younger onset dementia is finding it difficult to learn and retain new information. People will vary greatly in how much new information they are able to learn or retain.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling. Contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**, or visit our website at **dementia.org.au**



For language assistance phone the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**