

About you: Changes to attention and memory

This help sheet describes the attention and memory changes often experienced by people living with dementia. It also suggests ways to maintain or improve memory and attention skills.

Memory loss is one of the most common symptoms of dementia. Memory relies on different processes, including:

- learning new information
- storing information in the brain
- retrieving information when needed.

Any or all of these processes can be affected by dementia. For example, some people may still be able to learn things, but have trouble recalling them later. Other people may have more difficulty in learning new information.

Dementia often affects someone's ability to focus on specific tasks and maintain concentration. Problems with attention can also impact on your ability to learn or recall information.

Some of the following tips may help improve your attention and memory, or make up for changes you experience.

Every person is unique and there will be differences in how dementia affects your memory and attention skills.

Tips to improve attention

- Don't try to fit too much into the day and take regular breaks.
- Keep distractions to a minimum (such as turning off the television or radio when reading or talking).
- Break down large tasks into smaller, more manageable tasks and work through each one separately.
- Do specific tasks at a set time each day (such as choosing a time to return phone calls).

- If possible, try to avoid putting time pressures on tasks.
- Allow plenty of time to tackle large or more complex tasks.
- Eat well and exercise regularly, which can help with maintaining attention during the day and sleeping at night.

Tips to improve and assist memory

- Engage in activities that keep your heart, body and mind active, to look after your brain and improve your wellbeing.
- Link information to something or someone you know. A name might be easier to recall if it is associated with another person you know, such as “Alan, my uncle”.
- Place things you need to remember (such as task lists, medications or pet food) in a prominent place where you are likely to see them.
- Group the same kinds of things together. For example, in a shopping list, group similar items such as vegetables, dairy items or cleaning products.
- Set reminders for regular activities (such as taking medications) by using a diary, alarm, calendar or a reminder app on a phone or tablet. It can be helpful to use prompts and devices with large, clear print.
- Write a daily ‘to do’ list and cross off items as they are done.
- Make a special place to locate important items. You might organise items using colour-coded boxes, a hook or box for keys, storage trays for a diary or phone number lists, an area for messages or a whiteboard.
- Use visual cues around the home or in the community. To recall where the car is parked, take note of a nearby landmark such as a shop or a coloured sign, or use the camera on your phone to take a photo of it. Or use the phone to photograph important information, such as the level of a car park.

Tips to learn information

- Try learning information in more than one way. For example, when trying to remember someone’s name, you could write it down, then say their name out loud.

- When learning where something is kept, try walking to (or reaching for) the location several times. Sometimes learning physical actions can be easier than learning through words.
- Simplify written and spoken information that needs to be learned. Use familiar, simple language and keep it brief.
- To assist memory, repeat new information (such as actions, instructions, spoken or written words) as soon as you have learned it. Repeat new information again at intervals throughout the day.

Tips for families and carers

- Be encouraging and patient.
- When giving spoken instructions to a person with dementia, use short, simple steps.
- Try gentle prompts when the person's focus moves from a task or conversation.
- When providing information, check that the person has understood by asking them to repeat it back to you, or ask them to retell it in their own words.
- When assisting someone with dementia to learn or remember something new, try one or two new things that can be repeated several times a day, rather than several things in one session.
- Provide cues. When the person has tried but been unable to recall something, give them the first letter to help them recall a whole word, or a word to recall a whole name.
- Recall can be assisted in several ways. You can use rhymes or songs, association, visualisation, or you can try categorising it. 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 is finding it difficult to learn and retain new information. People will vary in how much new information they are able to learn or retain, and this can change each day.

Additional reading and resources

- Dementia Australia library service
Visit: dementia.org.au/library
- Dementia Australia support
Visit: dementia.org.au/support
- Dementia Australia education
Visit: dementia.org.au/education

Further information

Dementia Australia offers support, information, education and counselling.

National Dementia Helpline: 1800 100 500

For language assistance: 131 450

Visit our website: dementia.org.au