



Memory Problems and Tips

Short-term memory loss is very common after a brain injury – thankfully there are plenty of coping strategies available.

Typical situations include forgetting people's names, losing a train of thought, getting lost at the shops, repeating or forgetting past conversations, misplacing objects and difficulty learning new skills.

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Short-term memory loss

Memory problems can occur with most brain disorders. However they are particularly common with traumatic brain injury (TBI). Trauma increases the chance of bony protrusions inside the skull causing damage to parts of the brain responsible for memory. Sadly there are no cures available for memory loss, but there are many ways of coping and making life easier. It is important to remember that using the strategies described here is not 'cheating' and will in no way prevent natural recovery or cause existing skills to be lost.

Lifestyle changes to improve memory

As with any cognitive issue, memory works better when people:

- avoid fatigue from pushing themselves too hard
- sleep well
- manage stress and anxiety
- avoid alcohol, eat a healthy diet and exercise regularly.

Memory tips to improve general well-being

Manage emotions and well-being

Memory is very important in giving us a sense of identity. Memory problems often have major emotional effects, including feelings of loss, anger and increased levels of depression and anxiety.

Some approaches to dealing with this include:

- sharing your feelings with others who can provide relief and reassurance. (Contact Synapse to speak about support groups in your area).
- identifying activities you find enjoyable and relaxing - such as listening to music or exercising, and take the time to take part in them
- following strategies outlined below – they can provide a measure of control which can relieve anxiety and depression.

Adapt the environment

One of the simplest ways to help people with memory problems is to adapt their environment so they rely less on memory. Some ideas for doing so which have helped others are:

- keep a notepad by the phone to make a note of phone calls and messages
- put essential information on a noticeboard
- decide on a special place to keep important objects like keys, wallets or glasses and always put them back in the same place
- attach important items to yourself so they can't be mislaid e.g. using a neck cord for reading glasses
- label cupboards and storage vessels as a reminder of where things are kept
- label perishable food with the date it was opened
- paint the toilet door as a distinctive colour so it is easier to find
- label doors as a reminder of which room is which.



Adopt short-term memory strategies

There are several strategies a person with brain injury can use to help overcome short-term memory loss:

- reduce distractions - an inability to pay attention makes memory problems worse
- learn in small, repeated chunks – it is easier to remember information when broken down into repetitive and manageable amounts
- people can remind themselves to 'pay attention' at times when they need to focus
- use mnemonics – techniques used to memorise information through acronyms, short poems, stories, images or memorable phrases. A typical example is the acronym KISS for 'keep it simple, stupid'.

Use external memory aids

External memory aids are extremely effective strategies to compensate for memory loss and include:

- a diary for storing and planning
- notebooks of all sizes for various places
- lists, wall charts and calendars
- alarm clock, wristwatch alarm and timers on mobile phones
- calendar or wall chart
- voice recorder
- electronic organisers and smart devices
- pill reminder box for medication
- sticky-backed notes
- a memory book for big events, personal experiences and names
- cameras
- photo albums

It is important to realise that not everyone will benefit in the same way from the same aids after brain injury. Experimenting with different aids is the best way to find out which are the most effective.

Follow a set routine

Having a daily and weekly routine means that people with memory problems can get used to what to expect, which helps to reduce the demands on memory. Changes in routine are often necessary, but can be confusing. It is a good idea for family and carers to explain any changes in routine carefully and prepare the person with memory problems well in advance, giving plenty of spoken and written reminders.

Try the following reminder strategies in order to establish routines:

- make a note of regular activities in a diary or on a calendar
- make a chart of regular events, perhaps using pictures or photographs, on a notice board.