

# Cognitive Strategies for Clients



**MINDSOURCE**  
BRAIN INJURY NETWORK





**Memory Problems**



**Delayed Processing**



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# Memory Problems

Memory is your brain's storage of what you have learned and experienced. It allows you to remember and deal with situations as they happen. Memory impairment is when you have difficulties with parts of that memory system. For example, a memory impairment makes it hard to learn new information or to remember old information when you need it. Some people with memory impairment find themselves losing important items, forgetting what people tell them or what they have read, losing track of time, forgetting what they did or learned recently, and forgetting appointments or meetings. If you notice any of these problems, using and practicing the following suggestions can be helpful:

1. Keep important items (e.g., keys, wallet, papers) in one designated location to establish a routine.
2. When you are given important things to remember, try documenting them in multiple forms. For example, when making an appointment, write it down in a notebook and also on your calendar.
3. If you find yourself forgetting things you have read, try creating mental pictures of the material you read as you go. The more imagination you use while you read, the likelier you are to remember what you are reading.
4. If you struggle to keep track of time, try setting reminders for yourself. You can do this by setting alarms on electronic devices to keep yourself on track.
5. Be patient with yourself. Consider keeping a journal. At the end of each day, write down what you accomplished and what you would like to accomplish the next day. Set an alarm to remind yourself to record information in your journal.
6. If you have difficulty learning new information, try training your attention. Things such as learning a new skill or language may improve working memory.
7. If you find yourself missing important information about meetings, there are several different tools that can help you remember. For example, you can use a calendar, a daily log or diary, schedules, or steps to complete tasks.
8. Consider scheduling regular appointments that fall on the same day and time of each week if possible.
9. Getting proper sleep can help with memory. Refer to the sleep checklist handout.



## Delayed Processing

Delayed processing is your brain's decreased ability to quickly make sense of information like words and information you get from sights and sounds. Delayed processing can cause you to have trouble following conversations, take too long to respond, or remember only one or two steps when following directions. To others, you may appear spacey, mentally foggy or sluggish. If any of these sound like you, using and practicing the following tips can be helpful:

1. Delayed processing makes you more vulnerable to distractions. Distractions can be related to either visual or noise. Ask for meetings to be held in places away from distractions.
2. You may sometimes notice that it takes you extra time to figure out what someone is trying to tell you. Where possible, ask for extra time in groups or classes.
3. To help you follow directions with a lot of steps, ask the person speaking to pause so you can write down each step. This will relieve you from having to multitask during the meeting.
4. Physical activity increases activity in the areas of your brain where processing happens. Make sure to make exercise part of your day and, if possible, walk during meetings.
5. Poor sleep can cause make slow processing worse. You can review the attached sleep checklist to see how you're sleeping and help support better sleep habits.



## Attention Problems

There are different kinds of attention. One kind allows you to think about one thing for a short period of time, another type helps you ignore distractions and another type allows you to shift your attention from one thing to another. People with attention problems have a hard time staying focused during meetings, may get off-topic during conversations, and may have trouble remembering important details. Having trouble finishing tasks, especially when it is noisy or you are distracted, is a common problem. Using and practicing the following suggestions can be helpful:

1. Recording information can be helpful. To help you remember important details, you can take notes or record voice messages after important meetings.
2. To help you complete tasks, break them into small steps, create a list and work on only one step at a time.
3. Distracting places can make these problems worse (for example, spaces that are noisy, full of clutter, have busy views, or frequent interruptions). As much as possible, work in quiet, non-distracting places.
4. When possible, wear earphones to drown out excess noise.
5. To help you remember meetings or important dates, use the calendar or reminders on your phone/watch/computer or use a regular paper planner or calendar.
6. During important meetings, take a minute to repeat or summarize important points to help you remember.
7. Attention can get worse as the day goes on. When possible, try to schedule important appointments earlier in the day.
8. Attention can get worse if you don't sleep well. Using the attached sleep guide to help you practice better sleep habits.



# Inhibition Problems/Impulsivity

Impulsivity is when you find it hard to think before you act or say something. You might notice yourself cutting someone off before they finish talking or doing the first thing that comes to mind. You may also find it hard to control your emotions and show them in a way that others will understand. Even though these behaviors are not on purpose, it can be frustrating if you find yourself getting in trouble for your actions. Using and practicing the following suggestions can be helpful:

1. Stop → Think → Act! When you notice yourself acting on the first thing that pops into your mind, STOP and count to 3 while you think about the possible outcomes of what you are about to do before you do it.



2. Breathing techniques can help you relax when you are feeling out-of-control. A simple exercise that you can do is focus on your breathing for 60 seconds. Breathe in through your nose, hold your breath for 6 seconds, and then breathe out through your mouth.
3. Wait until others have finished talking before sharing your thought. If you find yourself disrupting conversations, try silently repeating the question(s) to yourself before offering an answer. This can help you avoid cutting others off when they are speaking.
4. If you find it hard to stay focused in any setting, physical or mental breaks can help. For example, try going for a short walk to take a break and refocus.
5. When working with others in a group setting, bring a notepad with you to write down your thoughts as they pop into your head. This can help avoid any interruptions that may have been caused by speaking out of turn.
6. Write down step-by-step instructions or create a checklist to help yourself complete tasks or instructions.
7. Poor sleep can contribute to impulsivity. You can review the attached sleep checklist to help promote better sleep habits.



## Physical and Sensorimotor

Physical and sensorimotor problems can include pain, blurred vision, difficulty hearing, and light or noise sensitivity. In day-to-day life, you may experience dizziness, headaches, difficulty reading, and difficulty concentrating. These problems can impact your performance and mood and can also disrupt sleep, resulting in daytime sleepiness. Some people describe this as cognitive overload. Using and practicing the following suggestions can be helpful:

1. Notice what aggravates your symptoms by keeping a journal of daily activity, substance use, diet, or sleep. With that information, you can more easily make changes to help lower your symptoms. Try not to use substances like caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco as they can make headaches, light sensitivity and pain worse.
2. Mindfulness has been shown to help pain as well as light and noise sensitivity. A common exercise is to place one hand on your stomach and then inhale slowly through your nose to the count of four. Feel your stomach expand with your breath. After the count of four, exhale through your mouth slowly to the count of four. Feel your stomach deflate with the release of your breath. Repeat this cycle three times.
3. Schedule 5-10-minute breaks after a difficult or mentally taxing task and minimize daytime naps to 20-30 minutes.
4. Engage in daily exercise to promote a more regular sleep cycle and make it easier to navigate daily tasks.
5. Advocate for yourself everywhere possible. Ask for large print options, for breaks, or to dim the lights or to close doors during meetings.
6. To maximize your field of view, sit at the front of the room during meetings or in group settings.
7. Poor sleep is the most important contributor to dizziness, headaches, difficulty reading, difficulty concentrating, and daytime sleepiness. Make the most of your sleep by using the attached sleep checklist materials.



## Language Problems

People with language problems can have a hard time knowing what others are saying and they can struggle to put their own thoughts into words. They may also have a hard time with reading. These problems can make you feel nervous to talk to people, can make it hard to do work, and can make you to feel alone. Practicing and using the following tips can be helpful:

1. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Ask people to speak slower, repeat what they said, or to ask their question in a different way if you don't understand them.
2. You may find it helpful to write down important points or tasks. You can also use a voice recorder.
3. To best follow what you are reading, try to read in places with no distractions. Read sentences aloud to yourself and use a bookmark or finger when reading a sentence to focus on one line at a time and not lose your place.
4. Try using paper notes or electronic devices (e.g., cell phones, computers, tablets) to communicate your ideas if it is hard to say things out loud.
5. Poor sleep can make language problems worse. You can review the attached sleep checklist to learn better sleep habits.

Compiled by S. Amos, A. Farquharson, & C. Lockhart March 11, 2019





## Organization Problems

Organization is the ability to use your time, energy or resources in a helpful way to finish goals or tasks. People who have a hard time with organization notice they have problems keeping a schedule, prioritizing, starting tasks, switching from one activity to another, or keeping up with time-sensitive tasks (for example, paying bills, completing paperwork, etc.). Using and practicing the following tips can be helpful:

1. To help master your schedule, you can use a notebook, planner, or digital calendar and reminder app on your phone or watch. Review weekly and monthly schedules frequently.
2. If you have trouble prioritizing duties, use a system of organization. For example, highlight important events, bill due dates, and other deadlines.
3. If you have a hard time remembering important activities or appointments, set up a routine by asking that your regular appointments be scheduled on the same day and at the same time when possible.
4. To help yourself switch between tasks, set a timer or use a watch to alert yourself when to wrap up what you're doing, and when to get ready for your next task.<sup>2</sup>
5. If you have a hard time finishing projects on time or correctly, break them down into smaller, simple tasks and cross off each step as it is completed.
6. Poor sleep can add to organizational problems. You can review the attached sleep to help improve sleep habits.

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## Mental Inflexibility

Mental flexibility is the ability to quickly respond to changes around you. If you have poor mental flexibility, you will have trouble thinking about multiple ideas at once or switching between thoughts. You may have difficulty deciding what to do when faced with a new problem, changing your mind, learning new ways of doing things, or understanding why somebody else acts differently. In many settings, this may present as being stubborn, uncooperative, or unwilling to change. Using and practicing the following suggestions can be helpful:

1. When planning your schedule, leave extra time before a due date and set reminders for yourself. These reminders can be set on your phone, on a paper calendar, or on post-it notes on the wall
2. In order to improve your mental flexibility, practice simple routines out of order. For example, get dressed or ready for bed in a different order.
3. To stay on track with required assignments, write out the steps to lengthy assignments and cross steps off as you complete them.
4. Write down pros and cons, perhaps with help from someone you trust. Consider short-and long-term consequences for actions.
5. Try new things, like making a new friend who has different interests than you, tasting a new food, or learning a new dance.
6. Exercise directly benefits cognition. Make time to exercise several days a week.
7. Poor sleep can contribute to poor mental flexibility. You can review the attached sleep checklist to promote better sleep habits.

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# Emotional Dysregulation

Emotional dysregulation includes sadness, irritability, crying easily, and overreacting to events. It means your moods are unstable and unpredictable. For example, you might feel a sudden urge to yell or cry. You may become react in extreme ways to an otherwise normal conversation or event. Using and practicing the following suggestions can be helpful:

1. When you feel intense emotions, take a moment to focus on your breathing. For 60 seconds, take deep breaths and hold each for 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and hold, and then out through your mouth.
2. Try to pay attention to what is happening in your body when you feel agitated (for example, are you tapping your foot, clenching your fists?) That way you can start to recognize when you need a break before you lose control.
3. You can always ask for short break to help you remain calm.
4. Write down important information before you go into emotional situations. This will help you remember everything you want to say in case you get upset or anxious.
5. If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or being easily distracted, start each morning by creating a schedule of what you need to get done. Try to stick to it whenever possible and refer to it often.
6. Make a list of people that make you feel safe and feel heard. When your emotions feel difficult to manage, reach out to one of these people for support.
7. When you have intense feelings, take a moment to focus on input from your five senses: touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste. For example: choose any color and spend 1 minute finding objects near you in that color.
8. Poor sleep can contribute to poor emotional control. You can review the attached sleep checklist with your client to help promote better sleep habits.
9. *The Colorado Crisis Line is available 24 hours/day and can be reached at (844) 493-8255.*

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# Appendix – Sleep

## Checklist For Better Sleep



Good sleep is influenced by many factors.  
Record how many of these things you have done in the last week  
and consider making changes to your routine.

### Things that are known to make sleep worse

- Napping during the day
- Watching television in bed
- Using a device with a bright screen in the hour before bedtime (e.g. a smartphone, a laptop)
- Consuming drinks containing caffeine (includes tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks, hot chocolate)
  - How many each day?
  - What time of the day was your last caffeinated drink? (try to avoid caffeine after 6pm)
- Drinking alcohol (alcohol typically leads to interrupted sleep)
- Eating a heavy meal less than 3 hours before bedtime
- Staying in bed even if you can't fall asleep (it's better to get up and do something relaxing, then try again later)

### Things that are known to improve sleep

- Regular exercise
  - How many times a week? (it is recommended to do at least 3 x 30 minutes per week)
  - What time of the day? (it is best not to exercise in the 3-4 hours before bedtime)
- Setting aside some 'worry time' each day to write down any issues that are bothering or concerning you, then deciding to leave those worries behind until tomorrow (make sure to do this at least one hour before bedtime)
- Relaxation exercises (e.g. relaxed breathing exercises, progressive muscle relaxation)
- Having a relaxing bedtime routine (e.g. taking a bath or a shower, reading a comforting book)
- Setting the conditions for sleep
  - Make sure the bedroom is completely dark (blackout curtains are cheap and effective)
  - Make sure the mattress and pillows are comfortable (make bed an attractive place to be!)
  - Make sure the bedroom is the right temperature (think like Goldilocks: not too hot, not too cold)