

# Memory and Mental Health

## Factsheet

# Memory and Mental Health

## *Compromise at home*

Memory makes us who we are. It provides us with a sense of self and makes up our continual experience of life.

Not being able to remember things is frustrating and can be upsetting. When it happens more than it should it can trigger fears of looming dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

If you've felt a bit absent-minded lately, particularly with short-term memory, it could be caused by anxiety and stress. Large-scale problems such as a pandemic, puts our brains into fight or flight mode, disrupting our attention, memory, breathing and sleep. But there are certain things you can do to help, like eating certain foods and regular brain exercises.

## *Memory loss symptoms*

- Unable to find words to communicate effectively
- Blocking out traumatic events
- Forgetting social events/ birthdays, work deadlines
- Loss of general knowledge
- Difficulty in processing information
- Loss of identity – forgetting personal experiences
- Low self-esteem and self-worth
- Forgetting habits (e.g. taking medication)
- Feeling disorientated and confused
- Not being present
- Brain fog



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## *Common forgetfulness causes*



### **Stress and anxiety**

When we're stressed or anxious, our bodies release the hormone adrenaline into the bloodstream. The body then releases another hormone called cortisol, which can disrupt the function of neurotransmitters that carries information between brain cells.



### **Nutrition**

A diet high in sugar, refined carbs, unhealthy fats and processed foods can contribute to impaired memory and learning. Eating a balanced diet can help your brain function correctly.



### **Dehydration**

Drinking enough fluids helps our bodies rehydrate and replenish our body's water supply. When dehydrated, our brains can't fulfil their normal functions, like memory and attention. Avoid alcohol, fizzy and caffeinated drinks, and stick to water, herbal teas and milk.



### **Lack of sleep**

Not getting enough sleep is perhaps the greatest cause of forgetfulness. Not enough restful sleep can also lead to mood changes and anxiety, which in turn contribute to problems with memory.



### **Medications**

Tranquilizers, antidepressants, some blood pressure drugs, and other medications can affect memory, usually by causing sedation or confusion. Talk to your doctor if you're worried as there are usually alternatives available.



### **Under-active thyroid**

A faltering thyroid can affect memory (as well as disturb sleep and cause depression, both of which can be causes of forgetfulness). A simple blood test can tell if your thyroid is doing its job properly.



### **Alcohol**

Drinking too much alcohol can interfere with short-term memory, even after the effects of alcohol have worn off. It's best to stick with the recommendation of no more than two drinks per day for men and no more than one a day for women.



### **Depression**

Common signs of depression include sadness, lack of drive, and less pleasure in things you normally enjoy. Forgetfulness can also be a sign of depression, or a consequence of it.

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## *Give your memory a helping hand*

Anything that relaxes you will also help with memory, as relaxation engages the parasympathetic nervous system. Take a yoga class, try meditation and mindfulness, exercise, and spending time in nature, if possible.

Doing activities that are inherently engaging and focusing are also particularly helpful. Crossword puzzles, sudoku, crafts, video games or playing a musical instrument, all challenge the mind and sharpen your cognitive skills.

## *Top foods to improve memory*

- Oily fish like salmon, mackerel and herring are particularly rich in omega 3 fatty acids. These are essential for our brain's development and functionality.
- Complex carbs such as wholegrain pasta and wholegrain rice. Whole grains release glucose (energy) slowly into the bloodstream, keeping you mentally alert.
- Blueberries are an excellent source of vitamin C and have a high content of antioxidants, specifically flavonoids. These help to protect cells against damage.
- Leafy greens like spinach, kale and broccoli are a great source of minerals and are rich in nutrients such as vitamin E, vitamin K and folate.
- Dark chocolate increases serotonin in the brain which can improve mood and reduce stress. It also contains flavonoids, which boosts memory and blood flow to the brain.



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## *Brain benefits of exercise*

Exercise affects the brain in many ways. It increases heart rate, which pumps more oxygen to the brain. It also aids the release of a plethora of hormones, all of which participate in aiding and providing a nourishing environment for the growth of brain cells. Benefits include:

- Improved learning and mental performance
- Lengthened attention span
- Reduced impairment of brain cells and loss of coordination
- Better decision-making skills
- Increased functional activity of the temporal lobe, which is responsible for storing sensory memories
- Improved multi-tasking and planning skills
- Reduced sensitivity to stress, depression and anxiety
- Helps to prevent and treat dementia and Alzheimer's
- Improved mood

## *Brain facts*

1. You can hold roughly seven items in your short-term memory for about 20 to 30 seconds
2. Being tested on information is one of the best ways to improve recall memory
3. The hippocampus is a horse-shoe-shaped area of the brain that changes information from short-term to long-term memory
4. Anterograde amnesia is losing the ability to form new memories
5. Retrograde amnesia is losing the ability to remember past memories
6. Scent is a powerful memory trigger
7. New brain connections are created every time you form a new memory

Most people forget things from time-to-time but see a GP if you keep having problems with your memory and it's affecting your day-to-day life. It could be caused by something that can be treated.

### **Other help available:**

Brain Charity  
Alzheimer's Society  
Brain and Spine Foundation  
Headway  
Mind

*“Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory.”*

*Dr Seuss*

greencore  
group

