
Improving Cognition After Traumatic Brain Injury

A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is a jolt to your brain that changes the way your brain works. This type of injury can change the way you think, act, move, and feel. One of the most common symptoms of TBI is slowed thinking. After TBI, you may have trouble remembering things, getting organized, or finding the right words to use when speaking. These types of brain functions are called cognition.

TBI symptoms, such as anger, fear, stress, or trouble sleeping, can slow down your thinking even more. Some medicines used after a TBI to reduce anxiety, pain, or depression can also slow down cognition. That's why healthcare providers are careful about giving medicines for a TBI. For these reasons, it is very important to learn ways to improve cognition after a TBI.

Common TBI cognition problems

Changes in your brain after a TBI can affect the way your brain takes in and stores information. This can cause your thinking process to be slower and make it harder to stay focused. Here are some common problems you might have:

- **You might lose some memory.** After a TBI, you could have trouble storing and finding memories. The most common type of memory loss after a TBI is called short-term memory loss. Short-term memories are memories of things that happened about 30 minutes earlier. One example is going to the store and forgetting what you went there to buy.
- **You might have a hard time getting organized.** Many people with a TBI complain that they have trouble doing more than a few things at once. You might put on the TV and forget about food that is cooking on the stove. You might start projects or make plans but have trouble following through.
- **You might not be able to find the right words to use.** Everybody has had the experience of having a word on the “tip of the tongue” but not being able to remember it. After a TBI, this type of problem may become more frequent. You may struggle to find the words you want to use or use wrong words instead.

Improving cognition after TBI

You will likely need to have neuropsychological testing to find out what problems you are having and to measure how severe they are. Knowing specific problems can guide treatment better. Specialists who work in TBI recovery programs are trained to look for and treat cognition problems. If you are in such a program, take advantage of their help. There are also many things you can do on your own to improve cognition:

- Think of your brain as a muscle. You can help your brain improve by exercising it and keeping it active. Practice memorizing things or work on crossword puzzles. A memory specialist can teach you different ways to improve your memory.
- To prevent the loss of your keys, wallet, or important papers, have one place at home where you keep them.

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- Write things down. Make lists of tasks you need to remember when those things are still fresh in your mind. Keep a to-do list and fill in a daily planner for the days ahead.
 - Break down your chores each day into easy pieces. Do one thing at a time and then move on to the next thing.
 - If you are struggling to find the right word, talk around the word by using other similar words. You can sometimes find the word you want by going through the alphabet for the right first letter.
 - Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. Being tired during the day makes cognition worse. Don't try to do too much when you're tired.
 - Stay away from stressful situations and strong emotions. Learn ways to reduce stress. Try exercise, deep breathing, massage, listening to music, or doing an activity or hobby you enjoy.
 - Stay away from caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine.
 - Minimize distractions when trying to focus on one thing.

Cognition problems can cause some people to make bad decisions. One of the worst decisions you can make is to treat your symptoms with illegal drugs or alcohol. Also, medicines are often not the answer for cognition problems. Take only medicine prescribed by your healthcare provider. Take no other medicines, even over-the-counter ones, without checking with your healthcare provider first.

Cognition problems and other symptoms of a TBI usually get better over time. The time it will take your brain to recover is unpredictable, because every brain is a little different, and no two TBIs are the same. Also, be sure to let your healthcare provider know if your symptoms are getting worse.