

Coping with Cognitive Impairment

In addition to the negative tone of thinking during depression, the very process of thinking is disrupted. Memory is poor, concentration is fleeting, and the simplest of decisions can be overwhelming. Of all the many symptoms of depression, these cognitive impairments often seem to last the longest, and lag the furthest behind initial signs of recovery. *“My mood’s back to normal, but I still can’t read or follow conversations as well as I used to.”*

Why this should be so is unclear: Is it a natural feature of the depression, or does the mind simply get out of the habit of concentrating? Just as an arm immobilized in a cast becomes weak from disuse, the mind may become flabby and undisciplined from the enforced slowness of depression.

If so, then gentle challenges may sharpen the mind, just as weight training will build back muscle. Here are some strategies that can make the period of cognitive recovery more bearable, and some that might actually shorten the process.

Memory and concentration

The cardinal rule for difficulties with memory and concentration during depression is *accept them*. They are normal and expected, and yes, they will eventually get better. Here are some additional coping techniques.

- **Use a daybook.** Even if you can usually remember all of your appointments without writing them down, during depression you will likely find this a challenge. A simple daybook (or electronic organizer) can be helpful in keeping your commitments straight.
- **Carry a notebook.** A small notebook and pen can be invaluable in remembering the two questions you want to ask of the car mechanic, or the three items you want to get at the store.
- **Quiz yourself.** When you are beginning to recover, gently test and flex your memory. What’s the name of that restaurant you like? What’s the next street coming up? What are the names of the people you’re likely to see at dinner tonight? Adopt an extremely accepting attitude toward memory lapses that arise; avoid becoming anxious or angry at yourself.
- **Drop your reading level.** If reading becomes difficult during depression, allow yourself to stop trying to read at your usual level. Drop Dostoyevsky and take up Harry Potter. If necessary, drop Potter and read the comics. As your ability to read and process information returns, inch your way back up to where you used to be.

- **Try audiobooks.** Some people find listening to audio books helpful. You can go back and listen again when your mind wanders, and the expressiveness of the reader may draw you in more than the printed word.
- **Read shorter pieces.** It can be hard to remember names and plot lines over hundreds of pages. Depression is a good time to read short fiction (the shorter the better) or brief nonfiction pieces. Magazines may be better than books.
- **Puzzle yourself.** Simple crosswords and other word or logic puzzles can get you back into the habit of looking at the printed page, and may help sharpen your attention. Don't frustrate yourself by trying hard ones, though.
- **Reduce background noise.** Depression can make it difficult to follow conversations; it increases distractibility and reduces the capacity to filter out irrelevant noise. Pick quieter settings if you want to converse. Turn the radio or television down or off when you want to talk. Avoid noisier restaurants. At social functions, try to get away from the main group of people into a quieter corner to talk. As you recover, ease yourself back into lively spaces.
- **Walk and talk.** During depression, some people find it distracting or overwhelming to look at someone while talking to them. If you go for a walk together, you will both be focused ahead rather than toward one another, and you may be better able to concentrate on what is being said.

Making decisions

During depression it can be more difficult than usual to make decisions. To some extent, this is fine. Just as we recommend putting off major decisions for someone who has been recently bereaved, some decisions are best left unmade until a major depressive episode passes. Nevertheless, you can't put off every decision. Do you want soup or salad? Would you prefer a morning or afternoon appointment? Often it doesn't matter too much what you decide, so long as you make a decision. Here are some strategies that may help.

- **Pick the one on the left.** When it doesn't really matter what you do, you can get past the dithering by using a simple rule. Pick the one on the left. Don't use this for important decisions (*"Which of these two shall I marry?"*), but for minor problems it can help you to make a decision quickly and efficiently. If you prefer, flip a coin.
- **First thought, best thought.** Often the worst possible option is to do nothing, so it can sometimes be useful to take whichever option pops into your head first. It may or may not be true that your first thought is your best thought, but it will shorten the decision-making process.

- **Pick the most important.** Given a list of tasks, which should you do first? Identify the most important task and do it first. The rationale: You seldom complete everything on your list anyway, so you'd best get the important stuff out of the way. As well, the most important thing is probably weighing on you and giving you a sense of pressure.
- **Pick the easiest.** Sometimes it's hard to get started. If you start with the easiest item on your list you'll be able to get yourself to do it. Having started, you will have a small feeling of accomplishment and it may then be easier to move on to some of the more important tasks.
- **The column technique.** This strategy is best for significant but complicated decisions. Take a sheet of paper and divide it into two columns (or more, if you have more than two options). Under each option, write all of the advantages and disadvantages of taking that option. Try to be complete. When you are done, rate the importance of each consideration on a minus 10 to plus 10 scale (where -10 means something horrible that must be avoided at all costs, 0 means completely unimportant, and 10 means absolutely crucial). Add up the numbers in each column. The column with the highest total may be your best option. Although not foolproof, this strategy can help you tease apart all the elements of a complex decision.



Which of the tips in this section seems most likely to be helpful, given your own situation?

How could you put this into practice?
