A complete guide to Cognitive problems after stroke

Stroke Association
A stroke can affect the way your brain understands, organises and stores information. This is known as cognition.

This guide explains the different ways a stroke can affect your cognition, the problems this can cause and what you can do about them. It’s aimed at people who have had a stroke but there is information for family and friends as well.

We have information on all aspects of stroke. If you have a question that is not answered in this guide visit stroke.org.uk or call our Stroke Helpline on 0303 3033 100.
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Why has my cognition been affected?

Every second you receive a huge amount of information from the world around you, which your brain has to understand, organise and keep. This is called cognition.

If your cognition is affected, then you could find it difficult to concentrate or remember certain things. You may also find it difficult to work out how to do something or know how to respond to what’s going on around you. This is what people mean when they talk about cognitive problems or cognitive impairment.

Cognitive problems happen because of damage to your brain. Different parts of your brain control different things. If one of the parts of your brain that control cognition is damaged by a stroke, then this can affect your ability to do certain things.

Cognitive problems are very common after a stroke. They can have an impact on the person and can also affect their family and relationships.

Noticing cognitive problems

It can be difficult to notice cognitive problems when you're in hospital. On the stroke unit there’s always a lot going on and you tend to get a lot of help with everyday things (nurses will remind you when to take your medication or help you find your way around, for example).

Because of this, many people don’t notice that they have problems until they return home. Even then, you may not notice until you go back to work or start to do more demanding activities again, such as driving.

When you’re in hospital, your stroke team should complete an assessment with you to find out if you have any cognitive problems. However, these cognitive assessments will only pick up on severe problems. More detailed assessments are needed to find less obvious problems, but these are used less often.
What kinds of problems can this cause?

Problems with concentration

When you concentrate on something, your brain has to screen out a lot of information coming in from the world around you. A stroke can affect your brain’s ability to do this. Concentration problems are especially common in the early stages after a stroke.

Problems with concentration can affect you in different ways, as we rely on it for all of our other thinking processes. If you find it hard to focus on something, then you’re not going know how to respond to it or be able to remember it later.

Other effects of stroke can make your concentration worse too. Tiredness, pain or emotional problems like depression can all affect your ability to take information in and stay focused.

Signs of concentration problems

If you’re having problems with your concentration you may not be able to:

- **filter out what’s going on around you**, so it may be difficult to chat to someone if you’re in a noisy room or find what you’re looking for in the supermarket
- **stay focused on a single task**, like reading a book or watching a television programme
- **move from one task to another very easily**, so if you’re interrupted, you may find it difficult to return to whatever you were doing before
- **do more than one thing at once**, so you may find it difficult to chat to someone and make a cup of tea at the same time
- **process things very quickly**, so you may find it hard to follow people who talk very quickly or it may take you longer to do things than it used to.
Memory problems

We store all kinds of information in our memory. We also remember things in different ways, and for different lengths of time. This is known as short-term and long-term memory.

Your short-term memory is like a temporary storehouse for information. It allows you to remember things just long enough for you to use them. When you read a telephone number, for example, you use your short-term memory to remember it for the few seconds it takes you to dial. Some people also call this your working memory.

If you need to remember something for longer than this, it moves to your long-term memory. This lets you recall events and feelings from the past.

Many people have problems with their memory after a stroke, especially in the first weeks and months. However, they may not always be down to a problem with your memory itself.

Most memory problems are actually caused by problems with concentration, because if you’re unable to focus on what you’re being told, you’re not going to be able to remember it later. So if you’re having problems with your memory, you could think about ways to improve your concentration as well.

Emotional problems like anxiety can also make it hard to concentrate. This can make you feel as if you have memory problems.

Signs of memory problems

If your short-term memory has been affected, you may find it difficult to remember:

- what someone just said to you
- what you were about to do.

If it’s your long-term memory then you may find it difficult to remember:

- important dates or when you’ve got an appointment
- where you’ve put something
- someone’s name or what they told you last time you met.
Problems with planning and problem-solving (executive function)

As well as being able to take in and store information, our brain performs a whole range of other thinking processes. Many of these happen without us being aware of them, known as automatic processes. Together, many of these automatic processes are known as executive function.

Executive function isn’t just about planning and problem-solving. It includes all the things that allow us to organise, make decisions and know when we need to do something. It also involves the way we monitor what’s going on around us and adjust what we think and do in response to it.

Signs of problems with executive function

If a stroke affects your executive function, you may not be able to:

- **work out how to do certain things.** This could be a task that seems quite simple like changing the channel on the TV remote control, or it could be more complicated, like making a meal
- **plan how to complete a task.** You may not be able to think of all the steps that are needed to do something, such as making a cup of tea, or put the steps in the correct order
- **begin or finish a task on your own.** You may not realise that you need to do something, like get dressed, until someone tells you, or you may need someone to prompt you throughout a task to help you to complete it
- **solve problems on your own.** You may not be able to work out what to do if something goes wrong
- **do more than one thing at a time (multitask).** You may find it hard to switch between tasks, and remember where you were with each task.
Problems noticing things on one side (spatial neglect)

A stroke can damage your brain so that it no longer receives information from one side of your body. If this happens, you may not be aware of anything on one side, usually the side where you’ve lost movement (your affected side). This is called neglect or inattention.

These kinds of problems will be very obvious to the people around you, but you may not notice that anything is wrong. This is because your brain doesn’t know that something is missing. So you won’t know that you’ve missed half of the food on your plate until someone else brings your attention to it.

What kinds of problems can this cause?

**Signs of spatial neglect**

If you have neglect, you may:

- miss things that are placed on your affected side
- ignore people or bump into things without realising that they are there
- not dress one side of your body or shave one side of your face
- not eat food on one side of your plate
- not read one side of a book or page
- have problems finding your way around because you may not notice doors or landmarks on one side.
**Problems moving or controlling your body (apraxia)**

Every time we move, our brain has to plan what it wants our body to do and make sure we do it in the right order. A stroke can affect your ability to do this, making it difficult to move parts of your body in the way you want to. This is called apraxia.

If you have apraxia you’ll find it difficult to move when you’re asked to, even though you understand exactly what you’re being asked to do and know how to do it. This is because apraxia is a problem with planning movements – so even though you can’t wave properly to someone when they ask you to, you may wave without any problem when they go to leave, because you’re doing it without thinking.

Apraxia is quite common after a stroke and it can take some time to improve. It can also be difficult to notice it. Very often people assume that their problem is physical. However, a doctor or therapist should be able to pick up on apraxia through the assessments they do with you.

**Signs of apraxia**

If you have apraxia, you may:

- hesitate before doing things or seem to do them very slowly
- do things with the wrong amount of force, so you may bang your mug on the table when you go to put it down
- move in the wrong way, like waving your hand forwards and backwards to say goodbye, rather than side to side.

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**Problems with movement and finding your way around (visual perception)**

We use information from our eyes to determine the size, shape and position of the objects we see. Our brain uses this to work out how far away they are from us and where they are in relation to other things. This is called visual or spatial perception.

**Signs of visual perception problems**

If a stroke affects your visual perception you may not be able to:

- judge depths or distances, so you may not know how close you are to something, or when a cup is almost full or how high a step is. This can make getting around difficult, especially when you go up and down stairs or through doorways
- tell the difference between foreground and background, so you may not be able to spot a white plate on a white table, for example, or see the item you’re looking for in a cluttered drawer
- interact with objects very easily, like putting a lid back on a jar or putting food on a fork and then into your mouth
- follow terms like ‘in front of’ or ‘inside’, so if someone tells you that the sugar is behind the teabags, you may not know where you need to look.
Confusion and denial (anosognosia)

Sometimes after a stroke, people are not able to recognise the effect that it has on them. So you may not know that you’ve lost movement in your arm or leg, for example. This is called anosognosia.

If you experience this kind of confusion, it’s more likely to be with movement or visual problems, although it can apply to other problems too. People who have neglect are more likely to experience anosognosia.

Anosognosia can be quite distressing, because you may not understand why you’re in hospital or why people think you can’t do things for yourself. We don’t really understand why it happens, but it can be quite common, especially in the very early stages after stroke. It can also come and go, so you may not experience it all the time. However, it will get better and only lasts a few days or weeks in most cases. Only a small number of people continue to experience anosognosia months after their stroke.

Signs of anosognosia

If you have anosognosia you may:

- not notice or show much concern about the effects of your stroke
- be aware of some problems but not others, so you may be aware that you have communication or vision problems, but not know that you can’t move one side of your body
- be aware of problems but not know what they mean, so you may try to walk, even if you know that you can’t move your leg
- think that your affected limbs don’t belong to you
- not accept that you have any problems at all, even when someone shows you that you do.
Problems recognising things (agnosia)

There are two stages to recognising something. The first stage uses the information you get from your senses about the way it looks, feels and sounds, to develop a picture of what it is. The second stage compares this to the information in your memory so that you can remember what it’s called and what it does. A stroke can affect both of these stages.

If your stroke affects how your brain processes the information you receive about an object, then this is apperceptive agnosia. If it affects the way you remember information about objects, this is associative agnosia.

Agnosia may only affect you in very specific ways. Some people, for example, find that although they can’t recognise an actual object, they can recognise a picture of it. Some people have agnosia for colour or faces. Having trouble recognising faces is known as prosopagnosia, sometimes called face-blindness.

Signs of agnosia

Apperceptive agnosia can affect any sense. So you may lose the ability to recognise objects by touch, sound or sight. It usually affects just one sense, so although you may not be able to recognise an object by looking at it, you may be able to by touching it.

Problems recognising an object by sight are most common. It’s not that you can’t see the object at all – if someone asks you to describe the object they’re holding, you’ll be able to tell them about some of its features. So you’ll know that it’s white, or that it’s got a handle, for example. But you won’t be able to recognise that it’s a cup. However, if you’re asked what a cup is, you’ll know exactly what it looks like and what it’s for.

If you have associative agnosia, you’ll have a full picture of the object you’re looking at, but you won’t be able to remember what it’s called. So you’ll often use the wrong name. Even if you’re told the correct name, you may not be able to explain what it’s used for.
Cognitive problems are usually worst during the first few months after a stroke, but they can and do get better.

They’re likely to improve most quickly over the first three months, as this is when your brain is at its most active, trying to repair itself. It’s still possible for problems to improve after this, but you may find that it takes longer. Recovery tends to slow down, especially after six months.

Even if your cognitive problems never go away completely, they should not get any worse and do get easier to live with.

Having cognitive problems does not mean that you have dementia. Many people worry about this, but dementia gets worse and worse over time, whereas cognitive problems after stroke often get better.

For more information about dementia, read our ‘Complete guide to vascular dementia’. Go to stroke.org.uk/publications to find it.
Are there treatments that can help?

Treatments for cognitive problems focus on ways to cope with the problems, rather than ‘fix’ them.

Once your difficulties have been assessed, you can learn compensation or coping strategies, often with the help of a therapist or doctor.

Research continues to look into ways of treating cognitive problems, so there may be a clinical trial that you can take part in. You can find details of research trials that are currently taking place on the UK Clinical Trials Gateway website. Visit www.ukctg.nihr.ac.uk.

An occupational therapist can help you learn coping strategies. This may involve using aids (such as writing in a diary or using labels and reminders) that can help you manage. Or it may involve learning other techniques that can help you.

If your problems are quite specific or severe, you may be referred to a clinical neuropsychologist. This is a doctor who specialises in the way the brain works. They often work with people who have had a brain injury or stroke. A clinical neuropsychologist can carry out a detailed assessment to understand the type of problems that you’re having and find the best ways to manage them.

There may be a clinical neuropsychologist in your stroke team, or you may be referred to one elsewhere. Clinical neuropsychologists are often based within a memory clinic or service, so it’s possible that you may be referred to one of these. Memory clinics are services that have been set up all over the UK to help people with dementia, but they do treat people with other conditions too.

Whether you receive treatment or not, your problems should continue to be monitored to make sure that you get the support you need for them. Even if you don’t need support straight away, you may once you’ve been discharged from hospital, so your doctor and stroke team should make sure that you get it.

Cognitive assessments

It’s likely that you’ll need to complete a cognitive assessment. This will tell you more about the problems you’re having and why they’re happening.

Some people can find these assessments off-putting. They are usually done by a doctor or an occupational therapist (or sometimes a psychologist) and involve a lot of questions, which can make you feel like you’re taking an exam. You may be asked to answer really easy questions or do things that are very simple, which can make you wonder what the point is.

Still, it’s important that you do them, as the results of the assessment will help your stroke team decide the best way to help you.
What can I do about cognitive problems?

1  Get some help
If you think you may be experiencing some of the problems we’ve described, the first thing to do is to speak to your GP. They will make sure that there isn’t anything else that could be causing the problems, such as an infection or side effects of medication. Depression and anxiety are both common after stroke, and can make a person perform less well on cognitive tasks. So if you feel depressed or anxious, let your GP or occupational therapist know.

It’s easy for people, including doctors, to forget that there are effects of stroke you can’t see. So don’t wait to be asked about them. If you’re finding it hard, tell someone. Make it clear how your problems are affecting you and ask what support you can get.

2  Don’t be too hard on yourself
Having cognitive problems after a stroke is nothing you can control or need to feel bad about. A stroke is a major injury to your brain, so it’s going to take time for it to recover.

You just need to be patient with yourself. You’re not stupid, even though you may feel that way. Allow yourself more time to get things done and don’t expect too much of yourself – you wouldn’t blame someone who had broken their leg for not being able to run, would you?

3  Take plenty of exercise
Being as active as you can may help with cognitive problems and it can also help with emotional problems. If you can, try to aim for aerobic exercise that gets your heart beating and makes you slightly out of breath can help. This could be a sport like swimming or running, or you can try gardening or brisk walking. For more ideas read our guide ‘R07, Exercise and stroke’ at stroke.org.uk.

4  Get enough rest
You’re likely to get extremely tired after your stroke, which can make it even harder to concentrate or remember things. Plan your day so that you balance being busy with taking breaks and resting. You’re not going to be able to take life at the same pace as you did before, at least not to begin with. Take breaks when you need to and make sure you get plenty of sleep at night. It will help you to focus if you do.

Returning to work
Cognitive problems can take a long time to improve, so if you go back to work too soon you could find it a lot more difficult than if you went back a little later. An occupational therapist can give you advice about the best time to go back to work and can also talk to your employer about how they can support you when you do.

“I’ve had to learn not to beat myself up about not being able to remember.”
Mary
What can I do about cognitive problems?

5 Look into aids and equipment
There are aids and equipment that you may find helpful, especially for problems with memory. Your occupational therapist will be able to suggest some to you. There are also Disabled Living Centres all over the UK, where you can get advice on aids and equipment. Most of them have products on show, so that you can try them out before you buy them. You can also go to the Disabled Living Foundation for impartial advice about aids and equipment. See the Other sources of help and information section for details.

6 Find ways to relax
Your mind needs to rest just as much as your body. Even small things like going for a short walk, listening to music or having a quiet moment to yourself in another room can help to calm your mind. Some people find mindfulness or meditation really helpful. Relating can be difficult if you have a busy home life, but it’s important that you find a way to rest your mind when you get tired or frustrated.

7 Tell people what’s going on
Cognitive problems are nothing to be embarrassed about, so be upfront with people about them. We all feel awkward when we don’t know what to do, so explaining to someone what they can do to help (speaking slowly or writing things down, for example) will make it easier for you both. It will also stop them getting offended if you don’t remember something from your last conversation, or think that you’re bored if you get distracted.

“Be open with people. I just tell people that I struggle with memory and making quick responses sometimes. I’ve never had a bad response.”
Jo

8 Talk to someone who understands
Cognitive problems can affect your confidence and how you feel about yourself. Talking about it can really help. Many people find support groups useful, because you can talk about problems with people who are going through the same thing.

These kinds of groups aren’t for everyone, so if they’re not for you, try talking to a friend or family member instead – whoever you feel comfortable confiding in when you’re finding it tough.

“One of the biggest things I learned was mindfulness meditation. It made a huge difference on calming my mind before using it.”
Mary
What can I do about my concentration?

Just do one thing at a time
• If you’re making something to eat, don’t try to use the phone at the same time. Even talking to someone in the same room can be tricky. Focus on completely finishing a task before moving on to another.
• If someone’s giving you information, ask them to keep it simple. If it helps, get them to write it down.

Remove distractions
• If you need to concentrate on something, ask yourself if there’s anything that may distract you. Turn off the TV and radio or move to a quiet room and ask other people in the house not to disturb you for a little while.
• Try to remove clutter, so you won’t have any visual distractions either. If you just keep the kettle, cups, teabags and sugar on the kitchen counter, this may help when you come to make a cup of tea.

Know your limits
• Remember that you’re not going to be able to concentrate for long periods. So keep your activities to half an hour, or however long you can manage. If an activity is going to take longer than this, take a break and come back to it later. You’ll probably be able to focus on it a lot better if you do.
• If you know you’re going to be doing something that requires concentration (if you’re going to an appointment or expecting a visitor, for example) then plan to have a rest immediately before.
• If you find it hard to follow a whole TV programme, think about what you’re watching. News, sports, or cookery programmes will probably be easier to keep up with than dramas or documentaries, which rely on you watching the whole thing.

“... I watched EastEnders on TV to understand what the story was about. I chose that because there were no commercials or music halfway through, both of which my brain couldn’t cope with.”

Frances

Make things easier for yourself
• It may help to write a ‘to-do’ list the night before and decide which tasks are the most important. That way, if you find yourself having a bad day, you’ll know what to focus on and what can be left until another time.
• When you’re talking to people, try to repeat things that they tell you in your own words. This may help you to follow the conversation and feel confident that you’ve understood.

Try using your phone. Smartphones have alarms, calendars, address books and cameras that can help you keep notes and set up alerts and reminders.
What can I do about my memory?

Write things down
- Use calendars or diaries to keep track of appointments and important dates. You can also use them to record things that happened that day.
- Make a note of small tasks as you do them, so that you know if you’ve fed the cat or phoned someone.
- Write short notes after you’ve spoken with someone. If you do this after a therapy session, doctor’s appointment, or even a chat with a friend, you can go back and remind yourself of what you talked about the next time you see them.

Use prompts
- Set your phone or a cooking timer to remind you when you need to take your medication.
- Leave things like your keys or wallet near the front door, so that you’ll see them when you go out.
- Add pictures of people next to their details in your contact book, to help you remember who they are.
- A pill or dosette box can help you to organise the medication you need to take each day, so you can easily see whether you’ve taken it or not. Most pharmacists will sort your medication into special packs for you now, so you know what you need to take each day.

Put reminders where you won’t miss them
- Leave notes in noticeable places. Buy a pen that you can use to write on your bathroom mirror, or set up a white board somewhere obvious.
- You could put up signs in the kitchen to remind you to turn the cooker off, or one on the back of the door to remind you to lock it when you go out.

Keep things in the same place
- Labels on cupboards and drawers will help you know where things go. They don’t have to be written labels, you could use pictures instead. It may help to keep your glasses on a chain around your neck, to stop you from losing them.

If writing is difficult
- You could make voice recordings, using a dictaphone or an app on your smartphone.
- Or use pictures: you can take photos on most phones these days.
- If you find writing difficult, then ask people to help you. Ask them to write down the main points of your conversation for you, so that you can take it away to read over afterwards.

“I carry a notepad and write down everything important I’ve done or been told so I don’t forget.”

Elizabeth
Plan your day
• Keep to a routine and do certain tasks, like taking your medication or locking your doors, at the same time every day.
• Write a ‘to do’ list for the next day before you go to bed. That way you’ll know what you have to do as soon as you get up. You could make it part of your routine to sit down with a member of your family or your carer and do this at the end of every day.
• Tiredness and stress will make it more difficult for you to concentrate and take in information, which will mean you’ll struggle to remember it later. So make sure you plan time to rest throughout the day as well.

Try mental techniques
• Verbal prompts can help too. Some people use acronyms or sayings to help them remember things. One lady told us she thinks of “SLAC” when she leaves the house, so she knows she needs to Set the alarm, Lock the door And Close the gate.
• Or try using mental pictures, so if you need to remember an address, like Clifton Road, picture a road leading up to a cliff.
• Focusing on a particular feature can help you remember people – so you may remember that your consultant is the doctor with a moustache rather than the one with the glasses.
• Some people find repeating information can help them to remember it. So when you’ve been told something new, you could get someone to ask you a few seconds later if you remember it, and then again a few seconds after that, and so on. Once you’ve remembered it for a short period, it may be more likely to stick.

Can memory games help?
There are number of games and exercises (most of them computer-based), which aim to improve your memory. However, it’s difficult to say for certain whether these really help.

Research has shown that some memory exercises can help people to improve, but they need a therapist to work through the tasks with you to make sure that you’re doing them in the right way. Even then, the improvements people see don’t tend to last very long and are difficult to apply to tasks that aren’t part of the training.

Many people play memory games at home and do find them helpful. However, they may not always be testing your memory in the way that you think they are. When you’re playing on your own, it’s very easy to use guess work or trial and error to get to the correct answer, rather than your memory. It’s something we all do and you probably won’t realise that you’re doing it. But that’s why most experts would say you need a trained professional to work through memory exercises with you, to make sure you’re doing them correctly.

“Leave extra time to do things, it might sound obvious but if you’re in a hurry to get to an appointment the stress can make memory recall and communication worse.”

Joanie
What can I do about my planning and problem-solving?

**Practise, practise, practise**
- Planning and problem solving can be improved, but only with lots and lots of practice. Your occupational therapist or clinical neuropsychologist can help you decide what activities to focus on, as it will be different for everyone.
- Once you’ve mastered one task, like making a sandwich, you’ll move on to more difficult ones, like cooking a meal.

**Keep to a routine**
- Dressing yourself in the same order every day will make it easier for you to relearn the steps and spot when you miss one.
- Developing a weekly routine can also help. If you know that Tuesday is washing day or Wednesday is shopping day it will prompt you to do these things.
- A daily timetable may also be useful. This can be especially helpful if you have problems getting motivated, also known as apathy, which is common after a stroke.

**Use prompts and reminders**
- Write out instructions or checklists for you to follow when you do something.
- Stick up notes around the house to remind you of things that you may not think of on your own, like brushing your teeth.
- You could use brightly coloured stickers on the microwave or remote control to remind you which buttons to press.
- Prompts don’t have to be written – use pictures or recordings instead. Some people make up songs or acronyms to help them remember how to do things.

**Talk it through**
- It can help to talk through a task with someone before you do it, so that you can think of and sort all the steps in your head before you do it.
- Also think about what could go wrong, so that you know what you need to do in case it happens.

What can I do about other cognitive problems?

Usually if you have problems like neglect, apraxia or agnosia they will be picked up by your doctors or therapists whilst you’re in hospital or by your community team when you’re back at home.

If they haven’t been, and you start to notice that you may be having problems, then go back to your GP to get them properly diagnosed and assessed.

If these problems are making day-to-day life difficult for you, then you need to be referred to an occupational therapist. They will work with you to find ways to help you cope with them. They will also be able to suggest aids and equipment that can help you.

“The best people to do things with are the kids. They don’t judge and can break down the tasks because they are still learning themselves. I practised planning by baking fairy cakes.”

Cath
Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Talk to us
Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke.

Call us on 0303 3033 100, from a textphone 18001 0303 3033 100 or email helpline@stroke.org.uk.

Read our publications
We publish detailed information about a wide range of stroke topics including reducing your risk of a stroke and rehabilitation. Read online at stroke.org.uk or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies.

My Stroke Guide
My Stroke Guide is the stroke support tool and online community from the Stroke Association. Log on at mystrokeguide.com.

Talk to others affected by stroke
There may be a stroke group in your local area where you can meet other stroke survivors. You can meet people on our My Stroke Guide online chat forum at mystrokeguide.com, and our Facebook page Facebook.com/TheStrokeAssociation.

Call our Helpline or visit stroke.org.uk/support for more information on stroke groups and other face-to-face support.
Other sources of help and information

**Alzheimer’s Society**
Website: [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk)
National dementia helpline: **0300 222 1122**
Email: [enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk)
Provides information about dementia and living with memory problems.

**Disabled Living Foundation**
Website: [dlf.org.uk](http://dlf.org.uk)
Helpline: **0300 999 0004**
Email: [info@dlf.org.uk](mailto:info@dlf.org.uk)
Offers impartial advice and information to help you live independently with cognitive problems. They don’t sell aids and equipment but they can suggest where to buy them from. They also have a factsheet on memory problems and aids that can help.

**Headway**
Website: [headway.org.uk](http://headway.org.uk)
Helpline: **0808 800 2244**
Email: [helpline@headway.org.uk](mailto:helpline@headway.org.uk)
A charity for people who have had a brain injury. They can provide lots of information, advice and support about cognitive problems.
It can be difficult to know how to help someone with cognitive problems, so here are some tips to help you.

Be patient
None of us like to repeat ourselves or feel that we’re not being listened to. But you need to remember this isn’t something a stroke survivor can control very easily. So let your friend or family member do things in their own time. If there’s something that’s frustrating you, explain the problem calmly and focus on what you can both do to make it better.

Don’t make things too complicated
If your friend or family member is finding it hard to concentrate or remember things, then you need to help them by giving information in the right way:

- break tasks down into individual steps
- give simple instructions, one at a time, rather than a list of things to do
- get to the point: don’t expect them to keep up with a 20 minute update about your day. Just start with the headlines.

Be encouraging
Practise exercises with your friend or family member and think of ways to make them fun. Cooking a meal can be a good way to practise planning and problem-solving, for example.

If progress is slow it can be easy to think that things will never get better, so help them by celebrating all their successes, however small.

Don’t do everything for them
It’s normal to want to do as much as possible for someone you love, but it will be better for your friend or family member, if you help them to do things on their own rather than do it all for them. So if they ask you what day it is, suggest they look at the paper to find out. Removing clutter and just putting out the things they need may help them to do things on their own – so if you lay their clothes out, they may be able to dress themselves, or make a sandwich if you’ve put everything they need to do it in a clear space.

Help them get support
Cognitive problems are often missed by doctors and sometimes it can be difficult to get them taken seriously. However, you need to trust that you know your family member or friend better than they do, so don’t be afraid to keep pushing to get the support you need. If you don’t think you’re getting the right support from your doctor or stroke team, then call our Stroke Helpline.
About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That’s why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.

How did we do?
To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.

Accessible formats
Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.

Always get individual advice
This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don’t control the information provided by other organisations or websites.
When stroke strikes, part of your brain shuts down.
And so does a part of you. That’s because a stroke happens in the brain, the control centre for who we are and what we can do. It happens every five minutes in the UK and changes lives instantly. Recovery is tough, but with the right specialist support and a ton of courage and determination, the brain can adapt. Our specialist support, research and campaigning are only possible with the courage and determination of the stroke community. With more donations and support from you, we can rebuild even more lives.

Donate or find out more at stroke.org.uk

Contact us

We’re here for you. Contact us for expert information and support by phone, email and online.
Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100
From a textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100
Email: helpline@stroke.org.uk
Website: stroke.org.uk

Rebuilding lives after stroke

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