

Thinking about thinking skills in depression

Thinking skills are affected in depression

Difficulties with thinking skills (cognition) are one of the main symptoms of depression. These can include problems with attention or concentration, memory, and planning and problem-solving.

Young people have described these difficulties as if their mind is 'foggy', 'a blur' or 'blank'. This can result in not being able to get new information to stick, just feeling really overwhelmed or zoning out in everyday situations. This may or may not apply to you.

It can be reassuring to know that cognitive issues are a part of depression, but aren't always talked about. There are strategies that you can use to help with these difficulties.

One way of understanding cognition in depression

Sometimes it's hard to understand how thinking difficulties impact everyday life. This example of the impact of a physical injury might help explain it:

If you have a muscle strain in your leg, you may not be able to compete in a running race as the parts you need aren't working that well. Other people may wonder why it's hard for you (especially if they don't know that you're injured).

This is similar to cognition in depression...

If focusing at school is made harder by depression, how can you do your best in an exam? The tools you need aren't working as well as they should be! It's not because you're 'lazy', as others may call it.

It can be helpful to talk to your school or employer about altering your workload while you recover. You could go with a parent or health professional to talk to a disability advisor or welfare coordinator to assist with this.

Impact on daily functioning

Cognitive difficulties can impact:

- Paying attention to and remembering information at school or work;
- following along with and recalling details from conversations;
- your ability to plan and make decisions;
- your confidence and self-esteem.

What else can impact thinking skills?

- Alcohol and other drugs;
- sleep patterns;
- stress and anxiety; and
- medications (prescribed and over-the-counter).

If any of these issues are affecting you, speak to your treating team or a health professional.



Flip over for tips on managing some cognitive difficulties in depression

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Some tips on managing cognitive difficulties in depression

Thinking strategies that can help in depression

Cognitive strategies can help reduce the impact of thinking difficulties on everyday life. These may need regular practice to be most helpful. You and your treating team may have other helpful strategies or ideas.

Attention and concentration (staying focused)

Depression can reduce the amount of free space available in our minds, so taking on lots of information at once might be really hard! Some strategies that may help are:

- try to only work on one thing at a time and reduce background distractions (e.g. TV, music or phone);
- break down big tasks into smaller chunks and then tackle each one in turn;
- work in short sessions (e.g. less than one hour at a time) and have regular breaks to recharge; and
- tackle mentally draining tasks (e.g. studying) when you feel most alert.

Learning and memory

Memory is like a filing cabinet. Learning something new is like putting a new file into the cabinet. Storing a memory is like keeping the file in the right drawer. Retrieving the memory is like finding the file again. Depression makes it hard to get files into the cabinet and find them when needed.

Some strategies that may help are:

- write down notes on a notepad or phone. Do it right away with important information so it's a permanent record;
- if you're not big on words, try taking a picture of things you need to remember (e.g. where you parked the car); and
- voice record important instructions.

These are like clues to help you store and find your files.

Planning and organisation

Planning, organising and managing multiple events, tasks or appointments can be harder with depression.

You might get overwhelmed easily when you have a lot going on.

Some really helpful strategies can be using:

- calendars or planners (hardcopy or electronic); and
- reminder alarms (e.g. on your phone).

These work best if new events are added straight away!

Completing a complex task

Sometimes, you may feel overwhelmed by one complex task (e.g. planning a BBQ). One helpful strategy is to work through this process using these steps:

1. Stop, relax and think – don't act straight away!
2. Ask yourself: "What do I actually need to do?"
3. Break up the big goal into many smaller tasks.
4. Make an action plan by putting the steps in order.
5. Follow the plan but review it often to stay on track.
6. Tick off each step or task as you go.

Seek extra support

Lastly, if you are really worried about your cognition, you could seek a formal cognitive or neuropsychological assessment. This may provide you with extra assistance. Talk to your treating team or a health professional for more information.



GET IN TOUCH

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