



**Headway
Nottingham**

This information booklet is written for people with brain injuries, their families, carers and friends. We hope it will support understanding of brain injury as well as offer ideas to help manage difficult areas day to day.

Top tips for: Managing Memory Loss

This 'Top tips' factsheet gives an overview of some of the difficulties you might face with memory problems following a brain injury. We are all different, and how you may feel won't be the same as other people, even if they have similar injuries to you. There are some practical tips and suggestions to help to make it easier for you to remember things and make the most of the memory you have.

Introduction

Being able to remember things is an important part of our daily lives, for example, what time do I have to be at the dentist? Or, when is Gran's birthday? Most of the time we don't have too much trouble remembering these sorts of things but all of us forget something important from time to time.

One of the most common problems for people with a serious brain injury, is that you may find it difficult to remember things. Sadly, there are no cures available, but there are a number of ways of coping and making your life easier. It is important for you to remember that using any strategies and tips is not 'cheating' and will not prevent your natural recovery or cause any of your existing skills to be lost.

We have divided our factsheet into two sections:

- **Section 1** outlines the ways you can adapt your environment and lifestyle to minimise the impact of memory problems.
- **Section 2** is aimed at your family, friends and carers, and deals with techniques and strategies which can help them to encourage you make the most of your existing memory, and to store and recall information more efficiently. It is a good idea for you to read through section 2 so that you can begin to understand what those around you are trying to do to help you the best they can.



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Section 1: Adapting and coping with memory problems

We have grouped five main ways to help make life easier, with a list of good ideas for each group:

1. Adapting the environment
2. Using external memory aids
3. Following a set routine
4. Improving general well-being
5. Combining several strategies to make a substitute 'memory system'

1. Adapting the environment

What this means is that you can change and adapt the things around you so that you don't have to rely so much on having to remember everything. Many of us do a lot of these things anyway.

- Keeping a notepad by the phone so you can make a note of phone calls and messages.
- Put essential information on a noticeboard.
- Decide on a special place to keep important objects like keys, wallets or spectacles. Always putting them back in the same place.
- Attach important items to yourself so they can't be mislaid, for example use a neck cord for reading glasses.
- Label cupboards and storage vessels as a reminder of where things are kept.
- Label perishable food with the date it was opened.
- Paint the toilet door a distinctive colour so it is easier to find.
- Label doors to remind you of which room is which.



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2. Use external memory aids

These can be especially important for you as they limit the amount of work your memory must do. We have shown a list of typical aids. It is important to realise that not everybody is happy using everything, for example, if you have never used a smartphone then it might not be a good idea to try and use one for this purpose. Do try different ways that really work for you, and don't be too upset if something doesn't work first time – try again another time or take a new tack.

- Smartphones with diary or calendar applications
- Diaries, personal organisers or datebooks
- Notebooks
- Lists
- Alarm clocks
- Watches
- Calendars
- Wall charts
- Tape recorders and Dictaphones
- Electronic organisers
- Pagers
- Pill reminder boxes for medication
- Sticky-backed notes
- Photo albums
- Cameras

3. Follow a set routine

All of us have routines that help us get through the day, week and month. We generally feel comfortable with our routines and most of us can adapt quickly if our habits change, or something out of the ordinary comes up. If you are having problems remembering things, daily and weekly routines are



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essential so that you get used to what to expect which put less strain on your memory. Sometimes your routine will have to change, and you may feel confused and upset. The tips below should make things easier for you to cope when something different happens.

Ask your family, friends and carers to explain your routines in as much detail as possible. Ask them to write things down clearly.

- If things must change, ask your family, friends and carers to give you as much notice as possible to give you time to think about what will happen.
- Make a note of regular activities in a diary or on a calendar.
- Make a chart of regular events. You could try using pictures or photographs, on a noticeboard.

4. Improve your general well-being

Your memory is very important in giving you a sense of our own identity. When any of us have problems remembering, we sometimes find it make us angry or feel we are missing out on something, which may make us feel depressed or anxious. There are a few tips below that we have found helps people in a similar situation to you:

- One of the first things to do, is look at the different strategies listed earlier in this factsheet. Once you have done this, have a look at the combined example at the end. This can begin to give you a measure of control which can go a long way to help you feel better about yourself.
- Share your feelings with other people. A second opinion is always a good way to give you confidence and reassurance that what you are trying is right.
- Find activities you find enjoyable and relaxing, such as listening to music or exercising, and take the time to indulge in them. Sometimes; just a good walk will make you feel much better.



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5. Combining several strategies to make a substitute memory system

You will find that no single thing works by itself, the best way to help you remember things is combine several different aids and strategies. This helps to give you a safety net for things you must remember.

You could even have two or three different plans, if you are struggling to know what to include you can ask your family, friends and carers to help you put together a plan they think will help you best.

Example of a combined strategy

- Make lists for different routine tasks, for example, you could have one for what to do if you go out, telling you things like, switch the lights off, or don't forget to lock the door.
- When you have made a few lists, it is a good idea to keep them together in a folder or write them down in a notebook.
- Keep things you use all the time in the same place, so you don't have to look everywhere for something you need.
- Keep a message pad by your phone to write down messages or things you want to remember.
- Use a calendar or diary, it doesn't matter if it is a paper one or on your computer. What is important is that you use it.
- A good tip is to learn and practice not to be 'put on the spot'. You may need help from family and friends with this. The important thing here, is that it will help you have more time to make decisions, which is especially important if you are struggling to remember everything.
- Try simple relaxation and breathing techniques to help you reduce anxiety. Before you dive in, the old saying, 'take a deep breath and think about it', is always good advice.

You can use any or all the external memory aids we listed earlier; if it works for you, and helps you remember, it can't be wrong.



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Summary

Sometimes you won't be able to do it on your own and you may need training to be able to overcome the difficulties you may have trying to remember things. In these circumstances it is right for you to seek the advice of an Occupational Therapist, Clinical Psychologist or Clinical Neuropsychologist. Talk to your GP about how to access further support in your area.

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Section 2: Techniques to make the most of your existing memory

This section is designed to help family, friends and carers of people who have suffered serious brain injuries.

Sadly, there are no ways to restore lost memory capabilities. It is however, a realistic goal to make the memory more efficient with practiced techniques. It takes patience and perseverance, and every little step on the road to recovery is a step forward, don't become too upset if progress take longer than first planned.

All the techniques shown in this factsheet are good exercises for everyone, whether they have had a brain injury or not. It doesn't matter if you are family, a friend or a carer, have a go at some of the techniques yourself.

We have grouped the strategies into three main groups, each with techniques to help improve memory:

- Getting information into memory more efficiently
- Storing information more efficiently
- Recalling information more efficiently

1. Getting information into memory more efficiently

In order to remember something, we must first get the information into our memory before it can be stored away. This can be very difficult after brain injury, especially for someone who has difficulties with attention and concentration.

Some simple rules to follow when giving information to someone with memory impairment are:

- Concentrate on relevant material that the person wants or needs to remember.
- Simplify information and written instructions.



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- Reduce the amount of information that must be remembered and just concentrate on the essentials.
- Divide the information into small chunks.
- Give the chunks one at a time.
- Encourage the person to take their time and pay close attention.
- Ensure that the information has been understood by having the person repeat it back in their own words.
- Encourage the person to make associations by linking the new information to something that is already familiar.
- Use the little and often rule as it is better to work for a few minutes several times a day than for a longer period once a day.
- Encourage the person to organise the information, for example, grouping items on a shopping list into distinct categories.
- Use two or three different methods to improve learning of one piece of information, for example, if you want to teach someone with memory impairment the way to the local shops, you could:
 - (a) draw a map;
 - (b) describe the way verbally; and
 - (c) accompany the person along the route.
- Choose a good time to practice, new information is taken in more efficiently when anybody is fresh and alert.

Detailed below are three more formal systems used to get information into memory efficiently. These are:

- Errorless learning
- Mnemonics
- PQRS



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Errorless learning

While many people learn from their mistakes this is not always the case for people with memory impairment, who tend to repeat the same mistakes as they cannot remember making them. This can be very frustrating, and a more efficient approach is to prevent memory impaired people from making mistakes when learning new information. This approach is known as 'errorless learning'.

One way to do this is to guide the person with memory impairment through a task several times and then gradually decrease the amount of help given. Alternatively, provide written instructions to follow and then gradually reduce the content, for example, by missing a word or short phrase out here and there.

The following steps can be used as part of an errorless learning programme for use with someone with memory impairments:

- Adjust your expectations: Don't ask for responses until you are at least 90% sure the person will give a correct response.
- Make sure the person is completely clear what is expected of them; if they don't understand what they must do in the first place then mistakes are inevitable.
- Complete the task together by saying, 'let's do this together', is a better way of starting an activity than, 'let's see if you can do this'.
- Make the task do-able. This can be done by breaking the task down into smaller parts and teaching each part separately.
- Anticipate problems and correct in advance. For example, if the person is reading and there is a difficult word coming up, anticipate this by saying something like, 'I see a tricky word in the next sentence, the word is...let me know if you need help when you get to that word'.
- Provide cues. This can be an entire answer, for example, 'I think the answer is 22, what do you think?' It could also be a sentence completion cue, for example 'The president at the time was Abraham ... that's right, Lincoln.'

A good tip is to carry out several repetitions of each step to reinforce the new knowledge and help with retention.



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Using 'errorless learning' to teach somebody can be a difficult technique to use without training. If the person with memory problems is working with a neuropsychologist, they will be able to advise as they will be trained to use the method. There are also excellent tutorials and videos on the subject on the Brain Injury Association of New York State's LEARNet project website at <http://www.projectlearn.net.org/>.

Mnemonics

Mnemonics are verbal and visual aids to learning, such as sayings, rhymes or drawings, which help us to remember things more easily. For example, the rhyme 'Thirty days in September...' helps us to remember the number of days in each month, and the sentence 'Richard of York Gives Battle in Vain' is a reminder of the colours of the rainbow.

Mnemonics can help people with memory impairments. For example, one memory impaired woman learned to remember her name was Stephanie by looking at pictures of a step and a knee. However, it is often unrealistic to expect anybody with a serious brain injury to devise and remember to use them themselves. For this reason, the following guidelines for relatives and carers might help:

- Devise the mnemonic yourself to teach to the person with memory impairment.
- Use mnemonics to teach a specific piece of information, such as people's names or addresses.
- Take account of individual preferences and styles – not everybody likes the same strategy.

PQRST

This is a way of helping anybody to remember something they are reading, such as a newspaper article and can be very useful for anyone to try.

PQRST stands for:

- Preview Scan the information to get a general idea of the content.
- Question Identify questions to answer after you've read it and write them down.
- Read Read the material closely.
- State Repeat the main points to yourself by stating them in summary form
- Test Test your knowledge by seeing if you can answer the questions you wrote down earlier.



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2. Storing information more efficiently

New information is most likely to be forgotten within a relatively short time after it is learned. The rate of forgetting slows down after this initial period.

Once information has been taken into memory, it helps to practise or rehearse it every so often. This is best done by testing immediately after learning, then testing again after a slight delay, then again after a slightly longer delay and so on. This process is known as 'expanding rehearsal'.

For people with memory impairment the intervals used should be very short, as immediate memory is usually relatively undamaged so needs to be taken advantage of. You could start by asking the person to repeat the information immediately, then after two seconds, four seconds, eight seconds, etc.

3. Retrieving information more efficiently

Often information is stored in memory but retrieving it can be difficult. We have all experienced this as the 'tip-of-the-tongue' effect. Retrieving information can be particularly difficult for people with memory impairment after brain injury. However, the following techniques can help:

- Provide a cue or prompt, for example, the first letter of a name.
- It is much easier to remember something if, when having to recall it, we are in the same location, situation or mood as when the information was learned. To avoid the limitations this can place on memory, it is a good idea to learn new information in a variety of situations and settings whenever possible.



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Summary

Following the strategies and techniques described should help most people to compensate for memory problems, at least to some degree. However, it must be recognised that they do not offer a cure. To help someone with memory impairment, these approaches should be adopted for specific purposes and in a gradual, step-by-step sequence.

It is important to try different things to see what the individual finds most suitable. The ideas should be used according to individual preference and can be adapted in any way that people find suits them. Ideally, they should be enjoyable and can be a shared activity with family and friends.

Conclusion

We hope that this information has helped you to learn that although life after your brain injury will be different, you can take positive steps to regain control and a safe level of independence. Headway Nottingham are there to help, reassure and support you through these challenges.

To help you overcome some of the other difficulties you may be facing after your brain injury, Headway Nottingham have produced a series of factsheets.

1. About the brain and what can happen after a brain injury
2. Difficulties with decision making
3. Coping with memory problems
4. Strategies for mood management
5. Coping with depression
6. Coping with lack of insight

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