

How forgetful are you?

By Dr. Judy Ronan Woodburn

If the title of this article caught your attention, it's likely that you have said this, thought this or know someone who has said it. More and more, people are wondering if they are getting Alzheimer's disease, dementia or some other form of cognitive deficit, but there are many other potential explanations for these experiences.

A cognitive deficit is difficulty with perception, memory or abstract thinking that interferes with one's ability to learn. It may also involve impaired judgment, inattentiveness, impulsiveness or impairment of speech or language. Cognitive deficits can be caused by changes in the brain as we grow older. Dementia and Alzheimer's disease are examples of this. Other causes include: head trauma, depression, circulatory disorders (for example, heart disease and stroke), which limit oxygen flow to the brain; medication side effects; hormonal changes; metabolic disorders; neurological disorders; infections; exposure to toxic substances; and brain tumors.

On the other hand, many people who complain to me about what seems to be a cognitive deficit are actually just having difficulty managing how quickly our world is changing and are experiencing "information overload."

So, what do you do if you are experiencing some cognitive difficulties?

Start by having a thorough medical evaluation to clarify a diagnosis and identify the causes of the symptoms. In general, treatment may involve improving nutrition; getting moderate exercise; developing healthy sleep habits; counseling/psychotherapy; reducing use of alcohol and other drugs; changing medications (increasing or decreasing, depending on the effect); or other, more intense, medical interventions.

However, if there is no clear medical diagnosis, you may need to learn new and/or better ways to manage our constantly, rapidly changing world and flow of information.

Our short-term (or working) memories are designed to manage an average of seven (yes, just seven) pieces of information at a time. As I talk to people, it seems that most of us are trying to manage much more information, and our brains are just not designed for that.

If that is the case, you may need to identify ways to slow down; use more memory aids, like written schedules or to-do lists; use various alarms to aid in managing your time; reduce your overall commitments; improve your overall stress management; and not just use your brain but continue to challenge yourself to be a lifelong learner.

Wishing you joy and good health,
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