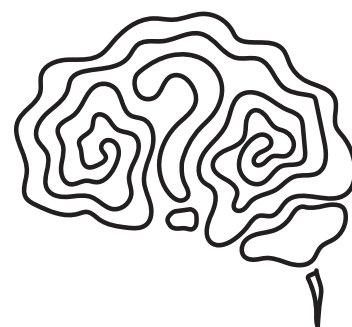


GREY MATTERS

Minds grow and change. Let's talk about it.

Pg.1 What is Grey Matters?

Your brain, like every other organ in your body, changes over time. Forgetfulness, for example, is a natural part of the ageing process. It's common to experience other changes too: you might start to notice that you are finding it more difficult to come up with the right word, or losing the thread of conversations, books, and movies.



Some people may experience only minor changes to their memory and thinking, while others may find that these changes are starting to interfere with their daily activities. People often come up with unique ways of managing these changes, so there is a lot we can learn from each other.

Grey Matters is designed with and for people experiencing changes to their memory and thinking. It is a place where you can:

- **Learn** about the ageing brain and how to keep your brain healthy
- **Explore** the different strategies people use to help them through the day
- **Hear** about the Tips, Tricks and Experiences of others that might help you

This resource has been funded by Brain Research New Zealand and brought to you by AUT's Centre for Person Centred Research in collaboration with Good Health Design and University of Otago.

If you want to find out more about the underpinning project and co-design process for this booklet and the original Grey Matters website, visit cpcr.aut.ac.nz/our-research/managing-Changes-to-memory-and-thinking or www.goodhealthdesign.com/grey-matters

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Ageing Brain

What are 'normal' changes for my age?

Some common changes associated with 'normal' age-related changes include:

- Slower recall and thinking
- Slower at solving complex or unfamiliar problems
- Difficulty learning new information
- Difficulty maintaining attention, particularly when there are distractions
- Difficulty multi-tasking (e.g. talking on the phone while cooking)
- Forgetting the finer details of conversations (but it is not usually normal to forget that the conversation occurred at all).

Many people who experience these changes worry that they might be experiencing the early symptoms of dementia. However, this is not necessarily the case. It can be very difficult, even for medical professionals, to know whether the changes we experience as we get older are 'normal' for our age, or the start of more significant changes to our memory or thinking. This is partly because every person is different. Our brains have varying levels of cognitive ability in the first place and, like other organs, age at varying speeds depending on multiple factors, such as our genetic makeup, diet, and lifestyle.

What is 'Mild Cognitive Impairment'?



We recommend watching the video above to learn more.

Watch the video at <https://vimeo.com/373781882>

Sometimes clinicians will use the term 'mild cognitive impairment' to describe memory and thinking problems which are greater than they might normally expect to see in adults who are getting older, but which are not severe enough to justify a diagnosis of dementia. People with MCI or those who know them will report one or more of the following:

Memory and Orientation

- Forgetting conversations more often than usual or asking repeated questions
- Forgetting important events such as appointments or social engagements
- Starting to have trouble navigating (e.g. when driving or finding your way out of a shopping centre)

Decision Making or Problem Solving

- Feeling increasingly overwhelmed by making decisions, planning steps to accomplish a task, or interpreting instructions.
- Becoming more impulsive or making decisions without thinking things through
- Being less tactful

What is 'Mild Cognitive Impairment'? (continued)

Attention

- Losing your train of thought or the thread of conversations, books, or movies even when there are no major distractions

Language

- More significant word finding problems or slowed speech

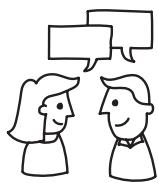
People who meet the criteria for MCI typically do less well than other people their age on cognitive tests. In daily life they typically manage to compensate for these changes by using strategies that minimise their impact. For example, they will use diaries, memory aids, bill payment systems, and be extra careful to avoid distractions whilst cooking, or preparing simpler meals.

It is common to worry that MCI will lead to dementia, where the person loses the ability to manage everyday tasks and needs assistance. However, not everyone diagnosed with MCI will develop a more serious form of cognitive impairment. In fact, research suggests that one in five people diagnosed with MCI will return to normal cognitive functioning within a few years. Many others will remain stable for several years or more without 'progressing' to dementia. Current research is trying to determine precisely who, of those diagnosed with MCI, will go on to progress to dementia, and identify the factors that contribute to the progression from MCI to dementia.

Brain Health

Ten ways to keep your brain healthy

While it is difficult to predict whether or not our memory and thinking will worsen over time, there are a number of things we can do to maintain and improve cognitive function as we age. Here are ten tips to help you keep your brain healthy.



1. Connect

Stay socially active. This is great for stimulating your brain and may lift your mood. Keep in regular contact with family and friends, or join a class or discussion group.



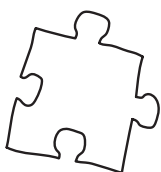
2. Breathe

Take some time to slow down and breathe. Becoming aware of your breath can bring you more fully into the present moment and may help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression. Meditation has been shown to improve brain health and mood.



3. Exercise

Any physical exercise is better than none. Moderate exercise such as walking for thirty minutes each day is a great way to get the heart pumping. Some studies suggest that more intense exercise with a combination of strength training and aerobic exercise (hard enough to make you feel puffed) is likely to result in greater benefits. You should check with your doctor first before starting a programme of vigorous exercise.



4. Challenge

Keeping your brain active and challenged may help slow cognitive decline. Try engage in mentally challenging activities, such as bridge, crossword puzzles, Sudoku, reading, and using the computer.

Ten ways to keep your brain healthy (continued)**5. Nourish**

A healthy, antioxidant-rich diet may improve memory and boost brain function. The Mediterranean Diet has the greatest evidence to support these benefits. This diet emphasises plant-based foods, vegetables and fruit, legumes and nuts, high fish intake and infrequent red meat (a couple of times per month).

**6. Learn**

Keep learning new things. Engage your brain with new and exciting content. You may like to read books or join a new class or course.

**7. Sleep**

Sleep recharges the brain and consolidates your memory. It is important to aim for 7 – 9 hours of sleep each night to achieve optimal brain function.

**8. Smile**

When you smile, your brain releases feel-good neurotransmitters (dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin) which can help relax your body and reduce stress - one of the causes of cognitive impairment. So watch funny movies and laugh with your family and friends.

**9. Hydrate**

Your brain needs to be hydrated in order to function properly. Not drinking enough water can affect your memory and your mood. Conversely, drinking plenty of water can improve brain function.

**10. Self-care**

All of this advice can be summed up in one final tip: self-care. In other words, look after yourself. Eat healthy foods. Stay connected with people. Go outside and enjoy the sun. Make sure you take time to rest and relax.

Tips & Tricks Explore strategies other people find helpful**Shirt pockets***By Bobby Parsons*

I try to make sure that all my shirts have a pocket. Every morning when I get up to make coffee, I take a piece of paper from the pad on my kitchen bench and begin my 'To-Do' list for that day. The list may vary in length from day to day, but I always have one because there's always something that needs to be done (I retired 25 years ago but I still like to keep busy).

So every morning, as part of my routine, I'll write out the list, fold it in half and put in my shirt pocket, so that it's always right there when I need to refer to it during the day. I don't put it down or leave it anywhere. That's where it lives. Right there in my shirt pocket. It's very important. And so at certain moments throughout the day, I'll reach into my pocket and check my To-Do list. If I complete a task or whatever it is, I'll pull out the list and cross it off. If I remember something else that needs to be done that day, I'll add it to my list. And then I will always put it back in the top-left pocket.

At the end of the day, I'll check the list to see if there's anything I've missed. If there's something on there that needs to be carried over to the next day, I'll go and re-write it on the notepad so it's ready for me when I go into the kitchen in the morning, wearing a fresh shirt, to make a cup of coffee.

Tips & Tricks Explore strategies other people find helpful**Yellow flag for the car***By Harriet McBride*

I have had trouble with my memory and thinking for several years. I'm 73 now and it seems to be getting worse. I have trouble with all sorts of things these days, especially weekly chores like grocery shopping. I can still drive, but sometimes when I go to the supermarket I'll forget where I've parked the car. It can be very frustrating, and also quite frightening. But what I do now is put a yellow flag on the back of the car, because it's easy to look at a row of cars and see the little yellow flag, rather than having to walk around looking for it. It's a simple solution but it has made my life much easier.

Remembering the home phone number*By Anjali Sachdeva*

I have noticed some changes to my mother's memory. It's obvious to me, because I live with her, but other people probably wouldn't notice. I'm not sure whether or not it is going to get any worse. But it's got to the point where I've started to worry about her when she goes out for a walk, because if she got into some trouble, or got lost, I know she won't remember our home phone number. My strategy for this is writing our number boldly on a piece of paper and taping it to the back of her phone. Doing little things like that give me some peace of mind.

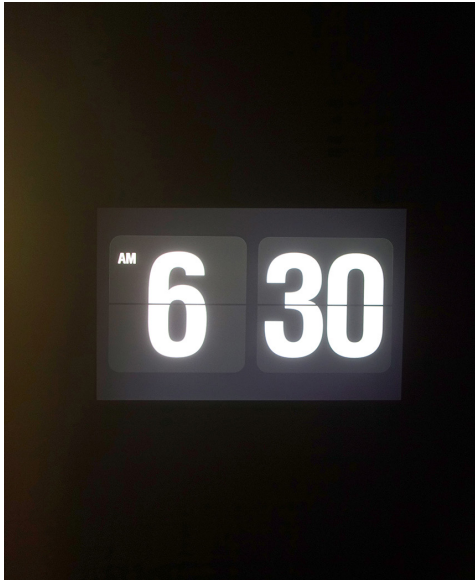
Tips & Tricks Explore strategies other people find helpful

Being more Mindful

By Pauline Walton



I was diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment two years ago, when I was 72. I found that I was forgetting things more often, and sometimes getting a bit lost while driving. It was pretty scary, and I can be quite an anxious person anyway, which doesn't serve me well. But what I've found is that being more mindful helps a lot. For example, sometimes I would go to do something around the house, like get a pair of socks from the drawers, but then I'd forget what I was there to do. So now, rather than get anxious and stressed about it, I concentrate on my breathing, which really brings me back into the moment and allows me to concentrate on what I was doing. Then I can carry on with things. It works for me and I would recommend it to others who have these annoying mind-blanks. But I'm interested to hear what other people do as well. Any other tips out there?

Tips & Tricks Explore strategies other people find helpful**My digital clock projector***By Dennis Goodman*

I'm 83 and was recently diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment. One of the difficulties I've had is with my sleep. I think my perception of time has changed. I find it increasingly difficult to keep track of the time. As a result, my sleep patterns have been very erratic. For example, I used to get up in the middle of the night to take the dog for a walk, thinking it was time to get up when in fact it was 3 a.m. It definitely frightened my wife when I did that. But one of our sons has come up with a gadget which projects the time onto the ceiling above the bed. I hop into bed and push the button and the time comes up, displays it up on the roof. And it's quite big, bigger than the little alarm clock next to the bed, which I often forget to look at. So now when I wake up in the middle of the night I can clearly see what time it is.

Tips & Tricks Explore strategies other people find helpful**Gas On/Gas Off***By Christopher Wilson*

I'm 68 and have been worried about my memory and thinking for a couple of years. My wife and I started noticing that I left the gas on after cooking dinner, which of course is really dangerous. And I do all the cooking at our house, because my wife is unwell. I never had any trouble remembering to turn it off before, but I started leaving it on more often. So I made a little piece of card, which on one side says 'Gas On' and on the other says 'Gas Off'. So now I've got in the habit of putting it in front of the gas stove when the gas is on, and then later I can check to see that I've flipped it over to the 'Gas Off' side. But I'm not sure how effective it is, because I still have to remember to look at it! I'm not sure how I can improve it. Any suggestions?

Experiences Read and learn from other peoples' experiences**Getting a diagnosis***By Cory Matthews*

My mother was behaving differently and I wasn't sure whether it was normal for her age. She was repeating herself more often, telling me things that she had already said earlier, adamant she was telling me for the first time. It was a bit worrying. What I really wanted was some kind of measurement on my mother's situation, because I'm not a doctor. How would I know what was going on? So I asked my mother's GP to run some tests, which he did and then said she was fine. But I wasn't convinced after that. There were still things that concerned me about my mother's memory.

So next time we went, I asked the GP if there were any memory clinics in Auckland. He said no. I found one online, it was in Greenlane, and called him one day and told him about it. He said, no, there are no memory clinics in Auckland, that I must be confusing it with a Greenlane in England. This went on for two years. Things weren't getting any better. So one day I called Alzheimer's Auckland and they said, 'Of course there are memory clinics in Auckland - tell your GP to refer your mother to one.' We have only just managed to see a memory specialist, but the point is that it was really difficult to actually get a diagnosis for my mother. And we have definitely changed doctors.

Experiences Read and learn from other peoples' experiences**Youth doesn't go on forever***By Beatrice Gibson*

I got such a shock one day while driving. I was approaching an intersection near my house and didn't recognise any of the usual familiarities. I looked around and didn't know where I was, even though I was in my own neighbourhood and had driven this same route many times before. At that point I realised I needed to get checked out. Living alone, I needed to know whether or not this was the start of dementia or something.

So I was assessed in December and they said I had mild cognitive impairment. But I don't know what the diagnosis means, or how significant it is. Is it important? Very important? Or not very important? I don't know. I was assessed again about a year later and I was looking forward to that appointment, because I really needed to know if I was on a downhill slide. So I was assessed and I had actually improved since the first time, which was such a relief. But all of this has been a reminder for me that youth doesn't go on forever, and at some point you have to confront some of the limitations of old age head on.

Links & Resources

Here are some useful links and resources:

Age Concern New Zealand

A charitable organisation dedicated solely to people over 65.

<https://www.ageconcern.org.nz/>

Alzheimer's NZ

Information and resources relating to dementia.

<https://www.alzheimers.org.nz/>

Carers

Information, advice, learning and support for carers of people living with dementia.

<http://carers.net.nz/>

Dementia Auckland

Information and support for people living with dementia.

<http://www.dementiaauckland.org.nz/>

Eldernet

A comprehensive information service that focuses on issues concerning older people in New Zealand.

<https://www.eldernet.co.nz/Home>

Neurological Foundation of New Zealand

A New Zealand charity that funds vital research and ongoing education into neurological disorders.

<https://neurological.org.nz/>

Seniorline

Information on how to get help at home, community services and rest homes.

<https://www.seniorline.org.nz/>