

Cognitive Effects of Depression

Mental health conditions impact how you think, feel and process information. Depression impacts your ability to think and function so here are tips on tools and recommendations for overcoming some of the challenges that come with depression.

Attention.

People experiencing depression are more likely to face challenges in focusing and maintaining attention during tasks. The good news is that attention can be improved with practice. Mindfulness and meditation exercises work in helping people improve attention¹⁻².

Memory.

Depression can affect memory by impairing the ability to store information properly. People with depression typically have difficulties remembering information, typically positive events³. Mindfulness and meditation have been shown to improve memory recall and working memory. In addition, physical and mental exercise also help with memory. Mental exercises that improve memory include crossword puzzles and Sudoku. The key is to keep pushing your brain fitness by engaging in mentally challenging exercises⁴⁻⁵.

Executive function.

Depression can reduce your ability to control and coordinate your thoughts to guide behaviors. With depression, it may take longer to complete tasks because of difficulties in planning, organizing information, sticking to tasks, and multi-tasking. People with depression may also experience challenges in shifting their focus to adapt to changes in situations. This ability, called cognitive flexibility, is critical for problem-solving and using coping skills. Executive function can be difficult to improve, but “exergames” – a popular way to combine exercise with video games using X-Box, Nintendo, Play Station and other devices – that use strategic thinking and physical movement have been shown to help⁶⁻⁷.

Information processing and decision-making.

Depression can also reduce the speed of information processing, taking longer to comprehend, analyze and solve problems. This leads to people with depression often experiencing difficulties with decision-making, which can impact all facets of life from social to occupational. To combat the delay in processing power, a person’s brain will often rely on an intuition or ‘first thought.’ Accordingly, responses can be impulsive and not well thought out. Also, information may not be processed fast enough to be remembered and used to respond appropriately. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness are effective in improving information processing speed⁸⁻¹⁰. CBT can help you develop strategies to process information more efficiently and combat other challenges that often come with depression.

What can help.

Most medications prescribed for depression target how you feel, but may have minimal effects on how you think. Fortunately, medication combined with CBT and other recommendations included here are important tools for tackling the cognitive effects of depression.

Being proactive in addressing depression with mindfulness and meditation, CBT and other therapies and medication can improve attention, memory, executive function, information processing, decision-making and how you feel. Resiliency training is also a great tool for executive function and decision-making.

References

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Right Direction is an initiative from the American Psychiatric Association Foundation's Center for Workplace Mental Health and Employers Health, a professional benefits organization. Right Direction is supported by Takeda Pharmaceuticals U.S.A., Inc. (TPUSA) and Lundbeck U.S. The information on this website is not intended to replace medical advice from your doctor. ©2013 - 2020 Right Direction.