



Royal Devon
University Healthcare
NHS Foundation Trust

Session 4:
Cognitive Difficulties
“Brain Fog”



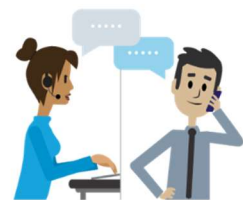
Cognitive difficulties / brain fog

Often called “brain fog”, cognitive difficulties refer to problems with mental functioning – concentration and short-term memory in particular. It can be a very worrying and frustrating part of having chronic fatigue, and the cognitive difficulties can fluctuate and vary from mild to severe.

Often, as our fatigue increases our cognition is affected, because cognitive tasks, as well as physical tasks, demand energy.

Common cognitive difficulties:

- Short-term memory problems.
- Difficulties with processing incoming information and retrieving stored information.
- Trouble finding the right word, remembering or mixing up commonly used words.
- Problems with carrying out everyday tasks that involve any form of sustained mental activity or complex processing.
- Struggling to concentrate, focus or maintain attention.



Concentration

Concentration can be defined as ‘the continued focusing of one’s attention on something, and the ability to sustain such focus’ (Oxford English Dictionary 2023).

Fatigue, along with the sensory overload experienced by many people with chronic fatigue (e.g. bright lights, loud noises, pain) can lead to a feeling of overwhelm and difficulties in filtering out unnecessary information. This leads to problems concentrating and attending to the relevant information, which is an essential part of storing and organising things to your memory.

See the image below for other factors that can impact the ability to concentrate.

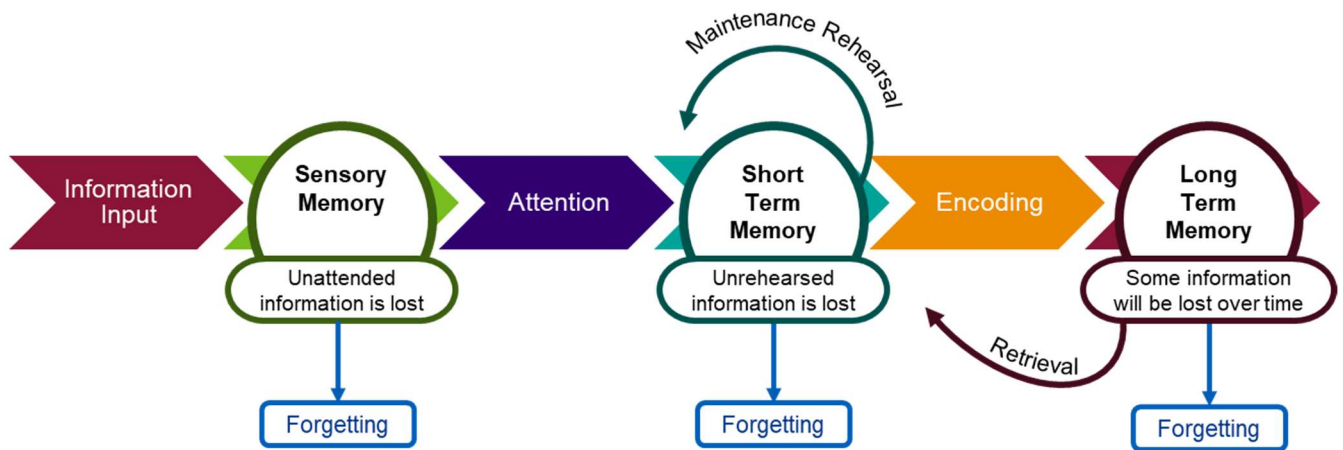


Memory

Problems with memory are common when living with chronic fatigue, but some people worry that it is related to a deteriorating condition such as dementia. However, as previously mentioned, the underlying cause of memory problems is related to the impact your symptoms have on your ability to concentrate and store memories.

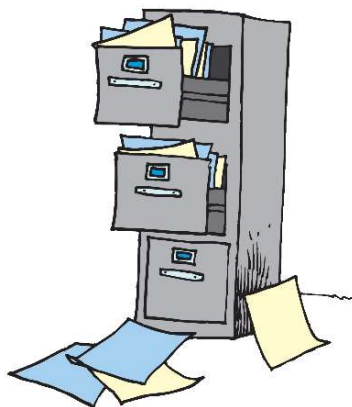
A model of human memory

Memory is the process of taking in information from your environment, attending to it, rehearsing it, filing it and then later retrieving that information.



(Atkinson and Shiffrin, 1968)

It is important to note that not everything needs to be stored. Forgetting non-essential information is a normal and natural part of the filtering and filing process.



Improving your concentration and memory

The table below outlines common strategies people use to improve their concentration and memory. Tick the ones that apply to you currently, and ones you may wish to use.

Strategy	Currently using	Planning to use
Environment		
Awareness of sensory stimuli (light, noise, temperature)		
Consider reducing distractions such as hunger or pain		
Allocate set places for important items (e.g. glasses, keys)		
Resources		
Lists, diaries, calendars, post-it notes		
Setting alarms or reminders on mobile phones		
Using electronic devices		
Using voicemail to screen calls		
Message or reminder notebook		
Rehearse and repeat things you want to remember		
Pacing and grading		
Set smaller goal and aim to increase concentration in small steps		
3Ps (pace, plan, prioritise)		
Regular rest breaks		
Mix and match cognitive and physical activities		
Expectations of self and others		
Set realistic standards		
4Ds (do it, ditch it, delay it, delegate it)		
Be kind to yourself		
Ask people to give you more time		
Ask people to speak slowly and repeat if needed		

