9 Tips for Limiting MS Memory Loss

by ERIC PATTERSON

Multiple Sclerosis and Your Memory

Multiple sclerosis (MS) takes pieces of you. The more pieces it takes, the less of you is left. There will be less of you to play with your kids and less of you to perform well at work. One important piece taken by MS is your memory.

While most MS patients' long term memory is left unaffected, short term memory can take a big hit. Remembering things like names, appointments, where you put something, or how to get somewhere can become difficult.

Your short-term memory serves as your connection to the world around you. Staying engaged with the people, places and things that you enjoy depends on your memory; without it, you are left disassociated from your environment.

The Role of Myelin

The pieces MS takes are both figurative and literal. MS causes your body's immune system to attack nerves located in the brain, spine and eyes. During the attack, a coating called myelin is ripped away from the part of the nerve that sends signals to other nerves. Once the myelin is gone, it is replaced by scar tissue.

Think of myelin as the plastic coating around an electrical wire. The coating keeps the electricity stable and directed correctly. Without the myelin, the signals sent throughout your nervous system can be interrupted or miscommunicated. This is why people with MS tend to have a mix of symptoms and impairments, including things like numbness and tingling, and difficulty walking.

The types of impairments created by demyelination (the act of losing the myelin insulation) depend on what nerves are damaged in the process. If you are having vision issues, then your optic nerve is likely targeted. If you are having speech problems, MS is attacking language centers located in the left hemisphere of your brain.

Some symptoms are permanent as the scar tissue is irreversible, while other symptoms will improve as inflammation in certain areas lessens.

If the areas of your brain responsible for short term memory have been compromised, you'll likely experience trouble with your memory. Other common cognitive issues associated with MS include having trouble focusing, processing new information, planning and prioritizing and remembering words.

Next page: nine tips for boosting your memory.

Memory Boosters

Even though there is no certain way to end the symptoms of multiple sclerosis, using cognitive behavioral interventions can help to reduce MS memory loss while improving clarity and concentration. Cognitive behavioral interventions target thoughts and behaviors to manage your daily functioning. Seeing a therapist, especially one that specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy, is a great way to find solutions tailored for you.

The interventions below are helpful guidelines that may help to improve your memory, attention and focus.

- **Be preventative –** The best way to improve your memory is to put yourself in a position of success. Get plenty of sleep. Reduce fatigue. Work exercise into your life. Monitor you moods, as depression can be associated with poor attention. Avoid distractions. Play memory games to help prevent MS dementia. Doing these to the best of your ability will increase your resources enabling you to devote more brainpower to memory.
- **Limit distractions –** If you have been having trouble concentrating or thinking clearly distractions will only make this worse. When you attention is needed, turn off music and the TV. Put down your phone and make good eye contact with the person or thing that deserves your attention. Encourage the people around to you make eye contact with you while they are speaking.
- **Do one thing at a time –** People pride themselves on their ability to multitask and, maybe this is appropriate for them. For you, do one thing at a time. Start it and follow it through until completion. This will take memory out of the equation.
- **Leave notes –** A small notepad or sticky notes are friends to the person with MS. Use them. Interruptions and distractions are unavoidable so if you must take a break in your task, leave yourself a message and you can get back to it soon. Perhaps using a voice recorder on your phone is a more convenient option.

- **Slow down –** Putting pressure on yourself to move quickly and to be more productive leads to you feeling scattered and confused. Reminding yourself to slow down is a very helpful cognitive intervention. Moving slowly will preserve energy and extend the limit of your mental resources. Moving steadily will maintain the momentum built and make it more likely you will complete additional tasks.
- **Make lists –** Not only can you write down reminders when interrupted but making lists throughout the day is a great option also. Write down what is left to do and what you have already completed. This will move you forward and improve feelings of accomplishment. Is there anything better than crossing something off your list?
- **Build a routine –** This is the most important behavioral intervention you can do to improve your memory. Routines build habits. Habits grow to be so ingrained in your functioning that they become instinctual. Take your medication at the same time every day. Go to the grocery store on the same day of the week. Your environment will trigger the action reducing your responsibility to remember.
- **Use technology –** Are you utilizing your smartphone to its fullest potential? There are many useful apps built specifically for people with MS. They can help you track your symptoms, manage medication and appointments as well as making lists and giving reminders. Your phone may come preloaded with voice recognition and the ability to set easy reminders and alarms. The benefit is there if you use it.
- **Know when to throw in the towel –** Some days will be too challenging. Rather than trying to maintain your regular plans and functions, decide to stay home and rest. Sometimes doing nothing is better than attempting many tasks only to have them end in frustration, disappointment and feelings of failure. Used in moderation, this tool is very effective.

No longer should you resign yourself to a life of poor memory. Have realistic expectations of yourself but work to maintain what you have and push to improve. These cognitive behavioral interventions provide a framework for experimentation. Interventions give you the power to remember.