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solutions for daily life

Cognitive Function

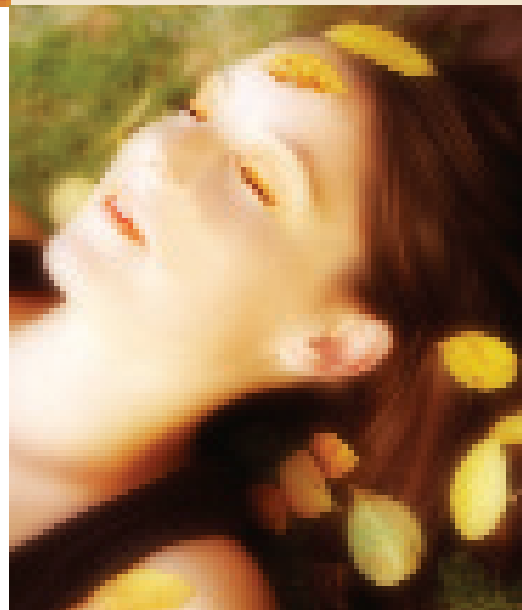
Repetition and reiteration can help lay tracks of memory. Don't be afraid to ask people to repeat instructions or other information. Even better, put what they said into your *own* words and say it back to them. Similarly, repeat information to yourself aloud even as you write it down. The writing and the speaking reinforce each other and the thought you're trying to remember.



Get treatment for other disorders. Pain, depression and sleep deprivation can influence your ability to concentrate and remember. Don't just assume every cognitive problem is directly related to CFS. Proper treatment for other medical conditions may help remove additional cognitive obstacles. On the flip side, talk to your doctor about how current medications could be adversely affecting your cognitive abilities.



Emerging evidence suggests that getting enough of nutrients like iron, zinc and B vitamins may help stave off cognitive decline. Researchers found a reduction in concentration and short-term memory associated with low iron intake in women who were dieting. In men, as iron and zinc levels declined, so did attention span. Other studies are showing that levels of B vitamins may correlate with spatial ability and memory. One study has found that B vitamins help break down homocystine, an amino acid found in higher levels in individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia.



Distractions are the enemy of concentration. Background noise, conversation and attempts to multi-task can get in the way of focus. Try to keep the TV off when working on something that requires attention. Avoid doing two things at once or having a conversation while working on a cognitive task. And don't feel guilty about having to pare things down. Productivity gurus are now advising businesses that multitasking actually impairs work quality. If the corporate world can recognize the value of pacing tasks, so can we.

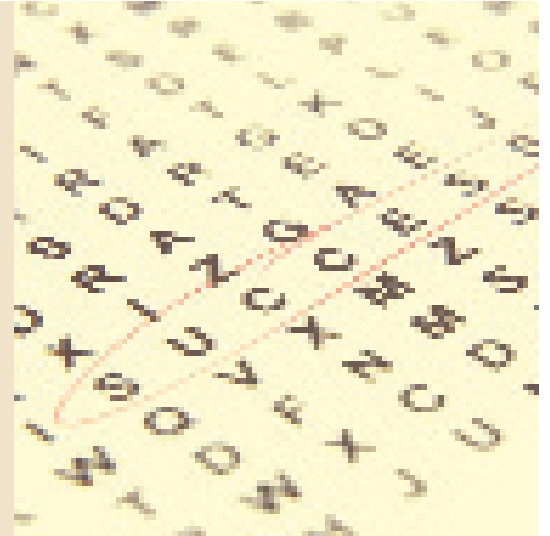
Experts agree that wise food choices can prevent such nutrient deficiencies. Iron and zinc are best absorbed from lean meat, poultry, seafood and fortified cereals. Meat and dairy products are good sources of B-12, as are fortified cereals. However, people over 50 may also need to take a B-12 supplement to compensate for a common age-related decrease in the ability to fully absorb the nutrient.

People with CFS often link convenience with cognitive coping. For example, one person told our editors that he keeps ready-made food at the front of his refrigerator and fresh fruit at hand to keep him from wandering through the kitchen several times before forming a plan for meals. Another writes important tasks for the day on individual, loose-fitting rubber bands that she wears on her wrist. As she completes a task, she removes the corresponding band. In this way, these individuals cope with the worst days of brain fog.

People with chronic fatigue syndrome are likely to experience cognitive difficulties such as memory lapses, trouble processing information and “brain fog.” Cognitive stimulation and good mental hygiene may help improve brain function or at least work around the challenges faced. Here are some tips to help clear the fog.



Many people experience better cognitive performance during certain times of the day. For instance, some with CFS have concentration problems in the late afternoon, late evening or early morning. Others experience higher capacity first thing in the morning and wear down mentally as the day progresses. Try to determine the times you experience mental peaks (and valleys) and plan your activities around them.



Mental fatigue is to the brain what physical fatigue is to the body. Take mental rest periods of 5 to 10 minutes for each hour of mental activity. Remove yourself from the work or social setting to engage in a period of quiet meditation or daydreaming. Take a moment to disengage from the tasks at hand, and let your mind relax. If helpful, picture a peaceful setting or flowing colors to allow your mind to recharge without a task-oriented goal.



Over the years, studies have shown that the human brain has an amazing capacity to “rewire itself” and forge new capacity for cognitive processing and memory recall. Activities like doing crosswords, jigsaw puzzles or playing cards can help keep your brain exercised.

There are also a number of “neurobic” products on the market to aid this process. Some are elaborate and expensive, yet others are very accessible. Brain Fitness (\$64.95) and BrainBuilder 3.0 (\$49.95) are computer programs with exercises to build your cognitive processing abilities—requiring just 10 or 20 minutes a day, respectively. They can be ordered online from www.toolsforwellness.com.

For those who have trouble using a computer, brain activity books exist, one of which is called *Keep Your Brain Alive: 83 Neurobic Exercises* by Lawrence Katz and Manning Rubin (\$8.95). There are also word game books and the new Sudoku “brain puzzles” available on the magazine racks at the grocery store.

Visualization, linking and association are helpful memory practices. In *visualization*, you picture what is being said in order to help “capture” it. *Linking* connects a small group of words, such as a short grocery list. If you need bananas, cereal and dog food, you picture your dog eating cereal with sliced bananas. The image is definitely memorable. *Association* is where you recall something recent by connecting it with something you already know, like remembering a name by associating it with a song that includes the same name.

Memory aids abound, from PDAs and elaborate planners to sticky notes and calendars of all sizes. But not all of these items work equally well for everyone. Find what works for you and use it. Many people report that color-coding their calendars for medical, household and social activities helps them keep better track of tasks and engagements. The key is to keep the same tool close at hand and write things down immediately—even if you later transfer your “spur of the moment” notes to another device.