

# 5 STEPS FOR MANAGING COGNITION

At least 65% of people with MS  
experience cognitive changes

## QUICK FACTS

- Cognitive Changes can occur at any time in the disease course – even as a first symptom.
- They're unrelated to level of physical disability, but occur more commonly with progressive MS.
- They are directly related to brain tissue loss – or atrophy.
- Cognitive changes generally happen slowly.
- Early identification is essential because cognitive problems are a primary reason that people leave the workforce.

## STEP 1: RECOGNIZING COGNITIVE CHANGES

**Slowed Information Processing** is the hallmark of cognitive change in MS. Your brain processes incoming information more slowly, which makes it difficult to keep up with things like conversations, meetings, TV shows, etc.

**Impaired Learning & Memory** makes it harder for you to learn and retain new information. You may need several repetitions to retain the information. Memory for long-ago events is unimpaired.

**Attention & Concentration Problems** make it difficult to focus on a task, switch flexibly between tasks, or multi-task.

**Word-Finding Problems** interfere with conversations.

**Executive Functioning** problems make it difficult to organize, plan, prioritize, or make sound judgements.

## STEP 2: ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF

Describe your cognitive challenges to your MS provider and request a cognitive screening. For example:

- “I have been struggling at my job because I can’t remember things.”
- “I’m unable to plan my day or my projects at work so I’m missing deadlines,”
- “My family is frustrated by my forgetting everything they tell me.”
- “I would like a cognitive screening to see what’s going on. Could you please refer me to someone who can do the screening and whatever other testing I might need?”

**Screening at the time of diagnosis and every six months thereafter is recommended for every person with MS.**

## STEP 3: WORKING WITH THE HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS WHO CAN HELP YOU

A **Mental Health Professional** can determine if you are depressed. Treating depression improves cognition.

**Neuropsychologists** provide in-depth assessments of cognitive function. A full neuropsychological evaluation is required for any person who is applying for Society Security Disability based on cognition.

Some **Clinical Psychologists** provide cognitive evaluations as well as cognitive rehabilitation therapy.

Some **Speech/Language Pathologists** and **Occupational Therapists** evaluate cognition and provide treatment.

The optimal treatment for cognitive challenges involves learning about tools and strategies that can help you compensate for your cognitive challenges at work and home. Physical activity (as recommended by a **Physical Therapist**) has also been shown to positively improve cognitive function.

## STEP 4: HELPING OTHERS UNDERSTAND YOUR COGNITIVE CHANGES

Cognitive changes are invisible to others and very confusing. You can help them understand.

- “This is an important conversation. Can we talk in a quiet place without distractions?”
- “Let’s create a family calendar to help me track all our activities without having to ask you over and over again?”
- “I’m having trouble keeping up with this conversation. Could you please slow down a bit so I can be sure I get it?”
- “Let me make a note of what you’re saying so I can remember it later.”

## STEP 5: TAPPING HELPFUL RESOURCES

Can Do MS has a variety of helpful programs and resources when it comes to symptom management. Check out our website to explore our offerings and learn more: [CanDo-MS.org](https://www.CanDo-MS.org)

