Functional memory disorder

Information for patients
Therapy Services
What is normal memory?

Memory varies from person to person but it is important to note that it is normal to forget. We forget much of what we see or hear because of how our memory functions.

There are three key steps:

1. **Encoding or initial learning.** This requires attention and if the thing to be remembered is boring or everyday then we often forget it. This means that we forget many facts soon after we hear them.

2. If you want to increase the chance of remembering a fact then making it more vivid or emotional helps. This part of memory function is called **consolidation or storage**.

3. The final part of normal memory is **retrieval.** This requires the brain to find the right word or right memory from details that have been stored over many decades. Events that have been retrieved or remembered many times are easier to find. Sometimes this process fails such as tip of the tongue moments. This is normal and common. It is sometimes called blocking because the other memory comes up in its place. This could be a similar sounding word for instance ball for tall, or a word from the same category such as banana for orange, or calling your children by the name of their younger sibling etc.

What is functional memory disorder?

Functional memory disorder describes a condition where an individual can experience poor memory function but no physical cause can be found. Worry, stress, difficulties sleeping, financial burden, life changing events and busy lives can affect how effectively our brain attends to and processes the information we are given every day.
Are functional memory disorders common?

A significant proportion of people who attend memory clinic are diagnosed with functional memory disorder. Memory difficulties caused by functional memory disorder can have a significant impact on daily life however it is important to recognise that it is possible to treat and improve functional memory disorder.

Functional memory problems can often be explained as a consequence of poor concentration or inability to cope with too much information. If you are not concentrating to begin with, perhaps because you are tired, or distracted, then you are not going to remember things.

What can I do to help my memory difficulties improve?

**Stress/worry:** Some individuals find that receiving this diagnosis can help improve symptoms as they have been worrying about the possibility of a degenerative memory disorder. Talking to friends, family or employers about worries may be helpful. Some individuals may feel they require formal counselling which is possible to access via your GP. Activities that promote relaxation and physical fitness have been shown to be of benefit. For those with financial difficulties the citizen’s advice bureau or debt support trust can offer support and advice.

**Mood:** Low mood, depression, anxiety can impact on our memory function. It is important to know that you can have memory and concentration symptoms without anxiety or depression. If you are concerned about this talk to your GP. Exercise, social activities and counselling are recommended. Some people find that anti-depressant tablets are helpful.

**Sleep:** Difficulties in sleep patterns should be addressed. Occasionally medical problems or frequent night time toilet trips can affect sleep. Your doctor can help you rule out or identify any medical causes. Good sleep hygiene can promote a healthy sleep. Keeping active and avoiding napping in the day will help. Ensure you wind down in the
evening. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and alcohol close to bedtime. Reserve your bedroom for sleeping; avoid watching TV and using mobile phones.

**Exercise:** Exercise has been shown to improve low mood and can improve memory and reduce risk of developing dementia. You may ask your GP about what exercises you should do.

**Keep mentally and socially active:** Keep learning—research has shown that people who continue mentally stimulating activities have lower risk of developing dementia. Likewise maintaining social activities with friends, families, groups, volunteering can all have a beneficial action on well-being and memory.

**Useful strategies**

When experiencing memory difficulties you should consider using the following strategies to support you:

- Pay more attention to planning activities and keeping a routine.
- Use checklists, diaries, calendars and notice boards.
- Mobile devices such as smart phones have electronic diaries and can be set up to provide audible reminders.
- There are also tricks to make your memory work better for you by making memories more vivid.

A small number of people may find that their memory difficulties impact on work. If concerned you should talk to your employer who may be able to provide support.