

VA

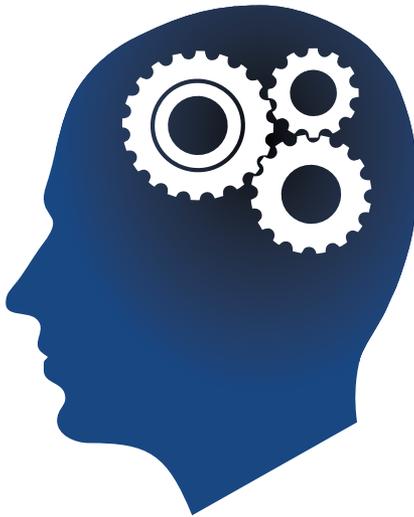


U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Geriatric Research, Education, and Clinical Centers

BRAIN HEALTH AND QUALITY OF LIFE IN AGING

Tips on Staying Sharp and Active



DID YOU KNOW?

- Physical and emotional health are linked with brain health in many ways.
- *Brain Health* means that your brain keeps working well as you get older.
- This booklet lists some of the reasons for problems with memory and thinking, and what you can do about them.
- Almost all products sold to protect your brain, memory, or thinking are not supported by science.
- Talk to your provider if you are worried about changes in your memory, or thinking.

Sleep recharges your brain.

Your brain needs quality sleep at night to work well during the day.

If you sleep poorly, it may affect your thinking.

- Sleep disorders are more common with aging.
- Many people have unhealthy sleep habits.

What you can do:

Work on healthy sleep habits:

- Keep a bedtime routine
- Do not read or watch TV in bed
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol around bedtime
- Avoid using electronics before bedtime
- Allow your mind time to relax

Sleep apnea is a common reason for poor sleep. The signs of sleep apnea are loud snoring, gasping for breath during sleep, and daytime tiredness. If you notice these, tell your health care provider. You may need a sleep study. There is an effective and safe treatment for the problem.



MENTAL HEALTH

Stress, depression, and anxiety interfere with thinking clearly.

Stressful life situations, worry, or low mood can make it harder to focus on what is happening around you.

People with depression often feel that their thoughts are slowed down or confused.

Worrying or being anxious is distracting and can make it hard to concentrate.

What you can do:

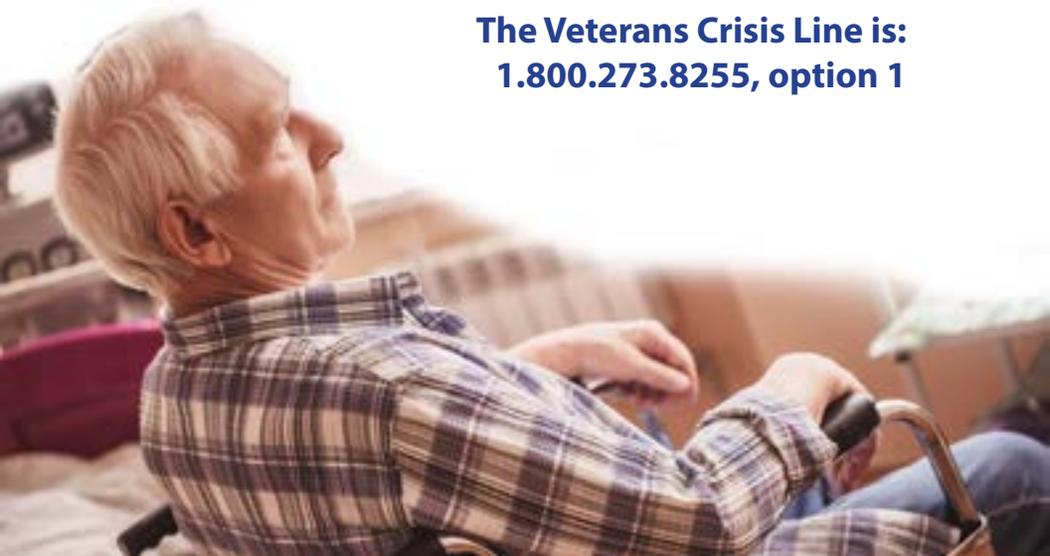
If you are feeling unusually sad, anxious, uninterested, or are “stressed out”, talk to your health care provider about it.

Mental Health help is available to you.

Discuss mental health issues with any of your VA providers.

If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself, get help right away. You can dial 9-1-1 or go to an emergency room.

**The Veterans Crisis Line is:
1.800.273.8255, option 1**



POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

PTSD can interfere with clarity of thinking.

PTSD can stop you from being present in the “here and now” and bad memories can intrude in your daily life.

People with PTSD may “zone out,” misplace things, feel lost, or forget what people tell them.

PTSD-related problems with attention and focus often come and go, and may be worse during stress, or when you’re in certain situations.

What you can do:

- Be kind to yourself!
- You can learn skills to improve your ability to remember. For example, use memory aids and mindfulness to help you stay in the present vs. the past.
- Get treatment for PTSD.

Visit <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/> for resources and more information, or talk to your provider about treatment.



LONELINESS

Relationships and social connection help keep your brain sharp!

Loneliness is a feeling of not belonging, or of being disconnected.

You can feel lonely even if you are living with other people, and even if you are not depressed.

Loneliness can develop for various reasons at different times of life.

What you can do:

- Find out about activities in your area. Talk to your healthcare provider or a social worker about programs.
- **Group activities** can improve emotional health and functioning.
- **Get involved** with hobbies that you used to enjoy and join groups who share your interests (e.g., book clubs, social groups, or volunteering).
 - **Make contact** with others.
Don't wait for them to call you.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

An active mind is helped by an active body.

People who engage in regular physical activity show better thinking and memory than those who are inactive.

Regular physical activity and exercise improve how your body and your brain work.

What you can do:

Remember that even small increases in activity can have **big benefits**.

There is an activity for everyone!

- **Walk more** if you spend a lot of time sitting.
- Consider **chair exercise** if you can't walk.
- Talk to your provider in order to identify **safe physical activities** for you.
- Some VA clinics offer **classes**, such as MOVE!™, Tai Chi, or Yoga.
- **Set daily goals.**
- Find an **exercise buddy** or **join a group** to help keep you motivated.

For resources and information on becoming more active visit: <https://www.move.va.gov> or <https://go4life.nia.nih.gov>



SIDE EFFECTS

Some medications, alone or in combination, can cause confusion.

As people get older, they may become more sensitive to medication side effects.

Some types of medication commonly cause confusion.

Examples are:

- Medications to treat bladder problems
- Medications for sleep
- Narcotic pain medications
- Cold and flu medications

Taking a lot of pills increases the risk of side effects.

Drinking alcohol makes side effects more likely.

What you can do:

Discuss your medications with your pharmacist or health care provider, especially if you have concerns about side effects.

Also, discuss any supplements or over the counter medications you take or are considering.



VISION AND HEARING

Our eyes, ears, and brain work as a team.

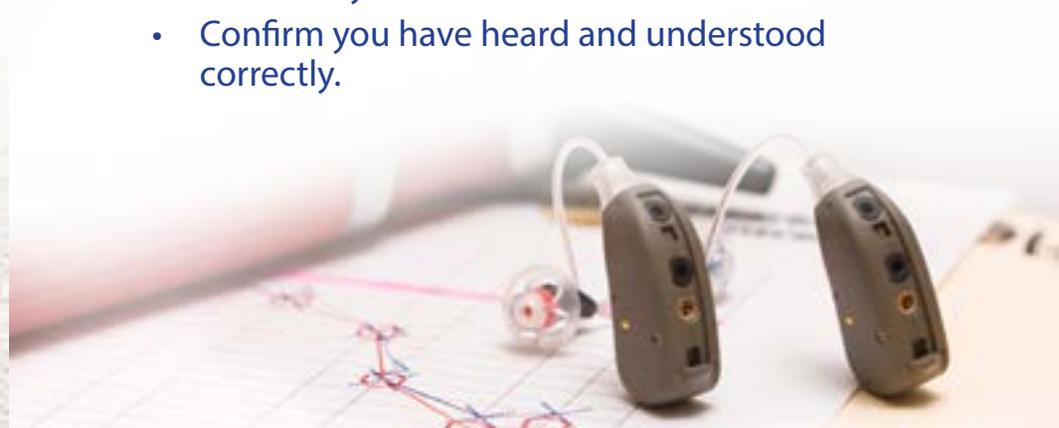
Seeing and hearing well helps the brain understand and remember new information.

As we get older:

- We need more **light** and more **contrast** to see well, even with glasses.
- We have trouble with **glare, depth perception**, and distinguishing **colors**.
- It is harder to **hear and understand** what people say.
- Listening takes extra concentration in noisy places, or if people speak quickly.

What you can do:

- Make sure your vision and hearing are at their best! Get regular check-ups!
- Use prescribed glasses and vision aids.
- Adjust light to fit your needs and tasks.
- See an audiologist. You may benefit from hearing aids or listening devices.
- Ask people to face you, and speak more slowly and clearly.
- Confirm you have heard and understood correctly.



MEDICAL PROBLEMS

The body and the brain are closely connected.

Poorly controlled medical conditions can cause confusion.

Look out for the following:

- An **infection** such as pneumonia or urinary tract infection
- **Dehydration** (too little fluid in the body)
- **Breathing problems**
- **Thyroid problems**
- **Diabetes** (high or very low blood sugars)
- **Abnormally low vitamin levels** found on blood tests
- **Anemia** (low red blood cells)

What you can do:

Make sure your medical conditions are well controlled.

Talk with your provider if you have concerns about how your medical problems are being managed.



BRAIN HEALTH TIPS

Protect and Improve your Brain Health

- **Sleep recharges your brain to work well during the day.**
Use healthy sleep habits to help you sleep well.
- **Stress, depression, and anxiety interfere with thinking clearly.**
Talk to your VA providers. Getting help with stress, depression, and worry helps your brain function better.
- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can make paying attention hard.**
Get treatment for PTSD! You can learn attention strategies and memory skills.
- **Relationships and social connection help keep your brain sharp!**
Connect or reconnect with persons or groups who share your interests.
- **Physical activity improves how well your brain works.**
For an active mind, keep your body fit! Ask your provider about physical activities safe for you.
- **Medications, alone or in combination, can cause confusion.**
Talk with your pharmacist or doctor about all medications and supplements you are taking or are considering.
- **Seeing and hearing well helps the brain to understand and remember new information.**
Get regular eye clinic and audiology clinic check-ups. Keep your vision and hearing at their best!
- **Poorly controlled medical problems can cause confusion.**
Look out for infections, dehydration, breathing problems, thyroid problems, diabetes, and anemia. Make sure your medical conditions are well controlled.

Visit
www.va.gov/geriatrics/brain
for more information about
these brain health topics, or an
electronic copy of this booklet.

Provider Notes:

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