

Promoting Independence in Spite of Cognitive Difficulties

Written by Thomas Vorwerk, M.S.

Introduction

As you age, you may realize you are experiencing some cognitive or memory challenges. You may have difficulty sequencing tasks or figuring out how to solve common problems.

Or it may become difficult to recall words or names. You may even have some challenges remembering what you need to do. All of these common problems can improve with practice or lend themselves to strategies that make them easier to figure out.

Having cognitive problems does not have to prevent you from being able to live alone. The hardest part may be convincing loved ones that you can manage on your own.

Some simple strategies may help improve your functioning. In the beginning you may need assistance from those people who are concerned about you. Ask them to read the information on the following pages. If they help you set up the suggested strategies and safeguards, they may be more comfortable with your desire to live independently.

Creating an Independence-Promoting Environment

Visual cues serve as memory aids that make it easier for older adults with memory problems to navigate their environment and complete tasks independently. Visual cues can be anything that helps you remember what to do—like putting a package by the front door so you'll remember to ship it. Cues should be explicit as to their purpose. Labels and signs will help.

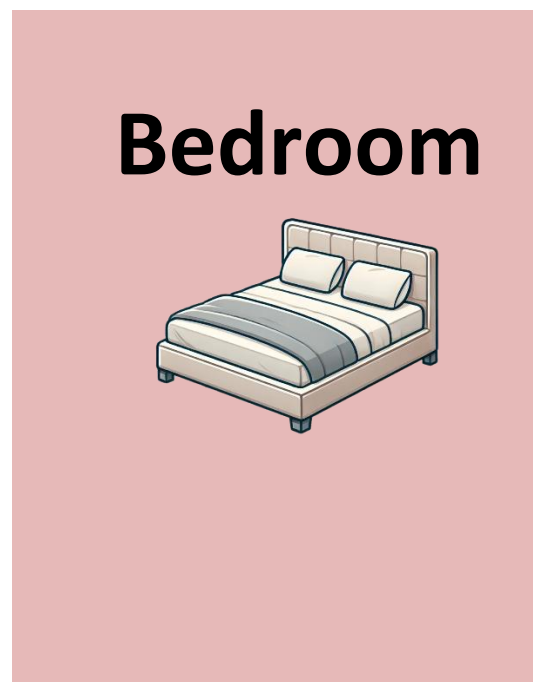
Labeling cabinets, drawers, and storage containers with their contents can be helpful for finding items. For instance, each drawer of a dresser can be labeled as “undergarments, socks, shirts, pants, etc.,” and a cabinet can be labeled with the contents inside: “cups, plates, bowls, etc.” Use clear, large print, and make labels as big as possible.



Labels can be further improved by putting pictures of the items on the label. So, a cabinet with boxed and canned goods could have a simple picture of a box of crackers and a can of soup. Adding pictures to labels allows you to associate both the words and the pictures with the memory of what contents are inside. This can improve your performance and help in decision making. It is also effective if you have difficulty reading or with your eyesight.

Placing clear, large-print signs in important areas like the bathroom, kitchen, and bedroom can aid recognition. For example, the bathroom door could have a sign with the word Bathroom and pictures of a toilet, shower, and sink. Place signs at the eye level.

Color coding for each room may also help, e.g. red bedroom, blue bathroom, yellow kitchen. Labels can be color coded with the room it is in. Directional signs like arrows or footprints on the floor can guide movement through the house, particularly for the pathway from the bedroom to the bathroom. Color code these as well.

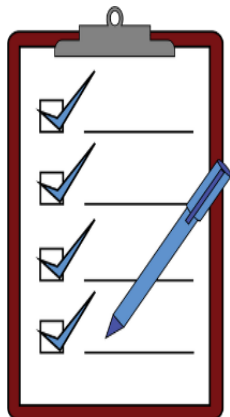




Arranging items within easy reach can reduce confusion and increase your ability to perform tasks independently. For instance, everyday dishes can be kept in a lower cabinet that's easy to access. Keys, glasses, and wallets can have designated spots on a table by the door to avoid misplacement. Grouped items, such as a newspaper and glasses, can be placed together. Consistently placing items in the same spot, like always putting the remote on the side table, can establish a predictable environment. To reduce visual clutter, keep countertops and surfaces clear except for essential items.

Creating dedicated spaces for hobbies or relaxation, such as a reading corner with a comfortable chair, good lighting, and a bookshelf, can encourage engagement in enjoyable activities. Quiet, distraction-free spaces can help you focus on tasks or help you relax when overwhelmed. Keep floors and pathways free of clutter to reduce the risk of falls.

A memory station placed where you'll most likely see it can be a focal point for essential reminders of appointments and tasks. For example, using a whiteboard in a common area, with different colors for different types of tasks (e.g., blue for appointments, red for urgent tasks,) will keep important information accessible. A large wall calendar to mark important dates and daily tasks can also be beneficial.



Effective Instructions for Everyday Routines

Maintaining a daily routine can be challenging if you are dealing with cognitive impairments. The various technologies and tools you may need can be confusing. You may want to avoid them. But visual aids are powerful tools to support you in your daily activities. They will help you remember important tasks.

Some tasks and routines have multiple steps or are more complex. Written instructions will help. They should be written in large, bold fonts that are easy to read. High contrast, such as black text on a white background, improves visibility and reduces eye strain.

The layout of instructions should be consistent, making them easier to follow. Laminating or using a page protector for instructions will keep them from wearing out.

Breaking down tasks into simple, numbered steps, each representing a single, clear action, helps make the process manageable and less overwhelming. Keep sentences short, and instructions explicit and easy to understand. For example, instead of saying, "Turn the TV on by pressing the power button located on the right side," say, "To watch TV, press the ON button on the right."

Here's an example for making a cup of tea:

1. Fill the kettle with water.
2. Place the kettle on the base and switch it on.
3. Put a tea bag in a cup.
4. Pour hot water into the cup.
5. Let it steep for a few minutes.
6. Remove the tea bag.
7. Add milk or sugar, if you like.

Making Hot Tea

1. Fill the kettle with water.



2. Place the kettle on the base and switch it on.

3. Put a tea bag in a cup.



4. Pour hot water into the cup.

5. Let it steep for 5 minutes.



6. Remove the tea bag.

7. Make sure it is cool before sipping! Add milk or sugar, if you would like.

Place a visual schedule of daily activities where you will be most likely to see it. This will greatly aid your independence. A morning schedule could look like this: include the steps:

1. Wash face
2. Brush hair
3. Put on fresh clothes
4. Breakfast at 8:00 AM
5. After breakfast, brush teeth

For more complex tasks like cooking or using technology, step-by-step visual checklists can make a big difference. Including pictures or diagrams alongside written instructions can improve understanding and recall. For instance, a checklist for making a sandwich could include images and steps like gathering bread, spreading butter, and adding filling.

A weekly planner can help keep track of appointments, social activities, and chores. Signs placed strategically around the house can serve as reminders for important tasks, such as “Turn off the stove” near the kitchen or “Lock the door” by the exit. Using color coding for different functions, like a red label for the power button and a green label for the volume control, can also aid recognition.

If your reading comprehension is good, more explicit and personal instructions may be beneficial. If you have trouble remembering to use the thermostat when you are too hot or too cold, instructions next to the thermostat may help.

“When I am hot, I will turn the thermostat to 68.”

“When I am cold, I will turn the thermostat to 73.”

You will be likely to read the **bold letters** when seeing or passing by the sign (which is why it is important to place the signs in multiple areas.) When the instructions are written in first person, you will know it’s part of your plan and complete the task.

Your morning schedule that you post may look something like this:

Morning Schedule

Wake Up: 7:00 AM

1. Wash face



2. Comb hair



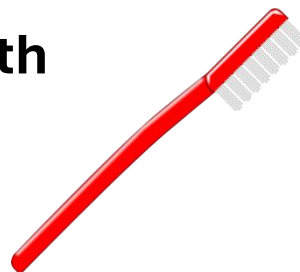
3. Put on fresh clothes



4. Breakfast at 8:00 AM



5. After breakfast, Brush teeth



Tools for Success

Modern technology can make daily tasks easier for you and for anyone who is assisting you.

Smart speakers, such as Amazon Echo or Google Nest, can help you be more independent with daily tasks. These devices respond to voice commands, making them easy to use. Other devices can program commands for setting timers, playing music, or making phone calls. Smart speakers can also provide reminders for medications, appointments, and daily activities to help you stay organized and independent.

If you are not comfortable with smart speakers, there are other effective ways to set reminders. Digital calendars with automatic alerts for medications and appointments can be beneficial. Apps that send notifications or alarms on phones and tablets also serve as great tools for keeping track of important tasks. Pill organizers with built-in alarms can remind you to take your medications on time.

Smart Speakers

Amazon Echo (Alexa) is the most widely used, with multiple options and varying options starting around \$30 – it is likely the best option! Look out for common Amazon deals throughout the year, such as Prime Day and Black Friday.

Google Nest is another option, but tends to be more expensive, and many Amazon-specific services are not compatible.

Reminders

American Lifetime offers a highly-rated digital clock designed for older adults. It has a large display, and alarms can be customized to include text, which can be used to remind you of medications and appointments.

A wide range of **weekly and monthly pill organizers with alarms** can be found online for a wide range of prices. Choose one within your price range and based on your needs. Choose one with different colored days.

Tablets featuring large icons and easy-to-navigate screens can help you effectively use them. They can be preloaded with essential apps and organized into clear categories, such as communication and entertainment.

Video call apps like Skype or Zoom can be set up with easy-to-access contacts, allowing you to make calls with just one or two taps.

Phones designed for simplicity, with large buttons and clear displays, are equally important. Setting up speed dial with important contacts, using both names and pictures, can help with quick and stress-free communication.

For TVs, universal remote controls with large, clearly labeled buttons can be pre-programmed for TVs and cable boxes to minimize confusion. Smart TVs equipped with voice-activated remotes allow users to change channels, adjust volume, and search for shows without having to use buttons. Favorite channels can be pre-programmed, and buttons can be labeled with symbols or colors for easy recognition. Additionally, the TV's guide can be used to set reminders, ensuring that individuals do not miss their favorite shows.

For maintaining a comfortable living environment, smart thermostats like Nest or Ecobee can be controlled with a simple app interface or voice command, and can be programmed to maintain specific temperatures throughout the day. This eliminates the need for manual adjustments.

Video Calling

Here are guides on setting up contacts for both **Skype** and **Zoom**:

<https://www.agespace.org/tech/skype-beginners-guide>

https://support.zoom.com/hc/en/article?id=zm_kb&sysparm_article=KB0065609

TVs

Many **large-button universal remotes** can be found online, some with only a few select buttons, and others with more. Choose one within your price range and ability.

Smart Thermostats

Google Nest and **Ecobee** are two popular smart thermostats with many capabilities. However, a cheaper and simpler choice is the Amazon Smart Thermostat. It offers a simplified design, is easier to utilize, and is over \$100 cheaper than the other choices. If using Alexa, you can use voice commands to tell it to change the temperature.

If you have communication difficulties or hearing impairment, written communication is often effective. Most smart phones and tablets have capabilities to support your efforts.

Many phones have speech-to-text options built into the text messaging services. This means if someone wants to speak to you, they can speak into the phone and it will write what they are saying for you to read. And you can use speech-to-text to relay your message, allowing for accurate communication. Some text messaging services can save specific texts, so replies or requests you use often can be easily chosen.

Safety is a critical aspect of living independently. You need to learn to use emergency features on your devices, such as calling 911. Medical alert systems also provide an added layer of security, especially if the you live alone or go out alone.

If you have gotten lost in the past, your family can get a GPS tracking app so they'll be able to know your location and can be sure you are safe.

Automatic shut-off devices for appliances such as stoves and irons can help prevent accidents. These devices turn off the appliance if it is left on for a set period, reducing the risk of fire or injury. Timed night lights can also ensure safe navigation during nighttime trips to the bathroom or kitchen, reducing the risk of falls.

Safety

Guardians from Truecaller is a highly-rated GPS Tracking app for phones and tablets. It offers secure GPS tracking for family members, provides information on battery life and network strength and allows for quick emergency calling.

For **stove protection**, there are many options depending on the individual's need. Examples include automatic stove shut-off, fireproof stove top covers, stove knob covers, and oven door locks.

Night Lights, both timed and sensor-based can be found online. **Sensor-based lights** are generally less expensive, allowing for many to be placed. **Timed lights** are also an option, but require setup and are generally more expensive.

Assess your own needs and challenges and consulting healthcare professionals for recommendations tailored to your situation. You should

select devices that are user-friendly and match your level of technological experience. Whenever possible, opt for devices that offer a trial period. This allows for testing to ensure the device meets your needs.

Be Connected is an Australian government program aimed to allow individuals the opportunity to learn how to use technology, with an emphasis on older adults. They offer a free worldwide website designed for older adults to learn how to use things like phones, tablets, and computers. They offer online courses, often in the form of videos, with step-by-step instructions for all the device's basic functions. They are easy to understand, as well as accessible for people who are hard of seeing or hearing.

<https://beconnected.esafety.gov.au/topic-library>

Teaching & Practicing

Involvement: Involve your family in creating labels, signs, and instructions. Their input can make them more comfortable with the plan.

Practice Together: Go through the instructions together a few times until you both feel comfortable with the plan. Repetition builds confidence and familiarity.

Adjust as Needed: Be flexible and willing to adjust signs, labels, and instructions based on feedback and observation.

Independence: In your quest to maintain independence, do not allow others to take over doing what you are capable of doing for yourself.

Reminders and Positive Reinforcement: When you repeat key instructions you'll reinforce the steps to independence.

Verbal Fluency: If you have trouble finding the right words, you will benefit from "brain games." Brain games focus on word associations, word meanings, and common usages of words and phrases. AARP offers brain games specifically designed for older adults, both on their website and their app, "Staying Sharp."

Your verbal ability can also improve by engaging in regular conversation: the more you use words, the easier it is! Asking questions and sharing past stories, opinions, and wisdom you've gained will help with your word finding and your mental and emotional health. Don't try to rush your words. You

might even remind people that you sometimes have trouble finding the right words and ask them to be wait patiently for you to express yourself.

Conclusion

You may eventually feel you'd be more comfortable living in a senior community instead of living alone. But technology is available to help older individuals live independently even when they have memory or cognitive challenges.

You may need family members or friends to help you with your plan in the beginning, and you may need regular support of some kind, but even when you have cognitive difficulties, you can successfully live the life you desire.

About the Author - Thomas Vorwerk, M.S.

Thomas Vorwerk earned his M.S. in Psychological Science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, specializing in cognitive science and gerontology. Currently completing an M.S. in Mental Health Counseling, Tom is on the path to becoming a licensed counselor, or LPC MHSP, focusing on older adults and their caregivers with an emphasis on promoting cognitive resiliency and functional independence in older adults.

With hands-on experience in aging care settings, Tom has developed a strong interest in cognitive health and positive aging. He previously worked as an activity director in a facility for older adults which deepened his commitment to advocating for and supporting older adults.