

Normal aging or dementia? How psychologists can help

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It starts with the little things. You misplace your phone, forget an appointment, or drive off with your coffee mug on the roof of your car. After a while, the trickle of small memory lapses can start to feel like a flood. You may wonder, “Is this normal, or is something wrong with me?”

Or maybe you’re worried about a family member or friend. This person, who once seemed so sharp and on top of things, now appears overly forgetful or confused or irritable. You wonder if you should talk with them about this, but you don’t want to hurt their feelings or make them angry.

You’re not alone

The first thing to remember is that you’re not alone in your concerns. The Alzheimer’s Association estimates that half of all Americans over age 65 report sometimes or often noticing changes in their ability to think, understand, and remember things. About 22% worry that these changes significantly interfere with their ability to function. As of 2024, about 6.9 million Americans were living with Alzheimer’s or related dementias. (For more information, see [2024 Alzheimer's Disease Facts and Figures](#).)

Most people experience some changes in their thinking and memory as they get older. You may need more time to take in new information or recall information you already know. You may have some trouble finding the right words to express your thoughts, or thinking through a problem situation. In fact, even some younger people experience these symptoms as a result of stress, inadequate sleep, or multitasking.

When to worry

So how do you know what’s normal and what’s cause for concern? Here are some red flags to look out for:

- o Noticeable memory loss, especially to recently-learned information
- o Confusion about where you are, how you got there, what day or season it is

- o Trouble communicating your thoughts or understanding what others are saying
- o Trouble with spatial skills, such as getting lost when walking or driving
- o Trouble with motor skills, like how to get dressed or use eating utensils
- o Significant changes in personality or mood

What next?

Your first step should be to consult your family physician, who can help rule out medical causes for your symptoms (disease, infection, medication side effects, etc.). Your doctor may give you a brief cognitive screening test during your visit. This provides a rough estimate of your current level of cognitive functioning, but does not replace a comprehensive neuropsychological evaluation.

How psychologists can help

Psychologists are trained to administer and interpret a multitude of tests to evaluate your thinking, memory, perceptual and motor skills, and much more. A complete neuropsychological evaluation takes 4-6 hours, sometimes longer. During this time, the psychologist will talk with you and your family about your symptoms and how they relate to your previous level of functioning. Tests administered will evaluate the following areas, among others:

- o Verbal skills – listening and using language
- o Visual perception, spatial orientation, and visual/motor skills
- o Memory for auditory and visual material
- o Short-term, long-term, and working memory
- o Reasoning, judgment, and problem-solving
- o Attention and concentration
- o Depression, anxiety, or other psychological factors that can interfere with your ability to function

Psychologists can also help you and your family adjust to the life changes that accompany aging and/or declines in cognitive functioning. PPA's [Psychologist Locator](#) can direct you to a psychologist specializing in this area. Click on "Areas of Practice" and then on "Alzheimer's/Dementia" to find a specialist near you.