
Alcohol related brain impairment - memory loss

Summary

- It is important to learn new information with a clear mind and without distractions.
 - Memory can be improved if information to be learned is repeated frequently and rephrased.
 - Using memory aids can help.
 - One of the simplest ways to improve memory and communication is to rehearse information they need to remember.
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Memory impairment is one of the most common problems associated with alcohol related brain impairment (ARBI). Some people struggle to remember things from day-to-day, while others have difficulty remembering skills, knowledge or information they have learnt in the past.

People with ARBI can experience problems with:

- learning new information
- focusing on a topic of conversation
- retrieving information from the past stored in their memory. They often have difficulty remembering what happened when (the timing of events in memory)
- remembering recent events or information they have recently acquired
- making errors when recalling information from memory. This can result in information being muddled or incorrect, and is sometimes called 'confabulation'. Importantly, the confabulations are caused by memory failures – they are not lies.

There are strategies that can help a person with ARBI to improve their memory and cope with the daily frustrations of their impairment.

Understanding memory limits with ARBI

Don't assume that people with ARBI will understand and remember what is being discussed. They may nod their head and say they understand when in reality they don't. If the person with ARBI is aware of their memory limits, they can learn how to deal with them.

Memory may be improved by:

- planning ahead and allowing adequate time to read and review information
- reducing distractions while memorising information
- learning information with a clear mind – memory difficulties can be made worse by tiredness, stress, anxiety, anger or intoxication.

Communicating effectively with a person with ARBI

People with ARBI often have difficulty focusing on a topic of conversation. They can be easily distracted by less relevant points of discussion and wander off in other directions. You can get them back on track by:

- reminding them of the conversation topic
 - redirecting the conversation by repeating a question
 - using a pencil and paper to focus discussion
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- using concrete and familiar terms
- breaking down information into small important points
- slowing down when you talk
- focusing discussion on one topic at a time.

One of the simplest ways to improve memory and communication is to rehearse information they need to remember. Encourage people with ARBI to:

- Ask for instructions or information to be repeated.
- Rephrase instructions in their own words and check that they have understood properly.
- When introduced to someone, immediately repeat the person's name and use it as much as possible.

Many people with memory problems related to ARBI respond best to questions with a 'yes' or 'no' answer. For example, instead of asking 'What did you do today?' ask 'Did you go out today?'. Communication can also be improved by providing cues or prompts to trigger memory.

Using memory aids

Using memory aids helps people with ARBI to make sure things are not forgotten. There is a range of aids available and their effectiveness depends on what best suits each person.

Some useful aids include:

- writing lists for shopping or jobs to do
- keeping a diary and using it as a daily organiser to record appointments, chores and important dates. Many people with an ARBI effectively use their mobile phone for this
- setting alarms and timers as reminders – for example, to take medication
- preparing written reminders, such as posters on the bathroom wall or notes next to the bathroom mirror
- using a whiteboard to clearly display daily routines, appointments and chores. Place it in a prominent position where it will be regularly seen (such as on the fridge door)
- organise set places within the house for important items (such as a bowl on a table near the door for keys and wallet).

Where to get help

- **arbias** – specialist services for people with acquired brain injury including alcohol and substance related brain impairment Tel. (03) 8388 1222
- Your regional Department of Health office.

Things to remember

- It is important to learn new information with a clear mind and without distractions.
- Memory can be improved if information to be learned is repeated frequently and rephrased.
- Using memory aids can help.
- One of the simplest ways to improve memory and communication is to rehearse information they need to remember.

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

ARBIAS

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