

Cognitive Communication Disorders

Information for professionals

What are cognitive communication disorders?

Cognitive communication disorders are difficulties in comprehension, expression, reading, writing or social interaction arising from cognitive impairments including attention, memory, information processing, and executive functions. They can occur in adults or children with conditions affecting cognition, including acquired brain injury and progressive neurological conditions.

Cognitive communication disorders are distinct from aphasia, dysarthria, developmental language disorders, and neurodevelopmental conditions (eg autism, ADHD, dyslexia). Overlapping features can make cognitive communication disorders harder to identify.

Cognitive communication disorders count as a disability under Equality Act (2010) so require provision of reasonable adjustments.

Signs and symptoms

Every person with a cognitive communication disorder is different but signs include:

- difficulty concentrating, processing, or remembering what they have heard or read
- trouble finding the right words or organising their thoughts
- talking or writing too much, going off topic, giving too much detail
- talking or writing too little, struggling to think of things to say, missing out important information
- appearing overly friendly, disinterested, blunt or rude
- difficulty understanding others' perspectives, feelings, social cues
- reduced insight into their difficulties.

Symptoms can fluctuate depending on the context, topic, fatigue, or emotion.

A useful screening tool is the

[Cognitive-Communication Checklist for Acquired Brain Injury \(https://brainandcommunication.ca\)](https://brainandcommunication.ca)



Impact

Cognitive communication disorders can affect any part of life. Common challenges include:

- forming and maintaining relationships
- understanding and participating in complex discussions and decisions
- writing
- participating in leisure and social activities.

Communication difficulties can lead to behaviours others find challenging, often misattributed to difficult personalities, non-compliance, or stereotypes.

Children and young people with cognitive communication disorders face added challenges. Difficulties can emerge and worsen over time as cognitive processes fail to mature as expected, making it harder to link current issues to a past diagnosis.

These changes can affect:

- confidence
- social inclusion
- quality of life
- and mental health

for both the individual and their family. They can have long-term consequences for family stability, academic achievement, employment outcomes, and increase vulnerability to exploitation or crime.



How to support people with cognitive communication disorders

Key principles:

Every person's needs are different, so always ask how best to support them

- don't assume their decision-making ability

- provide time and silence for speaking and communication tasks
- be patient and inclusive
- ensure the environment is quiet and calm
- monitor the impact of fatigue and provide breaks.

When speaking to the person:

- use clear, concrete, and familiar language
- ask one question at a time and be aware that open questions are harder
- check you have been understood
- read aloud complex written information
- provide information in written or visual formats
- revisit the conversation once the person has considered the information.

When the person is speaking:

- find the right time and place to ask for clarification or to offer help
- gently highlight if they've gone off topic or have spoken for too long
- provide options if needed
- remind them to record key information using notes or photos if needed.

Educators

Children and young people with cognitive communication disorders may have difficulty interacting with peers, learning new curriculum content, participating in classroom teaching, and understanding academic assessments.



Additional strategies for educational settings:

- consider the best position for the student in the classroom
- provide written resources in advance

- consider assistive technology
- use visual aids that help the student to organise and learn information
- adjust assessments and deadlines where needed.

Without implementing these strategies, children and young people may not demonstrate their full potential.



Employers

People with cognitive communication disorders may have difficulty interacting with managers and colleagues, following meetings,

understanding emails, delivering presentations, writing reports, and filling in forms.

Additional strategies for employers to consider:

- offer a longer phased return to work (if working)
- provide written information in advance
- minute meetings for later review
- foster a culture that tolerates use of strategies
- consider assistive technology
- adjust deadlines when needed.



In health and social care

People with cognitive communication disorders may have difficulty participating in assessment, education, goal

setting, intervention, forms, and decision-making.

Additional strategies for health and social care:

- use accessible resources
- support informed decision-making about health, finance, and housing.

In the medicolegal and criminal justice system



People with cognitive communication disorders may have difficulty participating in legal processes, including understanding complex questions and documents, answering questions in interviews, and completing lengthy paperwork.

Strategies unique to the medicolegal and criminal justice system include:

- avoid using complicated language
- support the completion of written documents
- using [His Majesties Court & Tribunal Service intermediary service](#) for people requiring communication support.

**For more
information visit**
[rcslt.org](https://www.rcslt.org)