

# Plan: How to manage brain fog

## What is brain fog?

Brain fog or cognitive impairment is a common symptom for people managing post-viral fatigue. Brain fog has been described as the experience of mental fatigue that can impact your ability to process and remember information, concentrate, and be organized.

Brain fog can impact many areas of life. This might include your daily functioning, social interactions, education, work, and managing home duties.



## What does brain fog look like?

The table below outlines some of the ways brain fog has been described:

Difficulty concentrating	Slowed thinking	Cognitive fatigue
Putting items in wrong location	Difficulty making decisions	Losing items
Memory and recall difficulties	Confusion	Word finding difficulties
Dropping items	Difficulty planning	Disorganization
Forgetting important details	Feeling disoriented	Forgetting why you left a room
Inability to process information	Difficulty responding quickly	Trouble expressing self
Difficulty keeping up with conversations	Unable to operate at the same mental speed/level you used to	Feeling foggy, spacey or moving through mud



It can be helpful to consider how your brain fog shows up and also to recognize that you are not alone in these symptoms, and the frustrations they can cause.

## Factors that influence brain fog

There are different factors that play a role in brain fog. Finding out what triggers your brain fog can help you figure out how to best manage it.

**Fatigue:** Going over your energy limits can trigger brain fog and other symptoms. Pacing can help you stay within your energy envelope, avoid post-exertional malaise, and reduce brain fog.

**Pain:** When pain is not managed it can occupy and overtax the brain, leaving less available energy for cognitive function. Pain management strategies can positively impact your brain fog.

**Orthostatic Intolerance:** Orthostatic intolerance is when sitting or standing upright makes you feel dizzy, nauseous, fatigued, confused, or gives you blurred vision. Orthostatic intolerance is a common symptom of post-viral fatigue. If you experience this symptom, talk to your family physician about treatment and management.

To learn more about orthostatic intolerance please see our handout *“Adapt: Managing orthostatic intolerance.”*

**Nutrition:** Diets rich in fruits, vegetables and whole grains such as the Mediterranean diet may support cognition by providing plenty of antioxidants, vitamins, minerals and prebiotic rich food. Please connect with a Registered Dietitian or call HealthLinkBC (811) if you have questions.



**Life Stressors:** Managing stress uses emotional energy that can cause fatigue and may result in brain fog. Exploring stress management strategies can help. Review our handout *“Cope: Coping Strategies”* for some tools and techniques.

**Sleep:** Poor sleep can have a big impact on brain function. Practising good sleep habits (also called sleep hygiene) can help you to have a better night's sleep. You can also talk to your family physician about sleep concerns (to discuss if you need further investigation such as a sleep study).

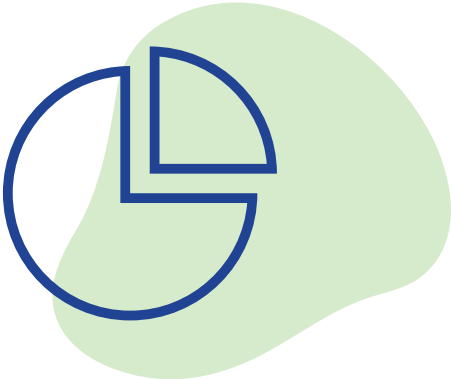
**Life cycle:** Our cognition can fluctuate through our lifetimes as a result of hormone changes (e.g. pregnancy, peri-menopause or menopause) and/or illness and treatment (e.g. chemotherapy).

**Medications:** Some medications used to manage pain, sleep, mental health, or other symptoms can result in worsening brain fog. Talk to your family physician or pharmacist about different medication options or timing of medication use.

If you think that any of the factors above affect you, try tracking them to learn more about how they impact your brain fog. For information on logs and symptom tracking see our handout *“Plan: How to Pace.”*

# How to manage brain fog?

Everyone’s brain fog is a little different and it will take time to figure out what works best for you. In this section, we’ll outline four areas to manage brain fog.



- 1. **Pacing** and energy optimization
- 2. **Sensory** stimulation
- 3. **Brain tips**
- 4. **Self-compassion**



## 1. PACING AND ENERGY OPTIMIZATION

Brain fog is often a symptom that you are outside your energy envelope. Practicing pacing is an important first step to managing brain fog.

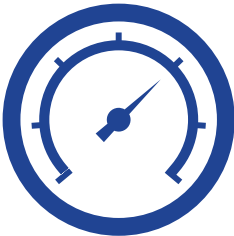
**Logging or tracking your symptoms:** Use your day timer, a written log or an app to track your symptoms. Symptom tracking can help you track and understand the factors that may be impacting your brain fog and other symptoms.

**Brain breaks:** Incorporate rest into your day to balance your activity, recharge your energy and reduce crashing. Allow both your body and your mind to rest. For example, listen to a guided meditation while resting your body.

**Reduce activity:** Do what you can to simplify or adapt activities. Where possible, look for ways to get help from others, or cut down on your activities to help you stay within your energy envelope.

**Activity tolerance:** If you’re doing mentally tiring activities that need your focus and concentration, try breaking up the activity into short chunks that don’t push you outside of your energy envelope. For example, if you’re completing a work assignment on your computer, try setting a timer for ten minutes. Work for those ten minutes, and then when your timer goes off, take a break to recover. When you feel rested, go back to your computer for another ten-minute work session.

**Sharpness Scale:** Use a scale to check where your energy is sitting throughout the day, before or during an activity.



- Ask yourself, “How sharp am I feeling?”
- Determine a scale: 1-3, or low, med, high, or green, yellow, red
- Attach each ranking to an activity

Examples:  
 Low: lying down resting  
 Medium: watching TV, crafting  
 High: computer, bills, reading

It’s important to note activity energy requirements will vary from person to person.

## 2. SENSORY STIMULATION

Our brains process everything that we interact with in our environment. Things that you can hear, smell, see, feel, or taste are called **stimuli**. Sometimes stimuli can be overwhelming. Knowing the types of stimuli that make you feel overwhelmed can help you to manage your ability to focus and perform mental tasks.

Everyone has different sensory needs to function optimally. Here are some ideas to adapt the environment to your stimuli needs:

- Create quiet spaces to complete cognitive tasks (paperwork, bills, work). Reduce background noise, and/or use ear plugs or noise-cancelling headphones.
- Reduce bright light using sunglasses or blackout blinds; full-spectrum lighting can help.
- Consider tolerances and timing for news, social media and crowds.
- Build in rest time if you are unable to avoid stimulating events/activity.
- Sometimes reducing the amount of stimuli in the environment can be helpful, e.g. switching over to a phone call instead of a video call to reduce visual stimulus.
- Multitasking often results in more errors and stress. We are generally less capable of multitasking than we think we are. Doing one thing at a time and paying full attention to it is often more efficient and effective in the long run.



## 3. BRAIN TIPS

This section outlines some tips to help you complete tasks when managing symptoms of brain fog. Finding brain tips that work for you can help conserve your energy by reducing the load of cognitive tasks, and make tasks easier and more efficient.

**Rehearsal:** Using rehearsal can help you complete activities, particularly when there are distractions, the task has multiple steps, or you have memory difficulties. Use rehearsal to prepare for an activity and remember the task you are doing or have completed.

- Verbal rehearsal: Stating information verbally e.g. "going to get a sweater," "locking the door"
- Visual rehearsal: Visualize yourself doing the action e.g. driving or shopping for groceries.
- Repetition: Re-read or repeat out loud information you want to remember



**Word Finding:** Word finding and articulating thoughts is a common concern amongst many people managing post-viral fatigue, and can cause a lot of anxiety.

Here are some strategies to try if you experience difficulties with word finding:

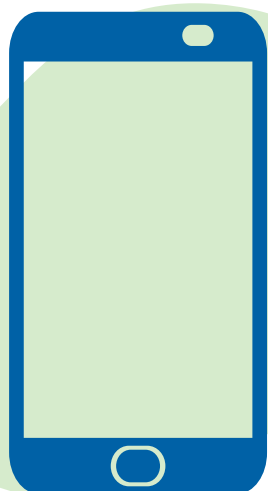
- Prepare scripts you are comfortable with for different situations and people.
  - Humour - "There's my brain fog again!"
  - Casual - "I haven't had my coffee yet," or "Do you know the word I mean?"
  - Sincerity - "I can't tell you the answer right now. I'll get back to you on that."

**Word Finding (continued):**

- Your brain may need a break. Here are some ideas to help you step back from the task:
  - Take a breath – the brain needs oxygen to function
  - Practice mindfulness to reconnect to the moment
  - Give yourself some words of encouragement and self-compassion

**Reminders:** Setting up reminders can help you remember important appointments and when to take rest breaks. Using external reminders reduces the cognitive load on your brain.

- Write down important information on calendars, day planners, or to-do lists
- Use electronic reminders (e.g. on your phone or smart home device, such as Google home or Alexa) to keep track of appointments and medications



**Tools to save energy:** Finding tools that help you complete tasks more efficiently can save you energy and reduce brain fog. Here are a few examples to explore:

- Using voice-to-text function on your cellphone or computer
- Taking photos of important items
- Making your “to-do list” your screen saver

**Organization:** Building organization and routine into your day can help you conserve energy by reducing the demand on your attention and memory, and the cognitive energy needed for decision making.

- **Prioritize:** Have one to-do list with important deadlines and one not to-do list, to revisit non-urgent tasks when you can
- **Plan:** Anticipate potential challenges e.g. over-stimulation, exit strategy, transport home
- **Time of day:** When do you feel the sharpest? Plan cognitive tasks at these times
- **Location:** Consider the location of the reminders e.g. one place for important items



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## 4. SELF-COMPASSION

The experience of brain fog might make you feel frustration and other difficult emotions. Practicing self-compassion can help you to be more patient with yourself, foster resilience and reduce feelings of frustration.

We've listed some examples of self-compassion below:

**Awareness:** Notice when you are experiencing brain fog and the stress and frustration that may accompany this. "I am having a hard time right now with following this conversation" or "I am really struggling today with recalling this information."

**Common humanity:** Acknowledge that you are not alone and that many others managing post-viral fatigue also experience brain fog. "I am not alone, others feel this way too."

**Self-kindness:** Be kind to yourself when experiencing brain fog. What would you say to someone you cared about? "May I be gentle with myself in this moment right now" or "May I be kind to myself today" or "I am doing the best I can and that is enough."

For more information, visit [self-compassion.org](https://self-compassion.org).



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