

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

7 Tips to Beat Brain Fog, Foster Focus, and Improve Mental Clarity

Do your thoughts feel fuzzy, sluggish, or scatterbrained? There are things you can do to potentially sharpen your cognitive function.



By [Jessica Migala](#) Medically Reviewed by [Justin Laube, MD](#)
Reviewed: February 23, 2023



If you find it difficult to concentrate or remember details, you may be experiencing brain fog. TJ Macke/Stocksy Let's say you've opened the refrigerator but forgot what you were going to grab. Or something important came up at a meeting, but you can't recall the details. Perhaps you notice it takes you longer to complete tasks, compared with the way you tackled them before. One potential culprit? [Brain fog](#).

[Brain fog](#) isn't a medical diagnosis. Rather, it's a casual, or lay, term used to describe an umbrella of cognitive symptoms, says [Danielle Wilhour, MD](#), an assistant professor in neurology at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in Denver. Among other symptoms, brain fog may include the following, she says:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Trouble finding the right words

- A feeling of disorientation
- Some memory impairment

This type of cognitive sluggishness can exist for a range of reasons, including stress, poor sleep, nutrition, and more. Sometimes brain fog may be a signal that your health and wellness regimen needs further attention and professional guidance. If foggy, fuzzy feelings persist past a couple weeks, or if you're concerned about your symptoms, talk to your doctor.

Additionally, there are a handful of lifestyle tweaks — from observations by experts — that may help alleviate brain fog and inspire mental clarity. Here's where to potentially start:

1. Take a Break, Especially After Getting Sick

If you zip from task to task throughout the day, you may not be giving your brain the break it needs to function well. “Your cognitive efficiency benefits from taking downtime or pacing activities with short breaks throughout the day,” says [Shehroo Pudumjee, PhD](#), a neuropsychologist at the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health in Las Vegas. This is important for everyone who's swamped with a multitasking lifestyle, particularly if you've felt under the weather. For example, the aftermath of having [COVID-19](#) may leave you with [lingering brain fog](#), even when you feel physically better, due to possible inflammation associated with the virus, notes [Harvard Health Publishing](#).

It's normal to want to push through your day and resume your typical to-dos, says Dr. Pudumjee. “But it's important to accept that you may not be back to your cognitive best,” she says.

Prioritizing your absolute-must tasks while scheduling downtime can help support mental stability while working with the fog, she says.

2. Automate Your To-Do List

Managing a busy life takes work, but there's no need to stress yourself out about small things you might forget (hint: defrosting the chicken). “Using cognitive aids can be really helpful,” says Pudumjee.

For example, use the alarms on your phone, schedule reminders through a voice assistant, set up auto pay for your bills, and organize your meetings into a calendar. This may help take away some of the stress associated with brain fog. “If we forget something, we get frustrated with ourselves, which doesn't help with the fog,” Pudumjee says. “If we can get something off our plate, we can avoid possible self-deprecation or criticism, which [can be] a huge help.”

3. Fill Up on Anti-Inflammatory Foods

“There's some thought that one mechanism that causes brain fog is inflammation,” says Dr. Wilhour. For that reason, she recommends a low-inflammatory diet, which roughly means limiting or avoiding highly [processed foods](#) and red and processed meats, and sticking to a plant-based or [Mediterranean-style of eating](#) that emphasizes whole grains, fruits, vegetables, and healthy fats.

Brain fog may be one symptom of certain autoimmune conditions, Wilhour adds. For example, according to the [Arthritis Foundation](#), [people with rheumatoid arthritis](#) often report feeling forgetful and unable to concentrate, and separately, anywhere from 40 to 80 percent of [people with fibromyalgia](#) and [lupus](#) may experience brain fog, per [Duke Health](#).

One [study](#) on people with rheumatoid arthritis, and other [research](#) on people with multiple sclerosis, showed that an [anti-inflammatory diet](#) may help alleviate some of the symptoms of the diseases, including improved cognitive function.

In addition, [research](#) shows evidence that a low-inflammation diet may be protective for brain health as we age, Wilhour adds.

4. Get Moving, Often

The [National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute](#) recommends 150 minutes of moderate-intensity [aerobic](#) activity per week, for adults, to keep not only the heart in good shape but the brain, too.

“Exercise increases blood flow to the brain,” says Wilhour. [Research](#) also shows that physical activity induces changes in the brain, such as an increase in gray matter and brain-derived neurotrophic factor, a molecule that plays a role in creating neural connections related to learning and memory, per [MedlinePlus](#).

Memory, executive control, and attention may all get a boost when you work up a sweat. Plus, exercise is a great antidote to stress for many people, and as additional [research shows](#), it builds up your cognitive reserves to help your brain become more [resilient](#) as you age.

5. Find Time for Brainy Activities

Your brain may be an organ, but it’s like a muscle in that “the more you use it, the stronger it can get,” says Wilhour. Activities that stimulate and support your cognitive health include reading books, tackling crossword puzzles, playing games or instruments, and keeping updated on current events, among others.

Like physical exercise, consistency is key. To maintain a regular practice, lean in to activities you find enjoyable. Don’t want to learn to play an instrument? That’s fine, perhaps you’d rather brush up on French vocabulary that you haven’t revisited since college.

Turning on some tunes can be another brain-tickling strategy. [Listening to music](#) has been shown to stimulate the brain and help with stress reduction and mood disorders, per [research](#).

6. Clean Up Your Sleep Hygiene

Sleep helps keep you sharp. If you’re feeling cognitively fuzzy, consider how well you’ve been snoozing.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) recommends that adults get at least seven hours of sleep per night. Sleep deprivation can lead to a range of brain fog-like symptoms such as issues with short-term memory, attention, processing speed, and alertness, [research](#) shows.

Addressing sleep problems by [improving your sleep hygiene](#) (like ditching devices before bed or creating a wind-down routine) may help you beat fatigue so you can think more clearly the next day.

[Sleep apnea](#), when you experience pauses in breathing during sleep, is another concern and can create disruptions that affect sleep quality, per the [CDC](#). A hallmark [sign of sleep apnea](#) is appearing to get enough sleep but still feeling excessively sleepy during the day. “If someone has [insomnia](#) or sleep apnea, I strongly encourage pursuing treatment,” says Pudumjee.

7. Detect — and Address — Underlying Health Conditions

While lifestyle changes may help cut through brain fog, they can only do so much if there's an unaddressed, underlying health condition. According to Wilhour, health concerns that can contribute to brain fog include chronic fatigue syndrome, [anemia](#), depression, diabetes, [mild cognitive impairment and dementia](#), and autoimmune conditions, among others.

Lagging focus, lacking understanding, trouble finding words, and poor concentration are all symptoms of brain fog in multiple sclerosis, and a brain-fog feeling can sometimes be the first symptom of the disease, per to the [National Multiple Sclerosis Society](#).

Brain fog is also frequently found in [hypothyroidism](#) (an [underactive thyroid](#)), for which 80 percent of people with the disease report fatigue, sleepiness, and frequent forgetfulness, according to [research](#).

While these are just a few examples, proper treatment or management of these underlying conditions may help relieve the cognitive symptoms of brain fog.

All told, experiencing brain fog isn't just a marker of aging or a busy lifestyle, and it's not something to ignore. It's an opportunity to make healthier lifestyle choices and seek medical advice from your doctor so clearer thinking can be in your future.