



advice and support for older age

**Independent  
Age**

# Factsheet

## Memory loss, confusion and depression

Memory loss, depression, confusion and dementia are not an inevitable part of ageing, but these conditions can affect people in later life.

This factsheet explains what to do if you or someone you know experiences any of these conditions, and what support and help is available.

**Last reviewed: November 2015**

**Next review date: November 2016**

Independent Age provides advice to help people claim benefits, access social care and stay independent at home. Our local volunteers provide friendship visits and calls for lonely older people. To find out how Independent Age can help you, call us FREE on **0800 319 6789** or visit [www.independentage.org](http://www.independentage.org). Our free wise guides and factsheets can be download from the website and ordered by phone or via our online order form.



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## 1 Memory loss

Although older people may sometimes experience memory loss, it isn't an inevitable part of getting older.

Short-term memory loss may be caused by anxiety or stress – perhaps because you are going through a difficult time such as a bereavement. Once this period has passed, your concentration and memory should also improve.

However, if your symptoms begin suddenly, persist or get worse, speak to a GP about your concerns. It may be that the memory loss is being caused by something treatable such as depression, stress, a side-effect of a medication or even a thyroid gland problem.



### **To do...**

If your memory loss is affecting your ability to cope with everyday tasks, or if you feel you're putting yourself or others at risk, you can request a full assessment of your needs from your council's social services department. This assessment should identify what difficulties you're having and what support could be provided to help you. For more information about needs assessments, see our factsheet [Assessment and care services](#) from your local council in England (0800 319 6789, [independentage.org](http://independentage.org)).

## 2 Confusion

Symptoms of 'confusion' can include:

- dizziness
- not being able to think as clearly or quickly as usual
- not recognising where you are
- being unsure about what time or day it is
- feeling tearful and agitated.

Confusion can be temporary or permanent.



### **To do...**

If you are suffering from confusion, you should talk to your GP as soon as possible so that the condition can be diagnosed, treated and brought under control.

### **What causes confusion?**

If these symptoms develop in a short space of time, they may be caused by a physical illness such as a stroke, seizures, a chest or urinary tract infection, or by not eating or drinking enough.

The symptoms of confusion could also be a reaction to any tablets or medicine you're taking. If you're prescribed any new medication, your GP should check it won't react with something you're already taking. If you do experience side-effects, speak to your GP immediately.

People with dementia are also often described as 'confused'. However, it's likely that someone with a form of dementia will have other symptoms as well, such as difficulty with language or judgement, or changes in behaviour, personality or mood. If you're worried that you or someone you know may have dementia, speak to a GP as soon as possible. For more information about dementia, see our factsheet Living with Dementia (0800 319 6789, [independentage.org](http://independentage.org)).

### **3 What is depression?**

Depression can affect anyone. Different people may experience different symptoms. Symptoms include:

- ongoing sadness or feeling low
- feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, or low self-confidence
- tearfulness
- losing interest in things you used to enjoy
- not sleeping at night or sleeping more than usual
- disturbed sleep, e.g. waking very early in the morning
- poor concentration
- poor memory
- problems with eating and appetite – not feeling like eating, or eating too much to comfort yourself
- feeling anxious and worried
- unexplained aches and pains
- lacking energy, not wanting to go out or do things

Although it's not always recognised, depression affects older people just as much as younger people. Sometimes the symptoms of severe depression are mistaken for dementia.



### **To do...**

If you think you may be suffering from depression, speak to your GP. If you're diagnosed with depression, you should ask your GP to explain the range of treatments available to you. You shouldn't automatically be prescribed anti-depressant medication without your GP also considering other types of treatment such as talking therapies. If you would prefer to seek help from a counsellor or a psychologist, you should discuss this with your GP.

### **Depression in care home residents**

Depression among residents in care homes is often poorly recognised or undiagnosed. If you think that someone living in a care home is depressed, ask the care home manager to arrange a GP assessment so they can be diagnosed and treated. You can also ask whether a care package providing more activities, social interaction and stimulation could be arranged for them.

## **4 Treatments for depression**

There are different health professionals who can help to treat depression.

- Psychiatrists are medically qualified and treat people using a combination of talking therapies and medication.
- Psychotherapists have specialist training and help people to manage stress, emotional problems, relationship problems or troublesome habits. They aren't medically qualified, so can't prescribe medication.
- Counsellors offer similar help to psychotherapists and have similar training. They more often help with short-term difficulties rather than longer-term concerns.

### **Counselling**

Counselling gives you the opportunity to talk freely and in confidence to someone who isn't a friend or relative. The counsellor is trained to listen to you so you can talk about how you're feeling and they then can help you to resolve the problem. Counselling can help you become more aware of why you're feeling or behaving the way you do, and help you become more accepting of your feelings and more satisfied with your life. The counsellor shouldn't judge you or try to tell you what to do.

There are many different types of counsellor, depending on the training they have had. It is important to find one you can feel comfortable with – it may even be worth finding one who has experience of working with older people, although you may have limited choice if your counselling is through the NHS or a voluntary organisation. Counselling can be conducted over the phone or face-to-face. It can be



a one-off session or regular meetings over a period of weeks or months. Self-help support groups also can give you an opportunity to talk with others who are feeling the same way or going through similar problems.

### **Counselling through the NHS**

Your GP may be able to refer you to an NHS counselling service. Counselling through the NHS is free of charge, though there can be long waiting lists. Although it is not available everywhere, many GP practices employ counsellors or can refer you to a psychotherapist or a clinical psychologist. If your GP does not mention counselling, you can ask them to refer you.

### **Counselling through voluntary organisations or charities**

Some charities offer counselling for specific problems. For example, Cruse Bereavement Care (0844 4779400, [cruse.org.uk](http://cruse.org.uk)) provides counselling for people who have experienced bereavement. Mind (0300 123 3393, [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk)) provides counselling for people with mental health issues. Your local Age UK (0800 169 65 65, [ageuk.org.uk](http://ageuk.org.uk)) may have information on local charities which provide counselling in your area. Services may be free or there may be a small charge, possibly based on a sliding scale depending on your income.

### **Private counselling**

Another option, if you can afford it, is to see a private counsellor. Details of individual counsellors are available from the British Association for Counselling and

Psychotherapy (BACP) (01455 883 300, [itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists](http://itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists)). It's important that the counsellor is qualified and registered with the BACP.

## **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

CBT is increasingly the treatment therapy most favoured by the NHS. It can help to treat a variety of mental health problems such as:

- depression
- anxiety
- panic disorder
- phobias
- post traumatic stress
- obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD).

CBT can help you to take control of negative thought patterns that can lead to you feeling or behaving in a certain way. A NHS patient is usually offered between six to eight sessions of CBT, although this can be extended. If you think you may find CBT helpful, discuss this with your GP.

## **Medication**

Sometimes depression can be caused or aggravated by an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. Anti-depressant medication could help to correct the imbalance.

Anti-depressants can only be prescribed by your GP or a psychiatrist. You may have to take them for six months or longer to treat the depression properly. You must let your GP know if you are taking any over-the-counter medications or any herbal remedies, as anti-depressants

can sometimes have an adverse effect on other medications.

There can be mild short-term side-effects from taking anti-depressant medication, for example, you may feel sick or agitated. If this happens, it's important to continue taking your medication as it will take several weeks before you begin to benefit from them. Talk to your GP if the side-effects persist or if you're thinking of stopping your medication because of them. Your GP may change your dose or switch you to another sort of anti-depressant.

### **What you can do to help yourself**

Looking after yourself is important for your mental health. Here are some tips to stay well.

#### **- Exercise**

If you can, try exercising for 30 minutes a day, broken down into 10 minute sessions. Everyday activities count as exercise, such as shopping, housework, gardening and cycling.



#### **To do...**

If you want to improve your exercise routine, you could try joining a local walking group. Your local library may be able to provide you with information about local schemes, or view the Walking for Health website ( [walkingforhealth.org.uk](http://walkingforhealth.org.uk)).



#### **Good to know**

Many councils offer concessionary rates at swimming pools to people aged 65 and

over. Exercise classes and aerobic water activities, some of which may be specifically targeted at older people, may be available at your local swimming pool or leisure centre.

- **Eat well**

Eat a good, nutritious diet and make sure that you have regular meals. This can help to counteract the effects of mild depression.

- **Get a good night's sleep**

Speak to your GP if you're suffering from a lack of good quality sleep. A lack of sleep can be a symptom of depression, and make depression worse.

## 5 When depression is caused by loneliness

Most people feel lonely at some point in their lives. You may feel lonely if you live on your own, you find it difficult to meet people or you have recently been through a big change such as a divorce, retirement or bereavement.

There are lots of ways to combat loneliness, such as:

- asking your council or your local Age UK (0800 169 6565, [ageuk.org.uk](http://ageuk.org.uk)) about social activities and transport options in your local area.
- joining a befriending scheme. Befriending schemes provide trained volunteers to visit you in your own home or phone you regularly for a chat. Contact Independent Age (0800 319 6789, [independentage.org](http://independentage.org)) for details of our befriending scheme.
- joining in with the Sunday afternoon tea parties organised once a month by Contact the Elderly (0800 716 543, [contact-the-elderly.org.uk](http://contact-the-elderly.org.uk)). These are for people aged 75 or over who live alone.
- offering a home to an unwanted pet for companionship. The RSPCA ( [rspca.org.uk](http://rspca.org.uk)) and local pet rescue organisations may be able to help you find a suitable pet.
- volunteering at a local charity. Most areas have a local Volunteer Centre which will be able to put you in touch with useful organisations. Contact Volunteering England (0845 305 6979, [volunteering.org.uk](http://volunteering.org.uk)) for details of your nearest Volunteer Centre. The Retired and Senior Volunteer Programme (RSVP) is a national organisation that supports people aged 50 and upwards to find voluntary work (020 7643 1385, [csv-rsvp.org.uk](http://csv-rsvp.org.uk)).
- trying a Homeshare scheme – where you offer accommodation in your home to a tenant in exchange for them giving you some companionship and support around

the home. SharedLivesPlus ( [sharedlivesplus.org.uk](http://sharedlivesplus.org.uk)) coordinate the homeshare schemes which are available in the UK.

Read our Wise Guide: Happy, Healthy, Connected for more information about ways to combat loneliness and stay well in later life. Call 0800 319 6789 to order your free copy.



## **6 Useful contacts**

**To understand more or talk about mental health problems:**

Mind (0300 123 3393, [mind.org.uk](http://mind.org.uk))

**To find out about dementia:**

Alzheimer's Society (0300 222 11 22, [alzheimers.org.uk](http://alzheimers.org.uk))

**To find a counsellor:**

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (01455 883 300, [itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists](http://itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists)).

You can call our free advice line on 0800 319 6789 to discuss any of the issues raised in this factsheet.

This factsheet has been put together by Independent Age's expert advisers. It is not a full explanation of the law and is aimed at people aged over 60.

If you need this information in an alternative format (such as large-print or audio cd), call us on 0800 319 6789 or email [advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org).

### **Tell us what you think**

We'd love to hear what you think of our publications. Please write to us at the address below, phone us on 020 7605 4294 or email [advice@independentage.org](mailto:advice@independentage.org).

We will use your feedback to help us plan for changes to our publications in the future. Thank you.

### **Supporting Independent Age**

If you have found this information helpful and would like to support our work, there are lots of ways you can help:


- get fit - run, walk or cycle in aid of Independent Age
- take part in our annual raffle
- donate in memory of a loved one
- remember Independent Age in your will and benefit from our Free Wills offer to supporters.

If you would like to donate or raise money in aid of Independent Age, please visit our website, email [supporters@independentage.org](mailto:supporters@independentage.org) or call our fundraising team on 020 7605 4288.



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