Common myths about thinking skills in people with MS

- **Myth:** Thinking difficulties are rare in people with MS.
  **Truth:** People with MS commonly have problems with thinking skills, with >50% of people reporting cognitive difficulties.

- **Myth:** Thinking difficulties are only due to MS.
  **Truth:** MS affects brain function and can lead to difficulties with thinking. These problems may be worse in Veterans with other cognitive risk factors (e.g., depression, high blood pressure, alcohol/drug use, sleep problems).

- **Myth:** Thinking difficulties are always a sign of Alzheimer’s dementia (AD).
  **Truth:** Most people with MS do not meet criteria for dementia and do not display the primary symptoms of AD.

What we know about cognition and MS

- 40-70% of individuals with MS demonstrate deficits on formal tests of thinking skills. Difficulties may include:
  - learning/remembering information
  - processing information quickly
  - problem-solving/reasoning

- Most people exhibit mild, relatively stable symptoms. **Risk factors** for more severe symptoms and faster decline may include:
  - progressive forms of MS
  - increased age, male sex
  - medical and mental health conditions

- Cognitive symptoms often **emerge early, persist,** and **interfere** with daily function (e.g., occupation) and quality of life.

Examples of thinking difficulties

- Forgetting to take medications
- Trouble coming up with a word during conversation
- Difficulty paying attention or multitasking
- Becoming lost or having difficulty with directions
- Trouble thinking quickly
What to do if you have concerns about thinking skills

- The first step is to discuss this with your medical or mental health care providers. They will assist you in addressing your concerns and may refer you to a specialist for further evaluation.

- Your health care provider may ask questions to better understand your symptoms. For example:
  - When did these symptoms start?
  - What are some examples?
  - How do they affect your daily life?

- You may be referred for a neuropsychological evaluation. This may include an interview and taking standardized paper-and-pencil tests designed to assess thinking skills.

- You may be referred for a treatment called cognitive rehabilitation. This is a treatment designed to help with thinking difficulties. Your health care provider can refer you to a clinical specialist (e.g., neuropsychologist, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist) for this treatment.

Some ways to improve thinking skills

COGNITIVE STRATEGIES

- Memory: set alarms and reminders to prompt you to complete tasks, attend appointments, or take your medication

- Attention/Concentration: when you need to concentrate, reduce distractions (turn off the TV, go to a quiet room, wear ear plugs, etc.)

POSITIVE HEALTH BEHAVIORS

- Planning and organization: prioritize your to-do list to focus on the most important tasks first

- Practice good sleep hygiene (e.g., set sleep & wake times, avoid screen time in bed)

- Follow medical and mental health treatment recommendations

- Use relaxation strategies (e.g., deep breathing, meditation) to reduce stress

- Exercise may improve thinking skills, mood, and physical health

Train your Brain