



Cognitive & Emotional Health

Supporting Thinking, Mood, Identity, and Emotional Well-Being

Cognitive and emotional changes are common in Parkinson's disease and can be just as impactful as changes in movement. These symptoms may affect thinking speed, memory, mood, motivation, and emotional regulation—often fluctuating from day to day.

Cognitive and emotional symptoms are **neurological features of Parkinson's**, not signs of weakness, lack of effort, or poor coping. When recognized and addressed, many people experience meaningful improvement in daily function and quality of life.

Through the **Wisconsin Parkinson Association**, individuals with Parkinson's are encouraged to talk openly about brain health and emotional well-being as essential parts of care.

Your brain health matters as much as your movement.
Cognitive and emotional symptoms deserve care, not silence.

Why Parkinson's Affects Cognition & Emotion

Parkinson's affects multiple brain networks and chemical systems—not only dopamine, but also serotonin, norepinephrine, and acetylcholine. These systems influence:

- Attention and concentration
- Planning and decision-making
- Mood and motivation
- Stress response
- Emotional regulation

Changes may appear early or later, progress gradually, and fluctuate with fatigue, sleep, stress, or medication “off” periods.

Common Cognitive Changes in Parkinson's

Cognitive changes vary widely and are often subtle at first.

Common experiences include:

- Slower thinking or processing speed
- Difficulty multitasking
- Trouble with organization or planning
- Word-finding difficulty
- Reduced mental stamina
- Feeling mentally “foggy,” especially when tired

Many people remain cognitively independent for years. Early changes often reflect **efficiency**, not loss of intelligence.

Supporting Cognitive Function in Daily Life

Helpful strategies include:

- Doing one task at a time
- Reducing distractions
- Using calendars, reminders, and written lists
- Scheduling cognitively demanding tasks during peak “on” times
- Allowing extra time for thinking and responses

Working smarter—not faster—protects cognitive energy.

Cognitive rehabilitation or speech-language therapy may also support thinking and communication skills.

Common Emotional & Mood Changes

Mood changes are frequent in Parkinson's and are biologically driven.

Common emotional symptoms include:

- Depression

- Anxiety
- Apathy (reduced motivation or emotional drive)
- Irritability
- Emotional blunting
- Increased sensitivity to stress

Depression and anxiety in Parkinson's are **medical conditions**, not reactions to personality or willpower.

Understanding Apathy vs. Depression

Apathy and depression may look similar but are different.

- **Apathy:** reduced motivation or initiation
- **Depression:** sadness, hopelessness, or loss of pleasure

Correct identification matters because treatments differ.

Emotional Health & Identity Changes

Parkinson's may affect how you see yourself—especially roles related to work, independence, productivity, or caregiving.

Common experiences include:

- Grief over changes in ability
- Fear about the future
- Frustration with unpredictability
- Identity disruption

You are still you—Parkinson's changes how life looks, not who you are.

Counseling can help process these changes and support adaptation.

Treatment Options for Cognitive & Emotional Symptoms

Treatment is individualized and may include:

- Medication adjustments
- Medications for mood or cognition
- Counseling or psychotherapy
- Cognitive or speech-language therapy
- Exercise and movement-based therapies
- Sleep optimization

Treating sleep, fatigue, and non-motor symptoms often improves cognition and mood together.

The Role of Exercise & Engagement

Regular activity supports brain health.

Benefits include:

- Improved mood
- Reduced anxiety
- Enhanced cognitive resilience
- Better sleep
- Stronger sense of purpose

Social connection, creativity, learning, and meaningful activity all support emotional health.

When to Talk With Your Care Team

Reach out if you notice:

- Persistent sadness or anxiety
- Loss of interest or motivation
- Increased confusion
- New hallucinations or paranoia
- Difficulty managing daily tasks

- Emotional changes affecting relationships

Early support prevents unnecessary suffering.

Preserving Cognitive & Emotional Well-Being

Living well with Parkinson's means caring for the whole brain—not just movement.

Cognitive and emotional health are not side issues.

They are central to quality of life.

Support, treatment, and understanding make a difference.

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