

THE WELLNESS DISPATCH

# Memory Changes: What's Normal and What's Not

*A plain-spoken guide for older adults and their families without the alarm*

Forgetting where you put your keys. Walking into a room and standing there, completely blank about why you came in. Struggling to recall a name that is on the tip of your tongue, a name you have known for many years. If you are over sixty, chances are you have experienced at least one of these recently. And chances are, it gave you a quiet moment of worry you did not mention to anyone.

That worry is understandable. In a world where Alzheimer's and dementia have entered our cultural vocabulary, any memory lapse can feel like the first sign of something frightening. But one of the most important things I can offer you as a clinician is this: not all memory changes are equal, and understanding the differences can spare you years of unnecessary anxiety and help you identify what genuinely deserves attention.

***“Knowledge is one of the most powerful tools we have against fear. Let's use it.”***

## What normal aging actually does to memory

Just like any other part of our body, the brain naturally changes as we get older. You might notice that processing information takes a bit longer, and multitasking or learning something new can require more effort. Remember, these aren't signs of illness; they're simply part of how a hardworking brain evolves over the years.

Normal age-related memory changes tend to share a few characteristics: they are inconsistent (the name comes back to you later), they do not significantly interfere with daily life, and they do not worsen dramatically over weeks or months. You might need to write more things down. You might take a little longer to find a word. But you can still manage your home, finances, relationships, and routines without fear.

Likely Normal Aging	Worth a Doctor's Conversation
Forgetting a name but recalling it later	Asking the same question multiple times in one conversation
Misplacing keys but retracing steps to find them	Putting objects in unusual places and not remembering doing so
Occasionally forgetting the day or date	Getting lost driving a familiar route you have taken for years
Slower word retrieval	Noticeably struggling to follow or maintain a conversation

Needing more time to learn something new	Difficulty managing finances or following familiar recipes
Occasional lapses in attention	Significant changes in personality, mood, or social behavior

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## The important role of depression and anxiety

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One of the most clinically important things to know about memory concerns in older adults is this: depression and anxiety are among the most common causes of memory and cognitive complaints in this age group and are often mistaken for early dementia.

When someone is depressed, their ability to concentrate, retain information, and retrieve memories is genuinely impaired. When someone is chronically anxious, their brain is so preoccupied with threat-monitoring that less cognitive bandwidth is available for everyday memory tasks. Both conditions are highly treatable and treating them often resolves memory concerns entirely.

If you or someone you love has noticed memory changes alongside low mood, fatigue, withdrawal, or anxiety, it is worth addressing both with a doctor rather than assuming the memory issue is the primary problem.

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## Why early conversations matter

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If you recognize signs from the right column of the table above in yourself or someone you love, the most important step is not to wait and worry in silence. An early conversation with your primary care physician enables proper cognitive assessment, rules out reversible causes (including depression, medication side effects, thyroid issues, and vitamin deficiencies), and, if necessary, supports early planning and intervention.

Early detection of cognitive decline not only improves treatment outcomes but also gives individuals and families the time and clarity to make sound and informed decisions about care, finances, and living arrangements together — **before** a crisis forces those decisions under pressure.

You are not overreacting by bringing this up with a doctor. You are doing exactly the right thing.

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