An Adult's Guide

What is Working Memory?

What it is, how it shows up, and what helps

Inside this guide

- Introduction
- Recognising working memory challenges
- Why working memory matters
- Practical strategies
- Final thoughts

www.tajua.co.uk

07521 567664 | hello@tajua.co.uk

Introduction

Working memory is the part of memory we use to hold information in mind while we're doing something with it. It's what lets you keep a phone number in your head long enough to type it, follow what's being said in a meeting, or hold on to the start of a sentence while you read to the end.

Dyslexia is usually talked about in terms of reading, writing and spelling, but working memory is often part of the picture too. Reading, writing and following spoken language all involve holding several pieces of information at once, so when working memory is under strain, those tasks get harder.

Working memory is different from long-term memory. Long-term memory stores things for days, months or years. Working memory holds only a small amount, and only for a short time. Many adults with dyslexia find they have to put in more effort to keep track of details, or that information has gone before they've had a chance to use it.

Introduction (continued)

This can show up in lots of areas of adult life:

- at work, when you're expected to listen, take notes and respond at the same time
- at home, when jobs or routines involve several steps
- in education or training, where reading, studying and exams all rely heavily on working memory
- in relationships, when you're trying to remember conversations, names or plans

None of this comes from laziness, lack of effort or low intelligence. Many adults with dyslexia are strong creative thinkers and problem-solvers who are good at seeing the bigger picture, even though tasks that rely on short-term memory leave them tired.

Signs to look out for

Recognising Working Memory Challenges

At Work

- Forgetting instructions with several steps after a meeting or training session
- Needing to reread long emails or documents to take in the details
- Struggling to hold on to numbers or information during phone calls
- Losing track of where you are in a complex project
- Feeling overloaded when you're given several tasks at once

At Home

- Forgetting shopping items unless you have a list
- Regularly misplacing your keys, phone or glasses
- Finding recipes or DIY instructions with lots of steps hard to follow
- Forgetting conversations with family or plans made a few days earlier
- Finding it hard to keep household routines going

Signs to look out for

Recognising Working Memory Challenges (continued)

In Education or Training

- Losing your place when reading textbooks or articles
- Forgetting a point you wanted to make in an essay before you've written it down
- Finding it hard to write notes while listening in lectures
- Needing extra time to organise revision or assignments
- Going blank in an exam on material you'd revised

Why Working Memory Matters

Working memory is involved in almost everything we do, from planning the day to remembering someone's name to following a set of instructions. When working memory difficulties come alongside dyslexia, everyday tasks can take more out of you. You might notice that:

- things take longer to process
- you have to work harder to stay on task
- you feel mentally tired by the end of the day
- important details sometimes slip through

The strategies below won't change how your working memory works, but they can take a lot of the load off it.

What helps

Practical Strategies

Everyday Life

- Get things out of your head and onto paper or a screen: calendars, alarms, sticky notes, a whiteboard.
- Give important things a regular home, such as keys in a bowl by the door and your wallet always in the same drawer.
- Break jobs and errands into smaller steps.
- Use visual reminders, such as notes on the fridge, phone apps or colour-coded folders.

At Work

- Take a notebook or tablet into every meeting.
- Use a task manager such as Trello, Todoist or Asana, or set reminders on your phone.
- Ask for instructions to be followed up by email so you're not relying on remembering what was said.
- Split big projects into smaller stages, each with its own checklist.
- Find somewhere quiet for work that needs a lot of concentration.

What helps

Practical Strategies (continued)

In Education and Training

- Study in short blocks of 25–30 minutes with a break in between (often called the Pomodoro technique).
- Mix reading with listening and doing. Information tends to stick better when you've heard it and used it as well as seen it.
- Use mind maps and diagrams so you can see information laid out instead of holding it all in your head.
- Record lectures (with permission) and listen back.
- Make flashcards and summary sheets, or use an app such as Quizlet.

Relationships and Communication

- Repeat back instructions or plans to check you've got them right.
- Keep a shared calendar somewhere everyone can see it.
- It's fine to say "Can you say that again?" or "Let me write that down."
- If you feel comfortable, tell the people close to you about your working memory. It usually makes things easier on both sides.

What helps

Practical Strategies (continued)

Wellbeing and Self-Care

- Get enough sleep. Memory is noticeably worse when you're tired.
- Take regular exercise, which can help with focus.
- Eat regular meals and drink enough water.
- Try mindfulness or meditation if it suits you, to help with stress.
- Build in downtime so you don't wear yourself out.

Extra Tips

- Write lists and tick things off as you go.
- Set reminders for bills, deadlines and birthdays.
- Do one thing at a time where you can.
- Notice what's going well, not just what isn't.

To finish

Final Thoughts

Working memory difficulties can be tiring to live with. Keeping on top of instructions, deadlines, conversations and everyday jobs takes more effort than the people around you may realise. These difficulties say nothing about your intelligence or ability. They're one part of how your brain handles information.

Many adults with dyslexia have spent years finding their own ways round these difficulties. They're often good at problem-solving, coming up with new ideas, seeing the bigger picture and understanding other people.

The aim isn't to "fix" working memory. It's to set things up so you're not relying on it so heavily. Using a planner, asking for instructions in writing and breaking a big project into smaller pieces are all sensible ways to manage a heavy load, and plenty of people without dyslexia do the same.

To finish

Final Thoughts (continued)

You're also entitled to ask for support. Under the Equality Act 2010, employers and education providers may have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for you. Examples include extra time, assistive technology, or information given in a format that works better for you. Raising it can feel awkward at first, but it often makes work or study much more manageable.

Thank you for reading.

Everyone's experience of dyslexia is different. At Tajua, our specialist assessors carry out full dyslexia assessments online and give clear, practical recommendations based on your own profile.

Get in touch

www.tajua.co.uk

07521 567664 | hello@tajua.co.uk