



Understanding the Difference Between Mental Health Disorders and Cognitive Deficits

A mental health disorder is the combination of symptoms that affect a person's ability to function and that can be the source of significant distress. These functional difficulties may be limited to one area of life or may be present in several areas, depending on the disorder and its severity. The best-known disorders are bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders, schizophrenia and personality disorders.

Cognitive processes are the set of mental processes that allow an individual to function.

Cognitive deficits encompass a multitude of functions orchestrated by the brain such as language, memory, reasoning, coordination of movement, recognition, perception, and learning, as well as executive functions such as reasoning, planning, judgment, and organization.

Certain conditions such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, brain tumors, head trauma, and the consequences of stroke, may lead to cognitive deficits .

We wish you insightful reading.

Little Brothers

What you should know

- In all cases, the person continues to have feelings, and can perceive and appreciate gestures of tenderness.
- We all communicate through emotions, actions, and touch.
- Smiling can communicate more than words.
- Be conscious of the message that you are communicating with your body.
- Include the person in your conversations: no one likes to hear others talk about them as if they were not there. (Source (in French): <https://bit.ly/ps-alzheimer>)
- Finally, take care of your own well-being and that of your companion.

Good practices



- Maintain a calm and reassuring presence, make eye contact;
- Speak slowly, transmit clear and simple messages;
- Allow time to reflect, accept silences, allow time to respond;
- Offer help, acknowledge the person's emotions or distress;
- Show empathy for what the person is experiencing, express understanding;
- Remember that a sense of humor can be a valuable tool to defuse tension;
- Take care of yourself, respect the limits of your companionship;
- If the situation deteriorates, refer to your coordinator.



Attitudes to adopt



- Keep in mind that the person must continue to be considered as a whole person, with respect.
- During difficult moments, wait for tensions to decrease before intervening.
- You are not alone! As a volunteer, share your observations: your supervisor is available to gather information about your companion's health and can provide you with perspective and support for challenges you may encounter.
- As a caregiver, consult professionals in your area or talk to people you trust.

Things to avoid

- Taking the person's reactions personally;
- Making judgments;
- Trying to create a bond too quickly;
- Confronting or contradicting the person, reacting abruptly.

Additional resources

In case of emergency: 911 or 811.

Online

Little Brothers, *Factsheets: Complex Health Disorders*, <https://www.petitsfreres.ca/programmes/tcs/> (in French only)

Alzheimer Society of Canada, *Communicating with People Living with Dementia*, <https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/i-have-friend-or-family-member-who-lives-dementia/communicating-people-living-dementia>

Alpabem, <https://www.alpabem.qc.ca/>

Marta C. González, "The Dancer Who Remembers," [video] <https://bit.ly/danseuse-alzheimer>