



**MS Learn Online
Feature Presentation
Cognitive Issues when Living with Primary-Progressive MS
Nicholas LaRocca, PhD**

Tracey>> Hi I'm Tracey Kimball

Tom>> and I'm Tom Kimball. Welcome to MS Learn Online. Cognitive Dysfunction is a common symptom for people with primary-progressive MS

Tracey>> and it can manifest itself in a variety of ways. Dr. Nicholas LaRocca, is vice president, of health care delivery and policy research, at the National MS Society. He spoke with correspondent Kate Milliken about the variety of symptoms that may be caused by cognitive dysfunction and how it can affect a person's day to day living.

Tom>> While cognitive dysfunction is a common symptom for the general MS population, Dr. LaRocca points out that it is a bit more common for people with primary progressive MS.

>>Nick LaRocca: Cognitive dysfunction is a little bit more common in primary-progressive MS, but not that much more common. And the reason is that cognitive dysfunction is much more related to the degree of changes in the brain, particularly the amount of lesions that can be shown

on the MRI. And that's related more to the particular course that an individual's MS has taken and to how long they have had MS.

And, so, although people with primary-progressive MS might be at a little bit greater risk for cognitive changes, many people with primary-progressive MS have no cognitive changes at all. And so for those people, it's not a problem.

For other people, they may have cognitive changes. By and large, those changes are mild to moderate, and maybe somewhat disruptive in everyday activities, but are not that troublesome. For a very small percentage, less than 10%, the changes can be severe enough that they really make it difficult for people to function independently in everyday life.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Are there particular strategies that you can think of for people with PPMS to help them cognitively?

>>**Nick LaRocca:** Yes. There are a variety of things that people with primary-progressive MS can do if they experience cognitive changes, and that depends on the type of cognitive changes that they experience. The most frequently reported would be memory problems, and the type of memory problem that people are likely to experience is the recall of information that they have learned recently. So, trying to remember the name of someone that they just met, or trying to remember a story that they just read in the newspaper, trying to remember the plot of a movie that they just saw, things of that nature; everyday activities, remembering appointments.

What we tend to suggest is that people think about substituting organization for memory. If you can become better organized, that that can really help you to keep track of the things that maybe your memory is no longer able to keep good track of. And whether you do that with a notebook or a BlackBerry or a Smartphone or a computer, it doesn't really matter. It really depends on what the person is the most comfortable with.

And so if they can work with a professional, a psychologist, speech-language pathologist or an occupational therapist, that that professional can help them find the method that works best for them, can help them learn how to use it most effectively, and how to use it consistently.

There are other cognitive changes in MS. One of the ones that is the most troubling for people is what's known as impairment in executive functions, and that would be planning, prioritizing and organizing. In other words, coming up with a plan and implementing a plan to do something that has many steps involved. A simple example would be cooking a meal, and then obviously you can move up from there into many more complicated tasks.

People with primary-progressive MS can sometimes find that those types of skills aren't working as well as they once did. And in those cases a person can learn how to really sit down and using organizational materials, again, whether it's a computer or doing it in paper and pencil, how to plan something out in a systematic way and follow it through step-by-step, so that they really are able to engage in that type of planning, prioritizing and organizing.

A third area that tends to be very troubling for people is attention and concentration. And what seems to affect people most is not just simple paying attention to something, but it's trying to focus on something when they're distracted. And part of the problem seems to be that people with primary-progressive MS very often experience a slowing in the processing of information. They're still able to process the information, but they find that things just seem to be processed by their minds more slowly than before. So, they need more time. And when that happens, what that means is when you're in a chaotic environment, which is a good part of our world, that it's very hard for them to sort things out. It's very hard for them to be able to focus.

And so part of the solution to that is to help people to learn how to find situations where they can be in an environment that's not going to tax their ability to process in quite the same way. So, a less distracting environment,

working with the family, so that they understand what type of environment that the individual needs.

So, those are just a few examples of some of the strategies that people can pretty easily learn that will help them with cognitive changes.

Tracey>> As always, there are many resources and professionals available to help with cognitive dysfunction.

Tom>> Another great resource is the video series “Hold That Thought”. You can find it on the webcast menu. Thanks for watching.