

au fil du temps

**Understanding brain aging
so we can better empathize with seniors**



ORDRE DES
PSYCHOLOGUES
DU QUÉBEC

The *Au fil du temps* initiative

The *Ordre des psychologues du Québec* developed *Au fil du temps* to promote a deeper understanding of the realities faced by seniors and their loved ones.

By better understanding how the brain ages, we can work together to provide better care to our seniors.

This initiative provides basic information on a range of topics, as well as videos and podcasts with psychologists and caregivers hosted by Dr. Christine Grou, a psychologist, neuropsychologist and president of the *Ordre des psychologues du Québec*.

Topics covered:

Page 03 The aging brain

Page 08 Neurocognitive disorders

Page 14 How can I help?

Page 16 Moving to a new home

Page 18 Self-care for informal caregivers

en.aufiledutemps.quebec

The aging brain

Over time, our bodies start to show the familiar signs of aging: our hair turns white, our muscles lose strength and our skin starts to wrinkle. Our brains age too, but unlike physical changes, these effects may not be as visible. However, they're just as real and can manifest in many ways.

While all brains age, each does so at its own pace and in its own unique way, shaped by the individual's background and life experiences.



These changes include:

- Processing information more slowly
- Decreased attention span
- Memory problems

Natural changes in how the brain works

- Certain pathways between neurons become less efficient, causing communication between them to slow down.
- The heart pumps blood less efficiently, veins may harden or become blocked, and small vascular lesions may form—all of which can reduce blood flow and limit the supply of oxygen and glucose the brain needs to function optimally.

Did you say “cognitive”?

You may have come across terms like cognitive decline, cognitive loss and cognitive problems. But what exactly do they mean? In short, cognitive functions are the brain’s mental abilities that allow us to think, learn, communicate, make decisions, find our way around, remember things, drive, stay organized... and worry!

Normal changes associated with aging

Carry out activities more slowly

Like getting dressed, reading, grocery shopping and cooking

Feel more tired after mental effort

Such as after a long conversation, driving or going out

Occasionally search for words

Which can lead to answering a question more slowly or needing to ask for the question to be repeated

Memory lapses

Such as forgetting keys, the reason for entering a room or the purpose of a phone call

Worry more easily

About relatives, upcoming plans, unresolved issues, tasks to be done, the weather, etc.





Preserving cognitive health

Although two seniors may be the same age, their brains could be very different. While many factors influence how our brain ages, it's well known that healthy lifestyle habits can help preserve certain capacities.

Staying mentally and physically active through continued learning and engagement stimulates the brain and promotes the growth of new neurons. The key is to break the brain's routine and challenge it.

Three habits to help maintain cognitive health

01

Regular conversation

Conversation supports mental well-being by strengthening social bonds and stimulating the brain. Interacting with others boosts our sense of belonging and helps us feel appreciated and valued.

- Talk on the phone
- Do volunteer work
- Join a group that shares your interests (e.g., craft circle, choir)

02

Reduce and manage stress

The brain becomes less resistant to stress with age. In addition, continued elevated levels of the stress hormone cortisol can interfere with memory.

- Do breathing exercises
- Respect your own rhythm and limits
- Listen to music

03

Get moving

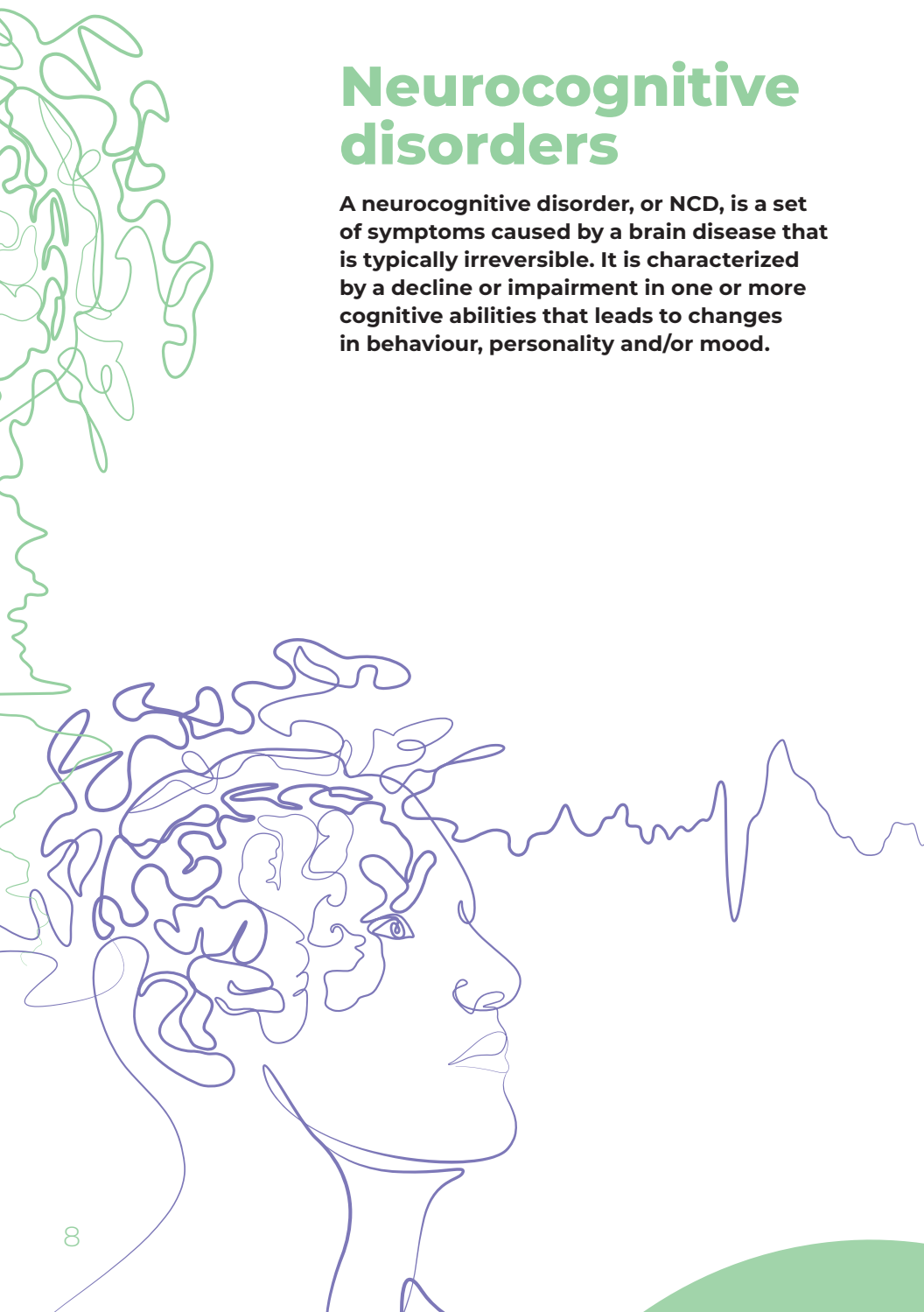
Staying physically active helps maintain good general health and reduce stress. Exercise also boosts blood flow to the brain.

- Go for a walk
- Dancing
- Garden



Neurocognitive disorders

A neurocognitive disorder, or NCD, is a set of symptoms caused by a brain disease that is typically irreversible. It is characterized by a decline or impairment in one or more cognitive abilities that leads to changes in behaviour, personality and/or mood.



NCD can be mild or severe depending on how advanced the disease is. When mild, the person can still carry out daily activities independently despite some decline in certain cognitive abilities. For example, they may be able to cook familiar meals but struggle to follow a new recipe.

By contrast, major NCD is associated with a significant loss of autonomy. The individual may no longer be able to manage their finances, run errands, drive or take care of basic hygiene.

65

The risk of developing Alzheimer's doubles every five years after the age of 65.

600,000

The estimated number of people currently living with a neurocognitive disorder in Canada.

1,700,000

The estimated number of people who will be living with a neurocognitive disorder in Canada in 2050.

Source : The Alzheimer Society of Canada's Landmark Study, 2022

When your loved one starts to feel like a stranger...

At times, you may feel like you no longer recognize your relative.

My mother has completely lost interest in gardening, an activity she used to love!

My grandmother, once an avid cook, has stopped because she says she's too tired.

My grandfather used to love telling jokes but now he no longer even takes part in conversations.

My husband now seems distant from his grandchildren, who once meant everything to him.



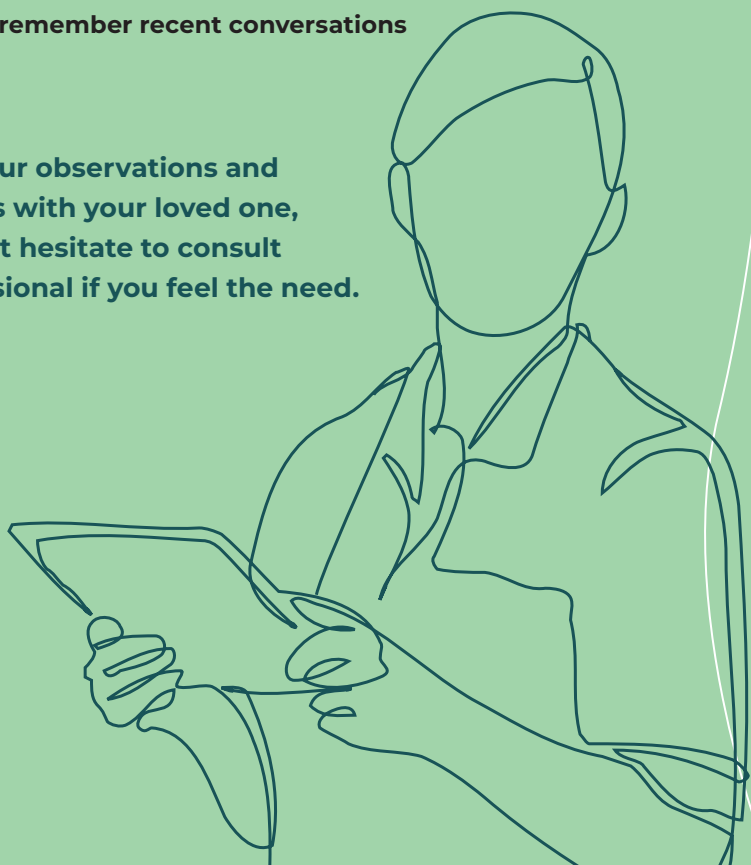
Normal senior behaviour

- Sometimes forgets names, appointments, topics of conversation, grocery items, etc.
- Misplaces keys, personal belongings, etc.
- Feels tired and less motivated
- Needs help making complex financial decisions or when dealing with the unexpected
- Experiences occasional mild mood swings
- Has problems concentrating and occasionally loses focus
- Sometimes feels doubtful or less sure of himself

Behaviour to keep an eye on

- **Has frequent and unpredictable mood changes**
- **Shows increased stress, anxiety or excessive fear**
- **Has lost interest in activities they previously enjoyed**
- **Displays strange or worrying new behaviours**
- **Has difficulty expressing themselves or finding the right words**
- **Can't remember recent conversations**

Share your observations and concerns with your loved one, and don't hesitate to consult a professional if you feel the need.



Understanding Alzheimer's

Alzheimer's is the most common neurocognitive disorder. Since it is progressive and irreversible, it is referred to as a neurodegenerative condition. In the early stages of the disease, individuals with Alzheimer's experience mainly memory difficulties but no significant changes in behaviour.

As the disease progresses, symptoms become more obvious, such as increased difficulty with communicating and recognizing objects or faces, as well as disorientation and organizational difficulties.

When to worry?

Every concern counts. If you're worried about changes in your loved one's behaviour, habits or mood, it's a good idea to discuss your concerns with them and decide together whether to consult a professional.



It's not just Alzheimer's...

There are many other diseases that can be mistaken for Alzheimer's, depending on the stage and progression. Here are a few examples.

Vascular dementia

This is characterized by brain lesions caused by decreased blood flow to certain areas of the brain. The cognitive impairment is progressive and highly variable, depending on which areas are affected by the decreased blood flow.

Lewy body dementia

This condition can lead to visual hallucinations and motor disorders similar to those seen in Parkinson's. In the early stages, it does not affect memory.

Frontotemporal dementia

This type of dementia affects mainly the brain's frontal and temporal regions, leading to personality changes, disinhibition (which can result in socially inappropriate behaviour) and language difficulties.



How can I help?

Learning that a loved one has NCD can be very unsettling. After the initial shock, you may have lots of questions and not always know how to help. You may wonder what to say, what to do and how to reassure your relative. It turns out that one of the best ways to help is by focusing on your loved one's needs.

The needs-based approach

Individuals living with NCD may have unpredictable or even aggressive reactions. This can stem from a variety of factors, including hunger, thirst, the need to go to the bathroom, physical pain, feeling unsafe, not understanding what's happening, and so on. These are known as “unmet needs.”

A person-centred approach focused on understanding the individual and addressing such unmet needs can help manage difficult behaviour.



So, what do I do?

The better you understand your loved one's needs, the better you will be able to recognize and respond to them. But remember—it's completely understandable to find it challenging to respond to your loved one's behaviour.

Respect their personal space

Your loved one may be surprised when, for example, you try to provide hygiene care without first asking. You would be too, wouldn't you? Or when it's time for a bath, they may get agitated and refuse to cooperate. So it's important to explain each step of what you're doing so they're not caught off-guard and feel uncomfortable.

Create a sense of comfort and security

A nervous and confused resident in a long-term care facility wants to go home and prepare a meal for her husband, even though he has long since passed away. Rather than trying to convince her of the truth, you could ask questions on another subject and gently lead her back to a place where she feels safe.

Foster independence

After your meal together, you want to guide your loved one back to his room, knowing that he'll likely fall asleep at the table. Twice you say it's time to go, but he gets angry. What if he simply wants you to respect his decision to remain seated?

Moving to a new home

Eventually an aging individual may have to move to a seniors' residence or long-term care facility. For the senior, this is a complex decision as it involves accepting some loss of autonomy and leaving the place that has provided their greatest sense of security: **THEIR** home.

There is much to grieve, including for the caregiver, who must face the loss of their once autonomous parent. The role of support during this transition is crucial to alleviating stress and anxiety, and to ensuring the process goes as smoothly as possible.

While it's a difficult decision with no easy answers, moving a loved one with NCD to a facility is necessary when safety concerns outweigh the benefits of them remaining in their home.



How to start a caring conversation

→ Discuss the situation sympathetically

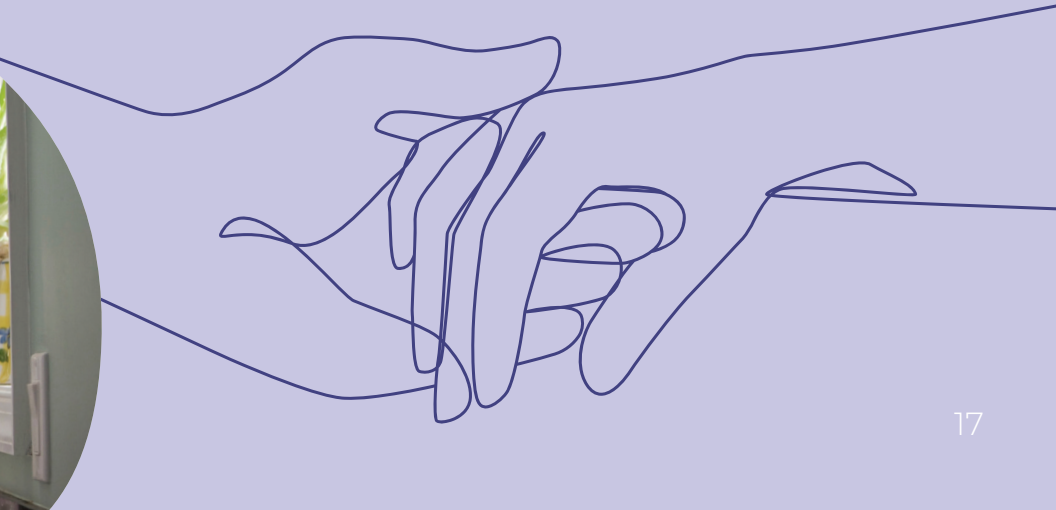
Mom, do you like living alone? Do you think your home is still suitable for your needs and situation?

→ Explain your reasons

Dad, you've had several falls recently. Do you realize that you could break a bone? That would really limit your mobility, and you'd have to use a walker.

→ Express concern

My love, the stove has been on all day and there could have been a fire. I'm afraid there might be an accident one day.



Self-care for informal caregivers

Am I an informal caregiver?

Many people are unaware that they are informal caregivers, mainly because they don't live with the person they are helping or because the support they provide is only occasional.

However, according to the Quebec government's definition, an informal caregiver is anyone who, on a regular or occasional basis, provides significant support to someone in their immediate circle who has a temporary or permanent disability, and with whom they share an emotional bond, whether familial or not.



Even with the best intentions in the world, being an informal caregiver means embarking on a journey fraught with challenges and worries. Learning to set boundaries is often difficult because of the feelings of guilt that can arise. However, this step is essential to avoid burnout.

Taking care of yourself

Plan ahead

Schedule some time to prepare the week's schedule, complete hospital paperwork, draw up a to-do list, and so on.

Use online and delivery services

Schedule grocery and medication deliveries, as well as medical appointments, online.

Talk to other caregivers and take advantage of respite services

Use available respite services to give yourself a break, and consider joining a support group for informal caregivers.

Go easy on yourself

Your role is difficult and demanding!

It's natural to experience a range of emotions and feel overwhelmed sometimes. Remember that what you're doing is incredibly valuable, and treat yourself with the same kindness and understanding that you would a friend who is an informal caregiver.



Do I have “compassion fatigue”?

It's possible to burn out from helping others too much. Constantly taking on the role of caregiver can leave you feeling exhausted, helpless, overworked and emotionally drained.

It's hard to keep giving of your time and energy when your own batteries are running low! It's therefore essential that you know your limits and take proper care of yourself.

Here are some signs that you may have reached—or exceeded—your limits and are experiencing compassion fatigue:

- Severe fatigue and sleep disturbances
- Impatience and irritability
- Anxiety and fears
- Sadness
- Loss of motivation
- Tendency to isolate yourself



35%

Percentage of informal caregivers who don't recognize themselves as such.

46%

Percentage of informal caregivers who provide care to a loved one for five or more hours per day.

1/3

Proportion of adult Quebecers who are informal caregivers.



Source: Enquête statistique sur la proche aide au Québec 2022, by L'Appui pour les proches aidants

To learn more

Au fil du temps has a wide range of informative, engaging videos and podcasts covering everything from staying healthy as you age to the realities of being an informal caregiver. So dive in!

Watch our videos (in French) at:
bit.ly/AFDTyoutube

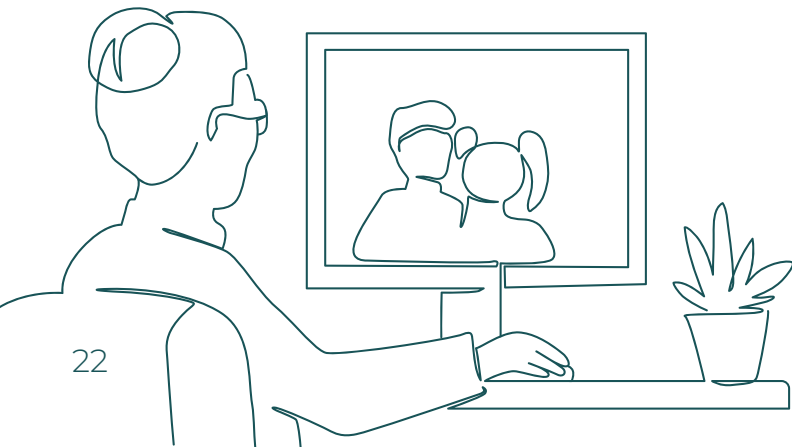
Find out more at:
en.aufildutemps.quebec

Resources for informal caregivers

Information and support:
lappui.org

Federation of Quebec Alzheimer Societies:
alzheimer.ca/federationquebecoise/en

Association québécoise des
neuropsychologues: aqnp.ca





Dr. Christine Grou, psychologist and president of the *Ordre des psychologues du Québec*, with guest Jean Bernaquez on the *Vieillir en santé* podcast.
Photo: Louis-Étienne Doré

Brochure design:
Communications Department of the *Ordre des psychologues du Québec* and MissPixels

ISBN : 978-2-923164-69-4

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