

DEPRESSION AT WORK · ARTICLE 2

WHY CAN'T I CONCENTRATE AT WORK ANYMORE?

A COMPASSIONATE EXPLORATION

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Introduction

"I've read the same email three times and still can't take it in."

"I walk into a meeting and completely lose my train of thought."

"I used to be organised. Now I can't even remember why I opened my laptop."

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone.

One of the most common and frustrating symptoms of depression is difficulty concentrating. Many people begin to worry they are becoming less intelligent, less capable or no longer suited to their job.

In reality, depression doesn't reduce your intelligence. It affects the brain's ability to access and use the skills you already have.

Understanding why this happens can help replace self-criticism with self-compassion and guide you towards strategies that support your concentration while you recover.

Why Depression Affects Concentration

Concentration isn't a single skill. It relies on several different brain functions working together, including attention, memory, planning, decision-making and mental flexibility.

When you're living with depression, your brain is already working hard to manage persistent low mood, emotional distress and increased stress levels.

This leaves fewer mental resources available for focusing on work.

Imagine trying to use a computer with dozens of programmes running in the background. The computer still works, but everything becomes slower because its processing power is being used elsewhere.

Depression affects the brain in a similar way. Much of your mental energy is already occupied, making it harder to absorb information, stay focused and think clearly.

Signs You May Notice at Work

Difficulty concentrating can affect almost every part of your working day.

You might notice that you:

Read the same document repeatedly without remembering what you've read.

Lose your train of thought during conversations or meetings.

Forget appointments or deadlines.

Make mistakes in work that previously felt straightforward.

Feel overwhelmed when several tasks need completing.

Take much longer to finish routine work.

Struggle to make even simple decisions.

Find it difficult to switch between different tasks.

These experiences can be worrying, particularly if you've always been someone who takes pride in your work.

The Confidence Trap

Many people begin to lose confidence when they notice these changes.

You may start checking your work repeatedly because you're afraid of making mistakes. You might avoid speaking in meetings because you're worried your mind will go blank. Some people work longer hours trying to compensate, only to become even more mentally exhausted.

Over time, this creates a cycle.

Reduced concentration leads to self-doubt.

Self-doubt increases anxiety.

Anxiety uses even more mental energy.

Concentration becomes even harder.

Breaking this cycle often starts with recognising that the problem is not a lack of ability - it's a symptom of depression.

How This Can Affect Your Work

Depression doesn't just affect productivity. It can also influence how you feel about yourself at work.

You may begin to question whether you're good enough for your role or worry that colleagues have noticed a change.

Many people fear they'll be judged as lazy, disorganised or unprofessional.

The reality is that concentration difficulties are one of the most common cognitive symptoms of depression. They are not a reflection of your intelligence, commitment or potential.

What Can Help?

Improving concentration often starts with reducing the pressure you place on yourself.

You may find it helpful to:

Focus on one task at a time rather than multitasking.

Break larger pieces of work into smaller, achievable steps.

Write down important information rather than relying on memory.

Reduce distractions where possible by working in a quieter environment or silencing unnecessary notifications.

Schedule demanding tasks for times of day when your concentration is naturally better.

Take regular short breaks to reduce mental fatigue.

Speak to your manager about reasonable adjustments if your symptoms are affecting your work.

Seek professional support if concentration difficulties persist or begin significantly affecting your daily functioning.

Small adjustments often have a greater impact than trying to push yourself harder.

Reflection

Think about how you would respond if a colleague recovering from a concussion struggled to concentrate.

Would you expect them to perform exactly as they did before?

Depression affects the brain too. Perhaps you deserve the same patience and understanding that you would naturally offer someone else.

Key Takeaway

Difficulty concentrating is one of the most common symptoms of depression. It does not mean you've become less intelligent or less capable. Your brain is working under increased emotional strain, leaving fewer resources available for attention, memory and decision-making.

Recovery isn't about forcing yourself to focus harder. It's about understanding what your brain is experiencing, reducing unnecessary pressure and giving yourself the support you need to heal.

A gentle reminder

This resource offers general information and reflection. It is not a diagnosis or a substitute for individual medical or therapeutic care. If you are worried about your safety or someone else's, seek urgent professional support.

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