

Cognition and Mental Health in Cerebral Palsy

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When people think about cerebral palsy (CP), they often think about movement. However, CP can affect many different parts of the brain, and this means it can influence not only movement but also thinking, emotions, behavior, sleep, communication, and mental health.

The brain injury that causes CP does not worsen over time, but the way it affects a person's life can change throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. New challenges may emerge as life circumstances change, making it important to pay attention to both cognitive and emotional wellbeing throughout life.

What Is Cognition?

Cognition refers to how we think, learn, remember, solve problems, pay attention, and make decisions. People with CP have a wide range of cognitive abilities. Some have no cognitive difficulties, while others may experience broad challenges or difficulties in specific areas.

Examples of cognitive difficulties may include:

- Paying attention or concentrating for long periods
- Remembering information
- Planning and organizing tasks
- Problem solving and decision making
- Understanding visual and spatial information
- Processing information quickly

Having cognitive difficulties does not automatically mean a person has an intellectual disability. Many people with CP have average or above-average intelligence while still experiencing specific cognitive challenges.

Every person with CP has a unique profile of strengths and difficulties.

Mental Health Matters

Mental health is an important part of overall health. Research shows that people with CP are more likely than the general population to experience conditions such as anxiety, depression, and sleep difficulties.

These challenges can occur in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Unfortunately, mental health concerns are sometimes overlooked because healthcare providers focus primarily on physical symptoms. This is sometimes called *diagnostic overshadowing* — when symptoms of anxiety, depression, pain, or other conditions are mistakenly attributed to CP itself.

It is important to remember that emotional difficulties are not simply "part of CP." They deserve recognition, support, and treatment just like any other health condition.

Why Might Mental Health Be Affected?

Mental health is influenced by many factors. For people with CP, some additional challenges may increase the risk of emotional distress, including:

- Chronic pain
- Fatigue and mental fatigue
- Sleep problems
- Communication difficulties
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Stigma and discrimination
- Barriers to participation in school, work, and community life
- Lack of accessible mental health services
- Having to depend on others for decisions or support
- Difficult transitions between child and adult healthcare services
- Other health conditions, such as epilepsy

Not everyone with CP experiences these challenges, and not everyone develops mental health difficulties. Mental health is influenced by many factors that interact in complex ways.

Protective Factors and Sources of Strength

Just as there are risk factors, there are also factors that support good mental health and wellbeing.

These may include:

- Strong family and social support
- Meaningful friendships and relationships
- Participation in school, work, sports, hobbies, and community activities
- Feeling included and valued
- Access to healthcare and mental health services
- Opportunities to make choices and have control over one's life
- Good pain management and sleep habits
- Regular physical activity and exercise

Building on strengths and promoting participation can make a meaningful difference in quality of life.

Getting Help

Mental health difficulties are common, and effective support is available.

Possible approaches include:

- Psychological therapies, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

- Adapted therapies for people with communication difficulties or intellectual disabilities
- Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)-based approaches when needed
- Medication when appropriate
- Treatment of pain and sleep problems
- Exercise and physical activity
- Rest, pacing activities, and managing fatigue

Support should always be tailored to the individual person's needs, strengths, and goals.

Key Messages

- Cerebral palsy affects more than movement.
- Cognitive abilities vary greatly among people with CP.
- Mental health is an important part of overall health.
- Anxiety, depression, fatigue, and sleep difficulties are common but treatable.
- Emotional difficulties should never be dismissed as "just CP."
- Early recognition, accessible services, and appropriate support can make a significant difference.
- Every person with CP has unique strengths, challenges, and potential.

By paying attention to cognition, mental health, and participation, not only physical functioning, we can support people with CP in living healthy, meaningful, and fulfilling lives.