

Cognitive Load

Cognitive load refers to the mental resources required by a task, which depends on: (1) the task's intrinsic level of difficulty or complexity, (2) how familiar or novel the task or situation is, and (3) to what degree extraneous stimuli are distracting us from processing information.

According to [cognitive load theory](#), working memory is a limited resource, and we can only process a certain amount of information at a given time. **When the cumulative demands of our tasks exceed our working memory's capacity, we experience cognitive overload.** Cognitive overload impedes [learning and memory](#) and can lead to [mistakes and burnout](#).

New schedules, roles, and tasks require greater cognitive resources than familiar ones. When something is new, we do not have a schema or mental script guiding us on what to expect and what to do.

Our ability to engage with high cognitive load tasks is also affected by our [mental health](#).

Here are some strategies to manage cognitive load:

- **Create routines.** Routines support cognitive function by allowing you to spend less cognitive energy on recurring tasks, so you can devote your focus and creativity to other things. Predictable routines help people feel more comfortable, secure, and able to engage in learning and work.
- **Break a complex task into smaller steps.** When a problem or task seems too big to tackle, break it down into pieces that are more manageable. Then focus on one step at a time. Remember to discuss priorities and timelines, ask for help, and delegate.
- **Remove or limit distractions.** Turn off email and social media notifications during dedicated work time. If you have to switch gears because of an urgent issue, make a note of what you were doing and where you were in your work when you were interrupted.
- **Be kind to yourself.** What would you say to a friend who was feeling overwhelmed? Give yourself time and grace when adjusting to a new routine, learning a new role, or taking on extra responsibilities. Examine your beliefs about how much you can do at once and make sure your expectations are realistic.