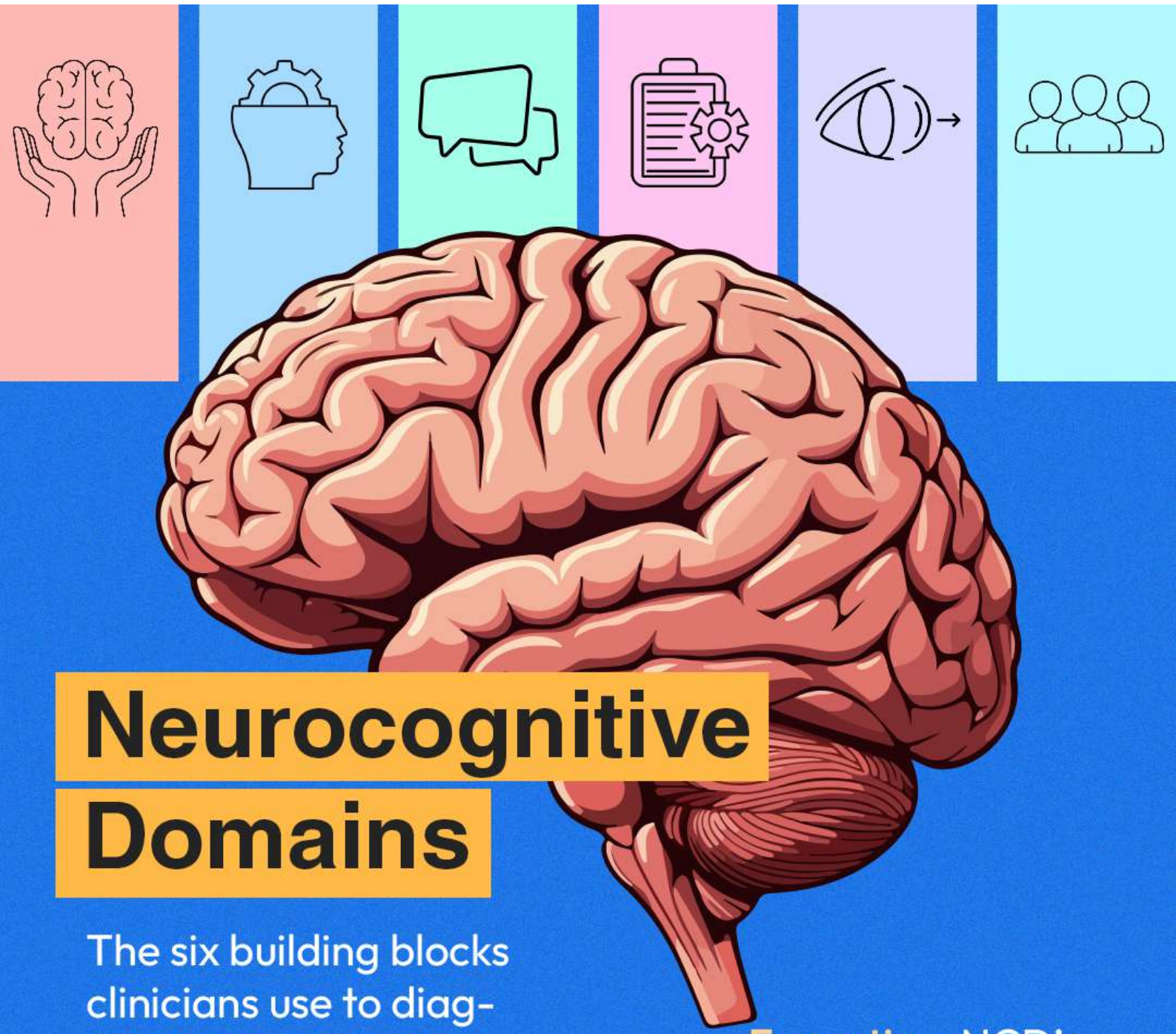


# Neurocognitive Domains

The six building blocks clinicians use to diagnose neurocognitive disorders

**Exam tip** – NCD's were previously classified as dementias as per DSM-III & IV

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# What Are Neurocognitive Domains?

Neurocognitive domains are the six areas of cognitive function assessed under DSM-5's Neurocognitive Disorders category.

- Complex attention
- Learning and memory
- Perceptual-motor function
- Executive function
- Language
- Social cognition

Quick Mnemonic: "Careful Elephants Learn Language Perfectly, Socially"

**A diagnosis is made based on decline in one or more of these domains:**

- Major NCD — significant decline that interferes with independence in everyday activities
- Mild NCD — modest decline that does not interfere with independence, though it may require more effort or compensatory strategies

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# Complex Attention

Sustained attention, divided attention,selective attention,and processing speed. The ability to focus, filter out distraction, and process information quickly.



# Executive Function

Planning, decision-making,working memory, mental flexibility,self-monitoring, and responding to feedback. Essentially, the processes that control and coordinate other cognitive functions.



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# Learning and Memory

**Includes:**

- Immediate memory span
- Recent memory (free recall, cued recall, recognition memory)
- Long-term memory (semantic, autobiographical)
- Implicit (procedural) learning

This is the most heavily tested domain in exams because it's the hallmark of Alzheimer's-type NCD — early, prominent impairment in learning new information and recent memory.

Common exam trap #1: Cognitive decline does not always mean memory loss. A person can have Major NCD because of problems in other areas, such as planning, decision-making, orattention, even if their memory is still fairly intact in the early stages.

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# Language

**Expressive language** — object naming, word-finding, fluency, grammar/syntax

**Receptive language** — comprehension of spoken or written language

Impairment often shows up subtly first — word-finding difficulty, substituting vague terms ("thing," "stuff") for specific words, or increasingly simplified sentence structure.



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# Perceptual-Motor Function + Social Cognition

**Perceptual-Motor Function — visual perception, visuoconstructional reasoning (e.g., copying a design), perceptual-motor coordination, praxis (skilled movement), and gnosis (recognition of objects/faces).**

**Visuospatial deficits → Posterior cortical atrophy;**

Social Cognition — recognition of others' emotions, theory of mind, and behavioral regulation/insight into socially appropriate behavior.

Social cognition decline → Behavioral-variant frontotemporal NCD.



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# Assessment Tools

| Domain | Common assessment tool |
|---|---|
| Complex Attention | Trail Making Test (Part A), Digit Span |
| Executive Function | Trail Making Test (Part B), Wisconsin Card Sorting Test |
| Learning & Memory | California Verbal Learning Test, Rey Auditory Verbal Learning Test |
| Language | Boston Naming Test |
| Perceptual-Motor | Clock Drawing Test, Rey-Osterrieth Complex Figure Test |
| Social Cognition | Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test |

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