

Compensatory Strategies for Post-Brain Injury Challenges

After a brain injury, an individual may experience difficulty with higher level thinking. This handout identifies some strategies that can be used if they are having trouble with certain cognitive tasks. Brain injury effects each individual in different ways, and these strategies may or may not work for them. The best way to find out is through trial and error, so if one strategy does not work move on to another!

- If planning/organizing is hard for a client...
 - Suggest they make a to-do list every day & write how long they think each task will take.
 - When making lists or trying to organize their day or week, have them do so in a quiet environment without too many distractions.
 - Suggest they develop a daily & weekly routine (e.g. laundry day is Wednesday, grocery shopping is Thursday, etc.).
 - Encourage them to let others (friends, family, counselor, etc.) know what their plans are for the day (including important appointments) so that person can check in.
 - Show them how to use alarms/alerts on their phone to remind them when they have something planned or to begin planning for something.

- If self-awareness/inhibition is hard...
 - Have them practice taking an extra second to think before they speak.
 - Encourage them to ask themselves questions like, "Do I really want to say/do this? What might happen if I do?"
 - Help them practice active listening with you, a family member, or friend.
 - Suggest they participate in positive self-talk daily.
 - Encourage open communication with their friends/family about coping strategies.

- If following through once they start a task is hard...
 - Allow extra time for them to complete tasks.
 - Encourage them to take breaks as needed.
 - Suggest they write down all the necessary steps for each task on their to-do list so they have them on hand. If they have trouble identifying steps to a task, help them break it down.

- If problem-solving is hard...
 - Role play a situation where they may have to use problem-solving skills.
 - Suggest they talk through a situation with you, a friend or family member. Ask them to try coming up with more than one solution to the problem.
 - Use visual aids as needed.
 - Again, writing things down can be very helpful.

Another common challenge after brain injury is difficulty remembering things. Brain injury can lead to short-term memory problems (forgets things that were just told to them) or long-term memory problems (trouble remembering details of their life before their injury). If this is a challenge, try

- Suggesting they use a daily planner (electronic or paper) where they can write down appointments, important events, etc. It may be helpful to have them post sticky notes around their house to remind them to *check* their planner!
- Smart phones, tablets and other electronic devices where they can download apps. There are many apps available to help people remember important things, but some apps out there have games/puzzles designed to improve memory and exercise the brain.
- Encourage them to hang a whiteboard by their front door so they can jot things down during the day as they think of them.
- Lists/Checklists. Again, just having notepads around for them to write things down as they come up so they don't have to keep everything in their brain.
- Keeping a consistent daily routine.
- Encourage them to tell a family member or friend when they have a doctor's appointment or job interview and ask them to send reminders leading up to it.

Sometimes after a brain injury, it can be challenging to control one's emotions. Your client may feel more angry, worried, sad, or irritated than usual. Some strategies to use if this is the case are:

- Using meditation/relaxation apps, or encouraging them to participation in self-care, relaxation, and meditation activities on their own.
- Deep breathing exercises
- Writing in a journal every day
- Search for potential triggers to increase self-awareness and recognize when something may trigger anxiety, anger, etc.
- Talk therapy, physical therapy, or medication may be appropriate after receiving an official diagnosis. Suggest your client discuss options with their doctor.
- Regular exercise can greatly help mitigate emotional consequences of brain injury. Start small, like with a short daily walk. Encourage your client to build it into their daily routine or to-do list.

Brain injury is not simply an event; it is a lifelong challenge for many. It can be confusing, complex and frustrating, so remember to be patient with them as their brain heals and learns how to solve complex problems again. Encourage them to have patience with themselves, too. Allow them time to process and encourage them in their progress, and reach out to the Brain Injury Association of Virginia for help and support.

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