

Challenges with Executive Functioning After a Brain Injury

What Do We Mean When We Say Executive Functioning?

The phrase “executive function” refers to a set of mental processes that help us connect past experience with present action. There are three main areas of executive functioning, they include:

- 1. Working memory** - This skill helps us to work with information without losing track of what we are doing. An example of using our working memory is how you remember a shopping list after you bump into a friend. Some challenges that may occur include:
 - Forgetting what was read or heard
 - Having difficulty following directions with multiple steps
 - Trouble staying focused
- 2. Flexible thinking** - This skill helps us to “change gears.” An example of difficulty with flexible thinking is becoming anxious or angry when plans or schedules change. Some challenges include:
 - Repeatedly using the same strategy when faced with a problem even though it did not work previously, or being unable to generate alternate solutions.
 - Taking longer to take in information, make sense of it, and respond to it.
 - Panicking or becoming overly emotional when things change.
- 3. Inhibitory control** - This skill allows us to put aside a thought, action or feeling that gets in the way of what we want to do. An example of this type of self-control is being able to follow a conversation even if there is music in the background. Some challenges that may occur include:
 - Inability to ignore or filter out a stimulus in the environment such as a loud noise or conversation.
 - Impulsive behavior without taking the time to consider options and consequences.
 - Being easily distracted by others or interrupting others when they are speaking.

How Can You Identify Executive Functioning Challenges?

In many cases, more than one area is affected with symptoms ranging from very subtle to extreme and problematic behavior. Individuals struggling with executive functioning might also: It may be difficult to identify when someone is having challenges with executive functioning and, in many cases, more than one area is affected. Symptoms can range from very subtle to extreme and problematic behavior. People struggling with executive functioning might:

- Be unable to start (initiate) or finish a difficult task
- Be unable to prioritize tasks
- Have trouble organizing their thoughts
- Find it difficult to keep track of their belongings
- Experience problems managing their time

What Should You Do If You Are Experiencing These Challenges?

1. Consider getting tested by a neuropsychologist to determine what particular areas are causing you the biggest problems.
2. Set goals to work on self-awareness and linking person centered goals to motivation and life satisfaction. Identify why a task is important to you.
3. Ask for direct, corrective feedback to improve impaired self-awareness.
4. Simplify and structure directions or tasks – break them down into sections or “chunks.” Based on your current abilities.
5. Build on strengths – identify and pursue pre-injury activities to facilitate success.
6. Develop routines that include the entire family.
7. Plan things in advance. When possible, try to have a back-up plan so you are prepared if your plans need to change.
8. Be organized, keeping the things you need to take with you when leaving home in the same place.
9. When you are doing a task with multiple steps, try pausing regularly and take time to think and review where you are in the process.
10. Talk through plans or steps with someone; role play and practice how you could deal with a change or a new situation.

Tools and Tips to Help with Executive Functioning Challenges:

1. **Make a Daily To-Do List** - Creating a daily list of tasks and projects can help you stay motivated, organized, and make progress towards your goals. A daily to-do list is a powerful way to manage impulses that can lead to poor decision-making. Check yourself during the day that you are staying on task.
2. **Use a Calendar** - Create a daily, weekly, or monthly schedule to track important dates and appointments. Update and check your calendar daily. Try to make recurring appointments at the same time of day.
3. **Take Notes** - Take time to write information you need to remember or that you want to clarify in a designated notebook. Keep notes organized in one notebook or binder, labeled by topic (i.e., doctor appointments, questions for case manager, bill paying...). Take notes related to important calls so that you can keep track of details discussed in meetings and conversations.
4. **Use Reminders** - Use alarms, timers, calendars, visual reminders, check lists and mobile phones/apps to help with memory and to stay organized.
5. **Keep It Simple** - Reduce the number of activities that you attempt to complete at one time to help you focus and complete the task before moving on to another.
6. **Relax and Breathe** - Practicing stress management techniques like meditation, yoga, and deep breathing can improve symptoms associated with weak executive function skills and can help to reduce executive function anxiety.
7. **Stay Organized** - If you find yourself losing items frequently or feeling overwhelmed, try decluttering. Label where certain items are kept. Stay organized and keep your area tidy to help you locate items and feel less overwhelmed.

Things to Consider As a Family Member:

Caring for an individual with executive functioning challenges can be a full-time job. Often your love one exhibits changes in their personality and behavior.

Caregivers/families can experience:

- An increase in responsibility
- Stress, depression, and anxiety
- Strained relationships
- Reduced communication with their family members
- Restricted leisure time or social connections
- Reduced sexual or emotional intimacy if your partner experiences these challenges
- Feeling tired or frustrated

It is important that family members seek support for their needs through counseling, or attending a caregiver support group.

At the Brain Injury Association of Virginia, our trained experts are available to speak with you about your experience, answer your questions, and connect you with the best providers/resources for your needs. Our services are free and confidential.

**To get in touch:
Call 1-800-444-6443
Visit biav.net**

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