

Strategies to Facilitate Executive Functioning

Skills that allow us to plan, initiate and carry out tasks effectively following Traumatic Brain Injury.

Using Executive Functions to complete tasks

Executive functions are skills that allow us to initiate and carry out tasks effectively. Most of us take these skills for granted and complete hundreds of tasks each day without really thinking too hard about it. For instance, going shopping would seem like an easy task, but there are a number of processes and plans we go through to complete the task. Let's break it down:

We decide that we need more food because our supply is running low.

We make a list of what we need.

We then need to consider how much money we might need.

We need to consider when we are going to have time to go the supermarket.

We need to consider how we are going to get to and from the supermarket with all our shopping.

We need to remember to take our wallet and shopping list.

When we get to the supermarket we need to make decisions on what brands we will buy.



This shows that what we might consider to be a relatively simple task, actually contains quite a number of plans and decisions. However, if you have a brain injury, tasks like shopping can be a lot more difficult.

Brain injury can make tasks difficult for a lot of reasons. We will use the shopping example again to show why some individuals with brain injury find tasks involving executive functioning so difficult.

A brain injured individual may not have an awareness that their food supply is running out and so not initiate a trip to the supermarket.

The individual with a brain injury may be aware there is no food in the cupboard but is still not able to initiate a trip to the supermarket.

The individual may not think to make a list or take enough money.

The individual may walk to the supermarket and then realise when they have done their shopping there is too much to carry home.

The individual with brain injury may not learn from the above mistakes and make the same mistakes the next time they go to the supermarket.



Being able to evaluate our performance is another key function of executive functioning. We can recognise when we have made a mistake, or we can make something more efficient, and we can act on it. For instance, if we travelled to the supermarket at 3pm when all the kids were coming out of school and got stuck in traffic, we might decide to go at a different time in the future to avoid the traffic. An individual with a brain injury may not be able to evaluate and make these changes and continue to make the same mistakes.

Someone with executive function difficulties will consistently make the same mistakes, forgetting appointments, over spending, forgetting essential daily tasks (washing, shopping etc) and starting tasks but not completing them.

Executive Functioning (initiating, carrying out, and completing tasks effectively and successfully)

There are a number of processes to completing a task successfully. Firstly we will discuss the steps to completing a task and then we will focus on strategies to facilitate this process:

- Have an awareness that a task requires initiation. If you do not have an awareness that you are running out of food, you will not initiate a trip to the supermarket.
- Plan the task. Break the task down into steps, make a list.
- Initiate the task. Start the task and follow it through.
- Manage any unplanned difficulties that occur.
- Complete the task.
- Review how the task went and think about any changes you need to make, so that the task is easier next time.





Strategies to Facilitate Executive Functioning

- Avoid carrying out tasks when you are fatigued, stressed or in pain. Any of these feelings are going to be a distraction. Take some time out to manage internal and external distractions before attempting to complete a task.
- It is a good idea to schedule in a time each day or week to plan ahead. When you have an agenda there are no surprises and you have time to prepare for tasks and activities.
- Set alarms as reminders. Following a brain injury some individuals need to be constantly directed to start or complete tasks because they now lack the processes that helps them initiate an activity. An individual with brain injury may not be lazy, they just do not realise they have to start these activities. Alarms are a great way to remind you to initiate a task. Some people are able to program their mobile phones to alert them to do a task.
- Create checklists, diaries and reminders. These will help you remember important aspects of a plan. They will also help you initiate tasks.
- Avoiding danger by putting up notes and signs around the house as reminders. For instance, notes to tell you to turn the stove off, or check the bath is not overflowing.



www.icommunicatetherapy.com will provide you with a comprehensive list of ways to manage your time, initiate tasks and remind you about appointments.



Executive Functions to regulate Thinking and Behaviour

Executive functions also have another purpose, they help us control our behaviour, and act and respond appropriately. As we have already mentioned, problems with executive functions may mean an individual consistently makes the same mistakes because they are unable to evaluate their performance and fix problems. What might also happen is that an individual with brain injury will have a lack of insight into their own abilities to perform tasks, even when other people make positive suggestions.

There may also be difficulties with self regulation which can lead to impulsive behaviour or verbalisations. Difficulties with self regulation during periods of communication may present in several ways:

- Making inappropriate remarks or statements
- Being rude
- Dominating the conversation
- Continually talking about a certain subject
- Not being able to stay on topic

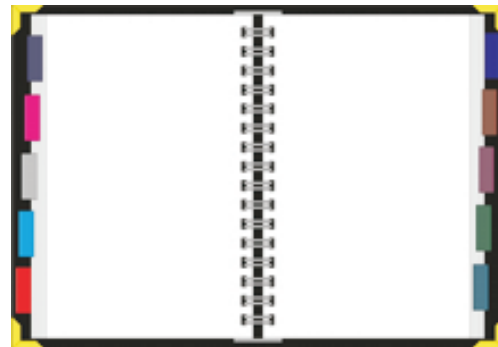
There are a number of strategies that some people successfully utilise to facilitate their communication:

- With the help of a suitably qualified speech and language therapist/ pathologist some individuals with brain injury can be taught to pick up on a listener's reactions or facial expressions to know when they are making communication mistakes. This may mean re-learning social conventions and what facial expressions represent, but it may mean just re-learning to appropriately react to certain facial expression e.g. if I say something and my communication partner looks shocked, I may have said the wrong thing.
- Enlisting the help of a close friends and/or family members (you must be happy to accept constructive feedback from these people). Using a kind of "buddy" system, your friend will be able to give a subtle signal if you are breaking social rules or conventions. Your friend can also sit down with you after the event and discuss what you did and what you can do in the future to make it better.





- Think about practising or role playing a communicative situation before you enter into it. Get feedback from a friend or relative to see if what you want to say is appropriate.
- Try and implement a system of self monitoring (this might be quite difficult for many people). Some people use a Stop-Think-Go strategy where they stop, and evaluate what they are about to say before saying it.
- Monitor your fatigue and your mood before entering a situation where there will be complex communication. Assess whether you be able to use your strategies correctly if you are tired, and if you are in a low mood are you more likely to make inappropriate remarks.
- If you have to communicate at a time when you are tired, low, or in a noisy environment, warn people that you may not communicate well.
- Monitor the environment. If you are going to be in a place with lots of distractions, is this going to affect your ability to communicate successfully.
- Try and keep a diary of when communication situations went well or badly and discuss these with friends, family or your speech and language therapist/pathologist.
- Make sure others are aware of your difficulties so they do not put too many communicative demands on you.





To learn more about Traumatic Brain Injury and strategies to enhance communication, speech, memory and cognition, you can read about and purchase books on our website www.icommunicatetherapy.com. Click this link to see our online Resource Centre. ***Suggested Reading***

Suggested reading:

Brain, Heal Thyself: A Caregiver's New Approach to Recovery from Stroke, Aneurysm, And Traumatic Brain Injuries by Madonna Siles and Lawrence J. Beuret

Brain Injury Survivor's Guide: Welcome to Our World by Larry Jameson and Beth Jameson

Textbook of Traumatic Brain Injury by Stuart C. Yudofsky, Jonathan M. Silver, and Thomas W. McAllister

The Mild Traumatic Brain Injury Workbook: Your Program for Regaining Cognitive Function & Overcoming Emotional Pain by Douglas J. Mason and Gottfried Jean-Louis

Living with Brain Injury: A Guide for Families, Second Edition by Richard C Senelick and Karla Dougherty

Rehabilitation for Traumatic Brain Injury by Walter M. High, Angelle M. Sander, Margaret A. Struchen, and Karin A. Hart

Communication Disorders Following Traumatic Brain Injury (Brain Damage, Behaviour, and Cognition) by Skye McDonald

Traumatic Brain Injury: Rehabilitation for Speech-Language Pathologists by Rita Gillis

Traumatic Brain Injury Rehabilitation: Children and Adolescents Second Edition by Mark Ylvisaker

The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science (James H. Silberman Books) by Norman Doidge

Aphasia Therapy Workshop: Current Approaches to Aphasia Therapy-- Principles and Applications by Jacqueline Stark, Nadine Martin, and Ruth Fink

Beyond Aphasia: Therapies For Living With Communication Disability by Carole Pound, Susie Parr, Jayne Lindsay, and Celia Woolf