

Suggestions for Substance Abuse Treatment Providers Working with Persons Who Have Limitations in Cognitive Abilities

The substance abuse provider should determine a person's unique communication and learning styles.

- Ask how well the person reads and writes; or evaluate via samples.
- Evaluate whether the individual is able to comprehend both written and spoken language.
- If someone is not able to speak (or speak easily), inquire as to alternate methods of expression (e.g., writing or gestures).
- Both ask about and observe a person's attention span; be attuned to whether attention seems to change in busy versus quiet environments.
- Both ask about and observe a person's capacity for new learning; inquire as to strengths and weaknesses or seek consultation to determine optimum approaches.

The substance abuse provider should assist the individual to compensate for a unique learning style.

- Modify written material to make it concise and to the point.
- Paraphrase concepts, use concrete examples, incorporate visual aids, or otherwise present an idea in more than one way.
- If it helps, allow the individual to take notes or at least write down key points for later review and recall.
- Encourage the use of a calendar or planner; if the treatment program includes a daily schedule, make sure a "pocket version" is kept for easy reference.
- Make sure homework assignments are written down.
- After group sessions, meet individually to review main points.
- Provide assistance with homework or worksheets; allow more time and take into account reading or writing abilities.
- Enlist family, friends or other service providers to reinforce goals.
- Do not take for granted that something learned in one situation will be generalized to another.
- Repeat, review, rehearse, repeat, review, rehearse.

The substance abuse provider should provide direct feedback regarding inappropriate behaviors.

- Let a person know a behavior is inappropriate; do not assume the individual knows and is choosing to do so anyway.
- Provide straightforward feedback about when and where behaviors are appropriate.
- Redirect tangential or excessive speech, including a predetermined method of signals for use in groups.

The substance abuse provider should be cautious when making inferences about motivation based on observed behaviors.

- Do not presume that non-compliance arises from lack of motivation or resistance, check it out.
- Be aware that unawareness of deficits can arise as a result of specific damage to the brain and may not always be due to denial.
- Confrontation shuts down thinking and elicits rigidity; roll with resistance.
- Do not just discharge for non-compliance; follow-up and find out why someone has no-showed or otherwise not followed through.