

## Thinking and Behavior Management Strategies for Caregivers and Professionals

### Approach as a Partnership

After a person has experienced brain injury, he or she may feel a loss of control in many aspects of life. The person may feel inferior or unequal as a partner or in the roles previously held in the family. A partnership approach can be an effective way to negotiate solutions to thinking and behavior problems. This means acting as partners in the decision-making process by working together to determine how to solve a problem. You can work together by following these steps:

#### 1. *Prepare a plan of action*

- Involve the person with brain injury in planning
- Define each person's responsibilities
- Use tools such as calendars and notebooks throughout the planning phase

#### 2. *Keep it simple*

- Break the task into small steps
- Keep the environment free from distractions

#### 3. *Use a problem-solving format*

- Identify and recognize the problem
- Define the problem
- Decide on possible solutions to the problem
- Discuss possible solutions
- Pick a solution
- Determine which solution works the best
- Try another solution if the one is not working

#### 4. *Keep Communicating*

- Discuss how things are going
- Provide gentle, realistic comments about behavior
- Identify success and address areas of concern or problems directly and without delay

## **Strategies**

The following information will help familiarize you with behavior, memory and thinking problems that a person with brain injury may experience. Also included are specific techniques you can use to help the person participate more effectively and comfortably in various situations.

### *Tips:*

- Consistent and frequent repetition of the techniques listed will increase the chance of success.
- Do not assume the person will remember or understand what has been discussed.
- Communicate expectations clearly.

## **Difficulty Remembering**

### *Signs:*

- Unable to remember tasks from day to day
- Unable to remember new information

### *What to Do:*

- Establish a routine of daily tasks
- Encourage the consistent use of memory aids such as calendars and notebooks to plan, record and check off tasks as completed
- Encourage the person to write down new information they may need to provide other people;
- Make sure the information recorded is complete.
- Encourage review and rehearsal of memory notebook information they may need to provide other people
- Encourage other family members to write down information in the notebook they want to provide the person
- Encourage review and rehearsal of memory notebook information throughout the day
- Provide opportunities for repeated practice of new information
- Try to pair new information with things the person is able to recall
- Provide spoken cues as needed for recall and, if necessary, help fill in memory gaps

## **Confusion**

### *Signs:*

- Confuses times/tasks in schedule of events

- Confuses past and present events
- Confabulates (makes up details to fill in memory gaps; this is not intentional lying)

***What to Do:***

- Provide detailed explanations of even the most basic changes in daily routines
- Gently remind the person of correct details of past and present events
- Encourage the use of a notebook to log events and encourage the person to refer to it for details of daily events
- Limit changes in daily routine
- Confirm accuracy of information with other people

**Attention**

***Signs:***

- Short attention span
- Distractibility
- Difficulty attending to one or more things at one time

***What to Do:***

- Focus on one task at a time
- Be sure you have the person's attention before beginning a discussion or task
- Decrease distractions when working with the person
- Praise any improvement in length of attention to activity
- Gently refocus the person's attention to the details of activity as needed
- Keep abrupt changes to a minimum
- Ask the person to repeat information they've just heard to be sure they followed a conversation or understood directions
- Schedule brief rest period in between short periods of work or activity

**Difficulty with decision making (poor judgment)**

***Signs:***

- Hesitation with decisions
- Inappropriate and potentially harmful decisions
- Difficulty reasoning
- Ineffective problem solving

### ***What to Do:***

- Encourage the person to stop and think. Many people with brain injury benefit from a note or stop sign on the front of their notebook reminding them to “stop and think”
- Help the person explore various options to problems
- Have the person write down possible options in his or her notebook
- Discuss advantages and disadvantages of each option
- Role play to prepare the person for various situations

### **Difficulty with Initiation**

#### ***Signs:***

- Has trouble getting started
- Appears disinterested or unmotivated

#### ***What to Do:***

- Help the person develop a structured daily routine
- Provide specific choices for daily tasks; for example, ask “Would you like to do A or B?”
- Simplify tasks. Break task down into simple steps and complete one-step at a time
- Encourage the use of a notebook or calendar and set specific deadlines for tasks to be completed
- Praise the individual when he or she gets started without assistance
- Establish periods in which to accomplish tasks

### **Difficulty carrying out a plan of action**

#### ***Signs:***

- Lack of follow through with a task
- Difficulty in planning a sequence of tasks
- Appears disorganized

#### ***What To Do:***

- Begin with small, realistic projects
- Include the person in planning the activity
- Provide a clear and detailed explanation of an activity before starting
- Have the person write down the sequence of steps
- Ask the person to repeat to you the task to be done to ensure understanding

- Encourage the person to refer to his or her plan, and check off each step and task as it is completed
- Repeat and explain the sequence of activities as needed
- Allow extra time for the person to complete the tasks
- Establish periods in which to accomplish tasks

### **Difficulty with self-control (impulsivity or lack of inhibition)**

#### *Signs:*

- Acts or speaks without all information or without considering the consequences
- Impulsiveness or poor judgment
- Inappropriate comments to or about others
- Gets stuck on one idea

#### *What to Do:*

- Limit options from which the person can choose.
- Suggest alternatives for behavior
- Explain the reason for the tasks
- Be fair in your expectations
- Respond immediately to inappropriate ideas but maintain the original focus of the discussion
- Encourage the person to slow down and think through tasks or responses
- Provide verbal and non-verbal feedback in a supportive way for reassurance
- If undesired behavior occurs, discuss the consequences privately in a calm and confident manner
- Praise and reward desired behavior

### **Impaired self-awareness**

#### *Signs:*

- Lack of awareness of deficits and limitations
- Inaccurate self-image/self-perception

#### *What to Do:*

- Anticipate lack of insight
- Prompt accurate self-statements

- Use feedback generously in a positive way
- Give realistic feedback as you observe behavior

### **Difficulty in social situations**

#### ***Signs:***

- Acting or speaking without all of the information or without considering the consequences
- Difficulty taking turns
- Socially inappropriate behavior or comments
- Not always sensitive to social boundaries

#### ***What to Do:***

- Provide clear expectations for desirable behavior
- Treat the person appropriately for his or her age
- Plan and rehearse social interactions so they will be familiar, predictable and consistent
- Establish verbal and non-verbal cues to signal the person to "stop and think"
- Encourage the person to slow down and think through responses
- Prompt the person to consider the consequence of his or her behavior
- Provide positive feedback for appropriate behavior
- Encourage a break in activity when frustration is evident
- Respond immediately to inappropriate ideas but maintain the original focus of the discussion
- If undesired behavior occurs, address the behavior and consequences privately, in a calm and confident manner. Be objective and explain that the behavior, not the person, is inappropriate
- Reassure and be fair in your expectations

### **Difficulty controlling emotions**

#### ***Signs:***

- Mood swings ranging from anxious to sad to angry
- Inappropriate laughing or crying
- Lower tolerance for frustrating situations

#### ***What to Do:***

- Expect the unexpected
- Remain a model of calm assurance and confidence if an emotional outburst occurs
- Take the person to a quiet room or area to give him or her time to calm down and regain control
- Provide feedback in a gentle supportive manner *after* the individual regains control (don't try to discuss or approach this logically when the person is upset or agitated)
- If you notice the person is starting to get agitated, take a break.
- Observe any patterns when outbreaks are like to happen (e.g., when tired, when there is a lot of noise,...)
- Avoid comparing past behaviors to present
- Gently redirect behavior to a different topic or activity
- Use humor in a positive and supportive manner
- Recognize that the person may use negative comments or refusal as a means of control
- Understand that brain injury may prevent the individual from feeling guilt or empathy
- Recognize your own emotional reactions to the person with brain injury

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