

Problems with Organising

Many people have difficulty getting organised after a brain injury.

The parts of the brain that are responsible for organisation are easily affected by injuries. Most people with an ABI will initially find some difficulty with prioritising, sequencing, organising, starting, and completing tasks. How long these problems will last, and how much difficulty they cause, will depend on the severity and location of the injuries.

There are quite a few things that can be done to help someone get and stay organised. The suggestions below are strategies that can help make up for some of the skills impacted by a brain injury. The good news is that with commitment and patience these strategies can be very effective.

Staying as well as possible

Anxiety, stress, and fatigue can make it harder to plan, prioritise, and complete activities. Therefore, better emotional and physical wellbeing is likely to improve mental alertness and the ability to get and stay organised. Emotional and physical wellbeing can be improved by:

- following prescribed medication guidelines and medical advice
- a balanced diet and, if required, supplements such as vitamins (but always check with your doctor before using any dietary supplements)
- enough restful sleep
- relaxation and stress-reduction strategies (mindfulness practices can be particularly helpful)
- avoiding alcohol, tobacco, and other recreational drugs.

Structure

Structure allows people to put some of their lives on automatic pilot and reserve creativity, memory, and novelty for more important areas. After a brain injury, many find that they lose this structure to their day, particularly if they are not working. Having well defined tasks and a weekly timetable can make it easier to plan activities and stay organised. It can also make it easier to stay healthy. For example, having set times for sleeping and waking is a great way to get a good night's sleep, and makes it easier to build a daily schedule.

It can also help to have set regular mealtimes and to not skip meals. A person with brain injury can work with family members to arrange a weekly plan for visiting friends, exercise, any rehabilitation tasks, and time to engage in hobbies or other meaningful activities.

Setting goals

Setting goals and working toward them can provide a sense of purpose and meaning to our daily lives, can make us feel like we have some control over our future, can improve a negative mood, and can give us a sense of accomplishment. However, it is not unusual for someone with a brain injury to have difficulties in this area.

It is important to realise the underlying emotions or needs behind a goal. For example, a person may want to return to work, but find that their cognitive impairments prevent this at this point. Returning to work can help a person feel productive, part of a team, and valued by peers. In this case volunteering for a community organisation may satisfy these underlying needs. Achieving goals is a step-by-step process. It may seem too daunting at first, but families can give support and help in a gradual way.

The recovery process is more like a marathon than a sprint and can involve a network of family support. Everyone needs patience, a positive attitude, and plenty of loving support for each other. Goals should be adjusted to fit different learning styles and be as enjoyable as possible. For example, a person who doesn't like reading or writing shouldn't use written exercises or reading books to achieve goals. For those who do, keeping a journal is an excellent way to record progress, especially when it feels as though progress is slow. A journal can keep track of the 'three steps forwards, two back' style that can sometimes feature in recovery.

If formal rehabilitation has finished, a goal might be to continue rehabilitation independently. Other goals could be to make some new social connections or learn a new skill.

It is important for people to have an accurate idea of their strengths and weaknesses. Self-awareness can be affected by a brain injury, giving people an unrealistic idea of what they are capable of. Family and rehabilitation professionals can help choosing and reaching goals.

One way to plan and organise a goal involves designing a goal schedule, which may include some of the following sections:

- goal
- task/steps
- time frame
- potential barriers
- benefits of achieving the goal.

There are many smart phone apps and resources on the internet to help with goal setting and tracking.

Memory aids

Memory is an important part of getting organised. When effectively used to store information, memory aids should enable a person to focus upon learning and recalling details for which a strategy cannot be used.

Organising your environment

Get a daily planner, diary, or a smart phone app and write things down in the order you are going to do them.

Get into the habit of checking your schedule at the beginning of every day or the night before. The aim is to arrange the surroundings so that less demand is placed upon a person's memory. Strategies for organising the environment include the following:

- keeping things needed every day in the same place
- putting phones and devices in the same place and charging when not in use
- using a large notice board/ white board and making plans
- having a special place to keep objects which tend to go missing (e.g. keys and sunglasses)
- For things that are used together, store them together (e.g. the tea, the tea pot, the teacups, and the sugar bowl next to the kettle)
- labelling or colour-coding cupboards, boxes, and drawers as a reminder of where things are kept
- tying objects to places (e.g. a key to a belt or a whiteboard pen to the whiteboard)
- Use alarms and timers to help keep track of time.

A 'to do' list is a handy tool.

Get a whiteboard and put it up somewhere in your house. Write on it the things that you plan to do and then erase them as you complete them. Sometimes people will list 20 projects and none of them will get done. If you have this problem, create a list of five projects that you want to do and write them on the whiteboard. Don't add another project to the list until you have completed one of the five items. As you add one, you have to remove one. You may want to limit it to only three projects if five is overwhelming.