

Supporting Independence After Brain Injury

QUICK GUIDE

Brain injury can be a barrier to being independent. Giving caregivers and professionals the skills necessary to encourage independence safely is important for recovery. Patience, time, communication, and taking a long-term approach are key in the process of supporting independence.

Tips for supporting independence:

Frequently discuss independence with the person, the caregiver(s) and the treatment team. Decide what to work on now and what to get back to later. Involve the person with the injury in setting long and short-term goals.

Encourage the person with a brain injury to make their own decisions. Deciding what to wear, when and what to eat, when to go to bed are simple day-to-day choices that most adults make for themselves.

Break down tasks into steps. Larger tasks can be harder to tackle and more frustrating. To help, simplify large tasks by breaking them into smaller, more manageable chunks.

Set expectations for the individual to set goals for themselves. Step away and encourage the person to practice skills on their own.

Be patient. Some individuals may need to make progress a little at a time. For example, the caregiver can help to a certain point and then let the person finish or step in if the level of frustration is getting to be too much or counterproductive.

Provide feedback. Acknowledge the gains they are making as well as the effort they are putting in.

Encourage exercise and movement. Continue exercises and routines taught by therapists or come up with your own.

Safety considerations:

- **Be specific in restrictions.** It is counterproductive to keep the individual from doing everything. For example - if their attention is poor, but their balance is good, it might be ok to climb a step stool to put something away, but not to cook at the stove unattended.
- **Use assistive devices and strategies.** Walkers and canes can increase a person's mobility. Elastic shoe laces and Velcro closures can help a person be independent with dressing. Timers, reminders from a cell phone, and written notes are other tools to encourage independence.
- **Practice walking with supervision.** When the person with a brain injury wants to take a step forward, negotiate the next steps together. For example, walk by their side when they feel ready to give up a cane or agree.
- **Learn from "failures."** Most of us learn from our mistakes. Controlled failures, where risks are minimized, can be more effective than a lot of talking. For instance, the person wants to walk to a local store, but the family is afraid they may get lost. With their agreement, put a tracking app on their phone. Then have them explain how they will get there and ask for a call when they arrive and leave.
- **Take the good days with the bad days.** Fatigue, illness, and too many competing needs can impact a person living with a brain injury more than someone without a brain injury. Help the person recognize when they're having a bad day and modify expectations accordingly.

Adjusting to life after brain injury can be challenging. At the Brain Injury Association of Virginia, our trained experts are available to speak with you about your personal situation and answer your questions. Our services are free and confidential.

To get in touch:

Call **1-800-444-6443**

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