

Supporting Independence

Practical Tips for Caregivers to Help Build Independence

Brain injury can be a barrier to being independent. As a caregiver, your primary goal is to give the person you are caring for the power and the permission to be in control of his or her own life as much as possible. It is important for loved ones to feel independent both for their emotional and physical needs. Patience, time, communication, and taking a long-term approach are key in the process of supporting independence.

- People respond to expectations so if you expect the person to get dressed or prepare a simple meal, they often will. It is also important to limit your availability to help if it is a task your love one can do independently. If you are not there to do everything for them, they will be motivated to do more on their own.
- Consider giving the person something to take care of, such as a pet or plant. This helps individuals become and feel more independent.
- Encourage movement and exercises. Mobility increases independence and decreases complications due to inactivity. Exercises that put the major muscle groups through the full range of motion (ROM) must be encouraged. Even the smallest efforts, if done consistently, will lead to greater independence.
- Break big tasks into small ones. Depression, fear, and humiliation can be major obstacles. If tasks are too complex, individuals may feel frustrated and defeated. Simplify multi-step tasks into small parts or steps. For example, rather than just saying "clean your room," break it down into a check list that may include a) make your bed, b) pick up your dirty clothes and place in hamper c) clear off the top of your dresser...
- Encourage the use of assistive devices. Mobility aids such as wheel chairs, canes and crutches, and walkers encourage independence. As do speech generating devices and phone apps that provided prompts and reminders.
- Offer encouragement often. It is hard for individuals to see their own progress. Reward for both effort and result. Make them feel good about doing things independently.

- Let them make as many decisions as possible to maintain their independence. Deciding what to wear, what to eat, and what time to go to bed, are all-important to make them feel they are in control of their own lives.
- Provide for psychosocial needs. Individuals who have a disability may have an increased need for acceptance from loved ones. Entertainment and social interaction is essential to everyone, especially someone trying to recover from an illness or someone living with a deteriorating health condition. Encourage family and friends to visit, and remind them as well. So often individuals feel isolated. Try to plan outings of their choice to enable them to socialize and feel more independent.

Dressing

- Provide as much privacy as possible during dressing. Offer frequent encouragement to relieve stress and frustration.
- Provide assistive devices such as a buttonhook or loop and Velcro that may make it possible for them to continue their independence in dressing as much as possible.

Bathing

- Maintaining as much privacy as possible during bathing. Allowing loved ones to select a bath time when they are rested and unhurried ensures the best outcome.
- Provide support with assistive devices such as a long-handled bath sponge, a shower chair, safety mats, and grab bars.
- Encourage individuals to brush their hair, brush their teeth, and shave to maintain independence as able.

Communicating

- Evaluate the need for adaptive equipment. An occupational therapist or speech therapist can evaluate and recommend assistive devices.
- If writing is difficult felt-tip pens require little pressure to mark and are easier to use. An occupational therapist can evaluate the need for a tool to assist holding the writing device.

Content last reviewed: May 2020

This article was adapted from Principle Business Enterprises, Inc. 2009. It is provided for informational and educational purposes only. The information is not intended as a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis or treatment, and you should not use the information in place of the advice of your medical, psychological, or legal providers.

This project is supported [in part] through state general funds (Contract #16-002A) administered by the Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services (DARS).