

Attention & Concentration after an Acquired Brain Injury



Information Guide for people with Acquired Brain Injury and their families and friends

Difficulties with **attention** are very common following brain injury.

The ability to pay attention is important for all areas of thinking. There are many aspects to **attention**, including:

- Being able to screen out unimportant distractions (**selective attention**). An example of this is focussing on a conversation in the middle of a busy and noisy coffee shop.
- Being able to do two or more things at the one time (**divided attention**) or being able to shift the focus of attention between tasks easily and quickly (**alternating attention**) - for example, cooking dinner and having a conversation.
- Being able to keep attention on one thing over a long period of time (**Sustained attention**) - for example, watching a film.

Attention is needed for remembering and learning new information and to complete tasks.

Common problems experienced as a result of **attention** difficulties include:

- Being easily distracted.
- Having trouble keeping track of what is being said or done.
- Difficulty ignoring irrelevant information.
- Perseveration - that is, getting stuck on one thought and having difficulty switching to another.
- Difficulty seeing tasks through to the end.
- Difficulty doing more than one task at a time, such as listening to the radio and making a cup of tea.
- Being slower at taking in and making sense of information.

Improving attention

There are a number of ways in which attention difficulties can be addressed, these include:

Process training exercises

These are exercises designed to practise specific attention skills. Examples of such exercises could include pen and paper tasks, computer games, board games etc.

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Strategy training

- 'Strategies' are ways of working around the attention problem.
- Examples of some strategies to help manage attention difficulties include:
 - Trying to reduce all possible distractions in the environment if you have to concentrate on a particular task - switch off the TV or radio, for example.
 - If you are having difficulty concentrating for longer periods of time, take regular breaks but come back to task after each break.
 - Trying to concentrate on one thing at a time such as, see one task through to completion before beginning the next.
 - Self-questioning - ask yourself 'what should I be doing now?' this can help re-direct you to what you are supposed to be focusing on.
 - Gradually increase tolerance to distractions, for example try to read the newspaper headlines with the radio on quietly in the background, then try increasing the volume on radio gradually while trying to read full articles in paper.

Functional activities training

- This is the use of everyday tasks to help improve the person's attention skills. Any appropriate real life activity can be used to 'train' attention. Examples of functional activities training could include;
 - Taking notes of key-points while listening to the news on the TV or radio (selective attention).
 - Preparing a meal which requires two or more stages or sets of instructions (divided attention).

Helpful hints for families and carers could include

- Make sure the person is looking at you before giving instructions or starting conversation.
- Time management; plan and agree a programme of activities ahead of time and try and stick with it to make it easier for the person to attend.
- Keep instructions simple and direct.
- Encourage the person to repeat instructions back to you to ensure that they fully attended to instructions.
- Provide cues. If the person does not appear to be paying attention, address them by their name or give a hand signal.