

Awareness and Insight after Acquired Brain Injury



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

Awareness and Insight after Acquired Brain Injury

- Awareness is our ability to notice things, and self-awareness is our ability to notice things in ourselves, including traits, feelings and behaviours. Often after acquired brain injury (ABI) a person's awareness can be affected. This can mean that they have little or no understanding or acknowledgement of their post injury strengths and limitations. Also they may be unaware of the effect of their behaviour on others or how they behave towards others, for example, acting aggressively or defensively.
- Insight is the ability to look at ourselves and to know and admit our strengths and weaknesses and to understand our own behaviours. When a person acquires a brain injury this often results in reduced insight. This means that they might be unaware of how the injury affects them. This can result in poor judgement, risk taking behaviour and unrealistic expectations. This is evident when the person with ABI is unable to anticipate that they will have a specific difficulty with a task, such as, remembering to take their medication.
- A person with acquired brain injury who has poor awareness and insight may find it difficult to engage in their rehabilitation programme as they will not fully believe that they need to do so, nor recognise the benefits that such a programme can offer them. They may deny the extent of the impact of their injury on them and their abilities.
- Denial is a psychological defence and a way to avoid and protect against feelings such as anxiety and grief that threaten our sense of self. After brain injury an individual may attempt to avoid certain tasks, minimizing the importance or relevance of these tasks, whereas in fact they may fear failure or having to face up to loss of skills.
- It is important to focus on developing awareness and insight early in a person's rehabilitation programme. Intervention will include awareness training, decreasing emotional distress, cognitive retraining and the development and implementation of compensatory strategies. The following is a list of some strategies that are recommended for the individual with ABI and their family and friends.

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Strategies to help develop awareness and insight

- When the person with ABI displays a difficulty in a task, draw their attention to it in a supportive and non-judgemental way. It may help to remind yourself that denial can be a survival mechanism and insight and awareness can improve slowly with time.
- Understanding is important. Sometimes when a person is showing uncooperative behaviour it may actually be a 'smoke-screen'. For example, the person may say that they don't want to do something, when in reality they may be overwhelmed or actually unable to do it and are avoiding it for this reason.
- It is best that the person tackles immediate problems first before trying to deal with longer term problems before they are ready. If they want to try something that you think they are incapable of at this time, allow them where possible to go ahead and try. Sometimes the experience of failure can help a person to gain awareness of their difficulties.
- Peer support is important and an effective way to help the person to build awareness and insight. The influence of others can help to increase a person's awareness of their own limitations. Taking part in brain injury groups will provide this type of support.
- Where possible, show professional reports and assessments to the person with ABI. Discussing these will help them develop insight, reinforce awareness, and gently address any denial of difficulty or impairment.
- Family members and those that come in regular contact with the person with ABI are encouraged to educate and access supports for themselves, so that they can try to develop a level of understanding and consistency in their interactions with the person with ABI .