

Executive Functions following an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)



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

What are Executive Functions?

Executive functions are a very important set of skills that help us in our day to day lives. They include our ability to pay attention, plan, and organise ourselves, as well as having the awareness and ability to behave in a reasonable, socially appropriate way.

Most of our cognitive functions are concerned with WHAT a person does, the executive functions relate to HOW the person does it. Everyone uses executive functions all of the time in their everyday life.

Executive Functions can include many different skills and behaviours such as:

- Goal setting: the ability to set realistic, achievable goals.
- Self Initiation: the ability to start and carry through our daily plans without a lot of prompting from others.
- Self-inhibition: the ability to stop behaviour or thoughts that are irrelevant to what we are doing in the moment.
- Planning and organisation: the ability to work out what steps are involved in carrying out a task and having them in the correct order.
- Self monitoring: the ability to review a task or behaviour, ensure that it is completed well and if necessary to check what is left to be done.
- Abstract thinking: the ability to think about ideas, and thoughts or concepts such as truth, justice, beauty and freedom.
- Switching: the ability to switch between two or more tasks as necessary
- Problem solving: the ability to both recognise a problem when it is happening, and also plan ahead for problems that might occur. This also includes the ability to work out solutions to these problems.
- Regulating and controlling emotions and behaviour: This includes the ability to be aware of our mood and behaviour and to modify it so that it is appropriate to the situation.
- Socially-appropriate behaviour: knowing what to say, or not say, and when to do something, or not.

What happens when Executive Functions are compromised?

Common difficulties include not being able to:

- Be aware that you have made a mistake(s)
- Learn from mistakes
- Adjust to physical and psychological changes following injury

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- Identifying your strengths and weaknesses
- See things from another person's point of view
- Set realistic goals or plans
- Manage personal time effectively
- Get started on activities/tasks
- Think of solutions to problems
- Monitor personal behaviour
- Plan your activities for the day ahead
- Complete tasks through to the end
- Regulate emotions and behaviour
- Think of more than one solution to a problem or situation
- 'Put on the brakes' or not say or do something in a particular social situation

Some strategies that may improve Executive Functions

The key strategy for addressing difficulties with executive functions revolves around STRUCTURE. Structure can help to organise and plan activities, to stay focused and to monitor that you are completing the task accurately. One way to provide such structure when undertaking tasks would be to ask yourself the following questions:




- What is the activity?
- Where is the activity?
- What is the time-frame for the activity?
- What are the equipment, materials or people needed to complete the activity?
- What else do I need to consider?

Monitoring yourself while you are undertaking a task can be enhanced by what it called 'Self-questioning'.

Some examples of self-questioning include:

- What do I want to achieve (my goal)?
- What do I need to do to move towards that goal?
- What steps do I need to take and in what order?
- Are there any other alternatives to this plan – if so what are they?
- How will I know when I have achieved the goal?
- How will I know if I am successful?

Another useful monitoring system is the traffic light system. Prior to doing anything, stop and think of this:

-  STOP – don't act
-  Get ready, is this going to irritate anyone? Is it appropriate right now?
-  GO – go ahead