

Managing challenging behaviour following Acquired Brain Injury



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

What is challenging behaviour?

Challenging behaviour following acquired brain injury (ABI) is often described as one of the most distressing consequences of ABI for family and friends to deal with. Challenging behaviour is commonly regarded as excessive behaviour that is so intense and frequent that it usually causes distress or harm, and can lead to feelings of discomfort, powerlessness, frustration, fear and anxiety. It is behaviour that is not socially acceptable and it can delay or limit access to community facilities.

It can include physical or verbal aggression. It can also include other behaviours that are difficult to manage, such as wandering, persistent questioning, cursing and lack of motivation. It often occurs unexpectedly or takes us by surprise. Some behaviours might be challenging for one person but not for another. The behaviour is often very persistent, unreasonable, and out of character for the person.

Types of challenging behaviour following ABI

Challenging behaviour can include various types of behaviour, including:

- Anger or irritability
- Impatience
- Aggression – physical and/or verbal
- Self-centredness
- Tactlessness
- Paranoia
- Impulsivity (acting before thinking)
- Increased or decreased sex drive
- Substance abuse
- Avoidance or withdrawal
- Reduced motivation or apathy
- Self-harm
- Mood swings
- Wandering
- Personality changes
- Jealously

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Other factors that can also contribute to challenging behaviour:

Stresses and strain in the family for example change in roles, financial strain, tiredness, anger, frustration, guilt, blame. Other factors include:

- Lifestyle factors - changes in work, social life, family life, leisure activities.
- Practical factors - new daily routines, boredom, sensitivity to noise, lack of choice, control and privacy.
- Responses to challenging behaviour i.e. sometimes the response to the behaviour increases the problem.

Strategies for managing challenging behaviour

Examples of commonly used approaches (these are best undertaken under the guidance of a Clinical Psychologist or appropriately trained personnel):

- Remember that the behaviour is the problem, not the person
- Identify patterns in the behaviour, for example
 - *What was happening just before the behaviour occurred?*
 - *What happens during the behaviour?*
 - *What happens afterwards?*
 - *Does the behaviour happen at a certain time of day or with certain activities or people?*
 - *Is over-stimulation or boredom a factor?*
- Modify the environment or change routines
- Ensure personal safety for the person and those around them.
- Ignore inappropriate behaviours, if it is possible and safe to do so.
- Give clear, straightforward feedback about the behaviour. They may not realise that their behaviour is upsetting or causing distress.
- Agree on how feedback should be given. Be clear and consistent when providing feedback.
- Give positive feedback for appropriate behaviour.
- Set achievable goals.
- Encourage involvement in new, preferred or independent activities.
- Maintain social contacts - for the person and for family and friends.
- Be aware of how others react to the behaviour. Sometimes people's reactions to the behaviour can escalate the behaviour.
- Remember to look after yourself too so that you can continue to react positively to the distress of challenging behaviour.