

GETTING YOUR LIFE ORGANISED

Many complain that following a brain injury they have difficulty getting organised. They may start a lot of projects but nothing ever actually gets finished.

The frontal lobe of the brain is responsible for the act of organising our lives. Unfortunately it is very susceptible to injury and some find great difficulty with prioritising, sequencing, organising, initiating and completing tasks.

IMPROVE YOUR LIFESTYLE

Factors such as anxiety, stress, multiple demands and fatigue can have serious effects on your ability to organise. Therefore, the improvement of a person's emotional and physical well-being will most likely have benefits for their mental alertness and ability to plan and prioritise. Important considerations for improving general well-being include:

- > A balanced diet and appropriate supplements i.e. vitamins
- > Sufficient restful sleep
- > Regular exercise
- > Relaxation and stress-reduction strategies
- > Following prescribed medication guidelines and medical advice
- > Avoiding alcohol, cigarettes and drugs.

STRUCTURE

Structure allows us to put most of our lives on automatic pilot and reserve creativity, memory, and novelty for more important areas. After a brain injury many find that they lose this structure to their day, particularly if they are not working. It is crucial to have well defined tasks for the day.

Set a timetable each day that will ensure the healthy lifestyle above. For example, sleep can be properly regulated by always going to sleep and waking at set times. Meal times should be at set times and never skipped. Work with family members to arrange a weekly plan for visiting others, exercise and any rehabilitation tasks.

ORGANISE YOUR ENVIRONMENT

Get a daily planner, diary or electronic organiser and write things down in the order you are going to do them. Get into the habit of checking your schedule at the beginning of every day or the night before. The aim is to arrange surroundings so that less reliance or demand is placed upon a person's memory. Strategies for organising the environment include the following:

- > Using a notepad system beside the phone
- > Using a large notice board and making plans
- > Having a special place to keep objects which tend to go missing
- > Labelling or colour-coding cupboards as a reminder of where things are kept
- > Tying objects to places e.g. a pen to the phone or a key to a belt.

A To-Do List is a handy tool. Get a whiteboard and put it up somewhere in your house. Write on it the things that you have to do and then erase them as you complete them. Sometimes people will list 50 projects and none of them will get done. If you have this problem, create a list of five projects that you want to do and write them on the whiteboard. Don't add another project to the list until you completed one of the five items. As you add one, you have to subtract one. You may want to limit it to only three projects if five is overwhelming.

SETTING GOALS

We all have goals we have set out to achieve, often at a subconscious level. Goals keep us focussed on a purpose and help us through difficult times when many others less motivated would give up. A person who wants to get the most out of life often has a number of goals simmering at the same time.

By setting goals you can get out of negative mindsets and help you gain more control over your life. It pays to set these out in writing and approach them step-by-step. If your formal rehabilitation has finished, some goals may be to continue further work yourself. It is crucial

to have an accurate idea of your strengths and weaknesses. Brain injury survivors often have unrealistic ideas here if their self-awareness has been affected, so the involvement of rehabilitation professionals or family is a good idea.

One way to plan and organise a goal involves designing a goal schedule which may include some of the following sections:

- > Goal
- > Task/steps
- > Time frame
- > Aim for completion
- > Potential barriers
- > How to overcome barriers
- > Benefits of achieving the goal
- > Measures of success.

It is important to realise the underlying emotions or needs behind a goal. For example, you may want to return to work but find your cognitive deficits prevent this. Why do you want to return to work? It may be the sense of being productive, of being part of a team and feeling esteemed by peers. In this case looking at volunteer work for a community organisation may achieve these underlying needs.

Achieving goals is a step by step process. It may seem too daunting at first but families can provide support and assistance in a graduated way. The recovery process is more like a marathon than a sprint. Both you and your family need patience, positive attitudes and plenty of loving support for each other.

Goals should be adjusted to fit your learning style or hobbies. If you hate reading or writing then your goals shouldn't use written exercises

or reading of books. If you don't mind writing then keeping a journal is an excellent way to record your progress, especially when you feel you aren't getting anywhere. A journal can keep track of the "three steps forward, two back" that can sometimes feature in recovery.

MEMORY AIDS

Memory is an important part of getting organised. When effectively used to store information, memory aids should enable a person to focus upon learning and recalling details for which a strategy cannot be used. Types of external aids include:

- > A diary for storing and planning
- > Notebooks of all sizes for various places
- > Lists and checklists
- > Alarm clock, wristwatch alarm and timer
- > Calendar
- > Wall chart
- > Tape recorder.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

All of these suggestions are compensatory strategies—that is they compensate for skills that your brain is not as good at anymore. The good news is that the right strategies can go a long way to making up for a sluggish frontal lobe. All it takes is commitment to getting these strategies into place and being patient with yourself!

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