

Maximising your thinking and memory abilities



About this handout

This handout aims to outline a range of common issues and tips that may be helpful to people who have difficulties with reasoning or organising their lives (called 'executive' difficulties).

It describes:

- Executive difficulties
- Reasoning problems
- Reduced insight and social awareness
- Information box: Goal Management
- Other sources of information and support.

Getting organised and solving problems

In order to cope with everyday life, all of us need to behave a bit like 'executives' do when running an organisation. We need to:

- Set goals
- Create plans about how to achieve our goals
- Monitor and regulate how our goals are being met
- Have good insight about any difficulties
- Maintain good relationships

People who are experiencing difficulties with these types of executive abilities may retain many of their previous skills and abilities but can experience the following difficulties.

Reduced motivation, initiative and goal-setting

This is also referred to as apathy and means a person has difficulties initiating activities and coming up with ideas for things to do in the first place. Apathy should not be confused with depression, disinterest, laziness or stubbornness. People are not deliberately avoiding doing tasks or activities; rather, their lack of spontaneity is caused by changes in brain function. A person with apathy struggles to initiate conversations, social activities, or to start everyday tasks such as organising paperwork or gardening. Sometimes they can get "stuck on the couch", finding it very difficult to think about what to do.

TIPS

- Establish and maintain a regular weekly routine
- Write a list of tasks in your notebook and the times these tasks should be started—refer to the notebook throughout the day
- Use an alarm to remind you to check a list or to do a specific activity

For family members:

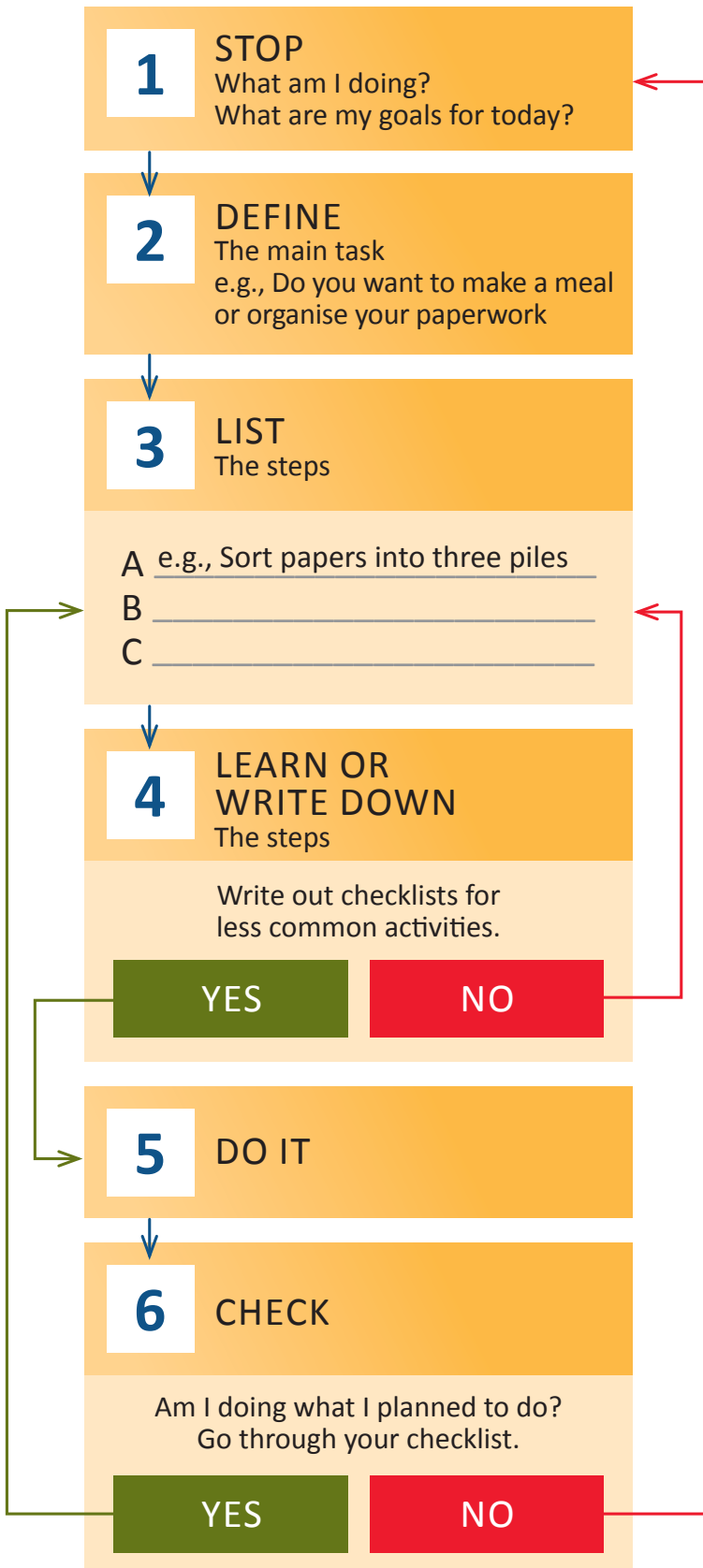
- Provide prompts or jointly start an activity with the person; if possible, avoid taking over.
- Start a conversation or ask a question rather than waiting for the person to begin talking.

Planning problems

Some people have few or no problems thinking of a goal, but struggle to develop a plan to achieve it. This involves the process of working out an ordered sequence of steps for achieving a goal. In day-to-day life, a range of activities can be affected, such as packing bags for a trip, going shopping, cooking a complex meal, writing a letter, or organising paperwork. Usually, tasks that are new or complex cause the most difficulties.

Getting organised and solving problems

Steps for Goal Management



TIPS

- Write down the steps involved in an activity. Try to work through each step methodically. (See the information box on 'goal management' for more information.)
- Use a diary or electronic planner (see the handout on using aids to improve your day-to-day memory).
- Focus on one activity at a time. Avoid external distractions (e.g., turn off the radio or television) and stressful situations (see the handout on focusing attention and avoiding distractions).

Self-regulation problems

Self-regulation refers to the ability to monitor and control one's own behaviours. Lacking self-regulation can cause problems with initiation and goal setting implementation such as:

- **Impulsivity** – a tendency to respond too quickly to what is happening in the moment without much consideration of how other plans may be affected (e.g., spending recklessly).
- **Error-monitoring problems** – struggling to appreciate that an error has occurred due to a lack of self-monitoring (e.g., getting in the car and driving the wrong way until someone questions where you are going).
- **Task persistence** – difficulty sustaining attention to a task long enough to complete it, and may easily be sidetracked mid-task.

TIPS

- Allow time to think and try to avoid activities in which you need to process information from a number of different sources; large group gatherings, for example, are often perplexing!
- Try to become aware of situations that are most challenging for you and consider not becoming involved in them; or consider other steps to reduce pressure on yourself.



Key Point

Not all the changes in thinking and behaviour described will be apparent in every person and the degree of change will vary from person to person. It is also important to remember that these types of difficulties are often particularly challenging and that seeking further professional support may be useful.

TIPS

For family carers:

- If a behaviour is inappropriate, a family member could try giving the person some feedback about his/ her behaviour (e.g., say “that’s inappropriate”) and then gently change the subject
- Redirecting attention to an error that has occurred, or back to the task that has been left undone, can sometimes be very helpful.

Problems with abstract reasoning

Sometimes a person can develop difficulties understanding more abstract or complex information. They may frame ideas in black-and-white terms and have difficulty in understanding “shades of grey” that add to an understanding of the “bigger picture”. It may be difficult for the person to compare different ideas and see patterns or similarities between them. Some people tend to interpret things too literally and can’t appreciate humour.

TIPS

- Take someone with you to situations where it’s important that you understand correctly, such as when you go to the GP or the bank.

For family carers:

- Ensure any instructions to the person are clear. Avoid abstract or complex ideas. Use diagrams or pictures to illustrate your point.
- Assist with more complex decision-making. It may help to re-phrase and simplify the options available (e.g., about a banking issue). It can help to offer the person a simple choice between two alternatives.

Problems with inflexible thinking

Inflexible thinking refers to a difficulty in considering new ideas or appreciating another person’s point of view. A person can get stuck on a particular point of view. In some cases, ideas, thoughts or behaviours are repeated over and over again (for instance, when a person becomes very preoccupied with one topic and

continually returns back to it even when others have moved on to a new one). There may also be difficulty in accepting or making changes to routine.

TIPS

- Try not to take on too many things at once. Introduce one change in routine at a time.
- Ask a family member or friend to help you ‘brainstorm’ some different approaches or ideas about a particular issue.

For family carers:

- Respectfully, use distraction and ignore repetitive thinking. Bring the person’s attention back to the current issue or topic of conversation.

Reduced insight

Insight refers to a person’s ability to appreciate that they may have problems with their thinking or memory that are impacting on day-to-day life. Many people struggle to admit they have difficulties. In some cases there may be a complete denial of problems with thinking or memory and a person may have unrealistic expectations of what they are able to do.

TIPS

For family carers:

- Try not to lecture a person about his or her deficits. Instead try to demonstrate how an activity can be done. Be as supportive as you can and provide as much positive feedback as you can about their strengths.
- Do not debate persisting, unrealistic points of view. Attempting to negotiate can cause arguments and should be avoided. Instead, it may help to provide very simple explanations about why a person should take a particular course of action, then change the subject.
- It may be helpful to allow the person with reduced insight to fail at some things to improve insight, but try to reduce the impact and exposure of a person’s weaknesses where possible.
- Enlist the support of a health professional if safety issues are at stake.

Social awareness difficulties

Some people develop problems appreciating how others around them are feeling. They may start to become somewhat “childlike” and preoccupied with their own needs. They may be less aware how their thinking or behaviour affects other people, particularly those caring for them. In some cases, they may start to have difficulties coping in social situations, particularly if they don’t notice when another person is sad or angry.

TIPS

For family carers:

- Be aware that the person is usually not intentionally trying to be difficult; that it is a symptom of brain changes. It may also be helpful to explain this to others.
- Problems with insight and social awareness are often a significant cause of distress for the person with difficulties and for their families. Families may benefit from counselling or support groups to help them understand the changes and to cope with their effects.



Other sources of information or support:

Dementia Australia

(www.dementia.org.au, phone: 1800 100 500 (National dementia helpline) is the peak body providing support and advocacy for Australians living with dementia. Even if you do not have a diagnosis of dementia they may provide some useful materials for coping with “executive” difficulties.

Australian Psychological Society

(www.psychology.org.au, phone 1800 333 497) provides a service in which you can find a psychologist. In particular, neuropsychologists may be of value in assessing executive thinking changes and helping to develop management strategies.

Brainlink

(www.brainlink.org.au) is a service dedicated to providing information and support for people who have suffered from an acquired brain injury. They provide a number of information resources on their website.

Dementia Support Australia

(phone: 1800 699 799) is an Australia-wide service aimed to assist the people and their families with a diagnosis of dementia to manage behaviours.