

Can't seem to think straight...?

What are executive impairments?

Executive impairments are problems with higher level thinking tasks such as planning, organisation, problem solving, setting priorities, and responding to unexpected situations. It can be very hard to see and accept changes in these areas of thinking and behaviour; that is they do not develop insight into their difficulties.

How do I know if I have executive impairments?

- Poor problem solving skills.
- Very rigid in your thinking style, have a 'one track' mind that is hard to shift.
- If faced with a problem, find it hard to think 'outside the box'.
- Find it hard to organise information, ideas, or activities.
- Lack of insight, that is, see yourself as the same as before the brain tumour.
- Are not aware that you have any current problems.
- May deny that you have any problems with your thinking or argue with others about the problems.
- Do not cope well with changes in routine or anything unexpected.
- Have problems with judgement.
- Lack awareness of the way you act and as a result, seem tactless or rude.
- Cannot understand you are unable to do things such as work, drive or manage your own finances.
- May not be willing to undertake therapy or refuse help with tasks even when it is needed.
- Being unable to finish an activity or follow through.
- 'Scattered' in your approach about how to do the most important tasks first.

'Julie's' Story

'Julie' is a woman in her late forties who was diagnosed with a Meningioma. She now finds that she is so disorganised that it can take her up to three hours to get ready to go out. 'Julie' was also having problems planning and preparing meals. This gets worse when she is distracted by other people or the TV. 'Julie' needs many prompts from her family to help her live from day to day. She often feels overwhelmed by having to complete tasks that used to be easy and automatic.

Strategies

For the person with a brain tumour

- Use a diary, whiteboard or planner to map out your day and week.
- Write out a daily timetable or list of tasks to complete.
- Once you have a list, circle the tasks that are most important and complete them first. Number them in the order you wish to complete them and preferably re-write your list in the right order.
- Reduce noise and other distractions when taking on hard tasks.
- Do harder tasks when you are fresh.
- Don't make big decisions on the spot – wait until you have had a chance to talk to someone that you trust about the issue.
- Take regular rest breaks.
- Have your family member help you if it is needed.
- Try to do only one thing at a time.

KEY FACTS

- A survey of people with a brain tumour found that **39%** frequently had difficulties with higher level thinking tasks such as planning or problem solving.
- Carers of people with a brain tumour who were surveyed said that **15%** of relatives had limited insight into these difficulties.

For the carer or family member

- Give lots of clear and simple reasons about why a problem is being treated or why the person is unable to do something.
- People can learn a simple five-step process for solving problems. Speak to a psychologist about this. (See Resource sheet - Problem Solving).
- Help your relative to develop a daily routine.
- Keep an eye out for anything that comes up that is not part of that routine – the person may have problems knowing what to do.
- If the person is stuck on one idea, don't argue – it will not change their minds and it will only make you more upset. Find other ways to get around the problem.
- The person may deny that their tumour is changing their life in any way. They may have unrealistic ideas about what they are still able to do. If the person goes on denying the problem or keeps finding reasons to explain it away, then change the subject.



- If a person wants to try something you know they cannot do, let them go ahead and try (as long as it is safe). Sometimes failing at something can help a person to learn about their problems.
- In a gentle manner, you can point out the problems that a person is having when they are finding it hard to do something.
- Encourage the person to join a support group for people with a brain tumour. Talking with other people 'in the same boat' can help to improve awareness of their own difficulties.
- If you can, show the person results from the reports on any tests of their thinking. This may help them learn about the problems that they are now facing.
- It may help to know that insight can get better (perhaps slowly) over a long time.
- Know the reason why they are having problems, and know what to do, but when they are in the problem-situation, they can't use this knowledge to change their actions.

For more detailed strategies, also see other fact sheets in the series

Executive functioning refers to higher level thinking. It involves a number of different parts of our thinking abilities (for example, see list below) working together. The result is that we are able to act in an effective goal-directed manner. For this reason, some of the following fact sheets also have ideas that will help a person who is having problems in this area.

- Attention and concentration
- Confusion and disorientation
- Impulsivity
- Memory
- Lack of motivation/ apathy

Questions to ask your Health Professional

- What is the cause of the thinking problems?
- Is it related to the tumour itself?
- Is it related to the treatments given for the tumour or other medications?
- Could the thinking problems be an unrelated medical condition and does this need treatment in itself?
- Do I/we expect the thinking problems to get better or worse over time?
- Are there any medications that can help the problem?
- Will a psychologist be able to help treat this problem?
- Are there any diet or lifestyle factors that can help the thinking problems?
- Who else could I speak with to help with the thinking problems?

Links to other information:

- <http://braininjury.org.au/portal/fact-sheets/getting-your-life-organised---fact-sheet.html>
- <http://braininjury.org.au/portal/fact-sheets/impaired-self-awareness---fact-sheet.html>
- Resource sheet – Problem Solving