

COGNITIVE DIFFICULTIES

When thinking of cognitive problems, it is important to keep in mind that that no human skills operate in isolation. We rely upon a combination of several skills to carry out even the simplest of individual tasks.

For example, a simple conversation requires us to use the following skills:

- Concentration (so we can focus on what the other person is saying to us)
- Information-processing (so we can comprehend what the person is telling us)
- Speed of thought (so we can keep up with the flow of conversation)

A Reduction in an individual's speed of thought is common, even in cases of mild brain injury. These difficulties can include being slow to respond to questions, understand instructions or follow conversations.

The majority of people that have suffered a brain injury will experience some form of cognitive difficulties, particularly in the early stages of their recovery. The extent of these cognitive problem vary depending on the severity of the brain injury.

During the course of their recovery a brain injury survivor may see a marked improvement in their cognitive skills. However, it is common for people that have suffered a severe brain injury to experience some degree of permanent cognitive disability.

MEMORY

For people with brain injuries, memory problems are a common area of cognitive difficulty. Several parts of the brain are involved in the learning and remembering process. Damage to any of these parts can result in memory impairment. There are also many different aspects of the memory system that can be affected, depending on where the brain is injured/damaged. Examples include:

- Verbal memory (names, words, etc.)
- Visual memory (faces, pictures, places, etc.)
- Prospective memory (remembering to do/not do something)

Commonly-reported difficulties include:

- Remembering/keeping track of conversations
- Remembering people's names
- Getting things mixed up
- Remembering where things have been put

Learning and remembering involves a three stage process:

1. Absorbing information
2. Storing information
3. Retrieving information

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Brain injury can cause a breakdown between these three stages.

1. ABSORBING INFORMATION

Before we can even start to remember something, we first have to focus on what we hear, read or see; this is how we absorb information. This stage of the process can prove to be problematic for people recovering from brain injury. This is due to the attention and information-processing problems mentioned above. Problems often occur if the person with a brain injury is given too much information at once or if the information being given is complex.

2. STORING INFORMATION

Once we have absorbed information, it is stored by the brain. This stored information is then used immediately or kept for later use. Even people not affected by brain injury must make a concerted effort to remember new information, so that it is not later forgotten. The same is true for those with brain injury, but it requires more deliberate thought to ensure they recall the required information.

3. RETRIEVING INFORMATION

Once the information is stored by the brain, it is necessary for us to access information as and when required. This can be problematic for everyone but more so for some people with memory impairment. From time to time we all may need prompting to enable us to recalling something. Those with memory impairment will experience an exaggerated version of this situation.

EXECUTIVE SKILLS

Executive skills are associated with the frontal lobes of the brain.

Those with frontal lobe damage are often unable to see things logically. Individuals can be inflexible, become fixed on one particular thought and are often unable to consider another person's point of view. During a conversation they may continue to repeat their own opinion in the belief that it is the correct one – even if provided with clear evidence as to why it isn't. On the other hand, they may flit between different topics, resulting in them going off on a tangent.

Problems with executive skills can contribute to poor planning and problem-solving. This is because the person may find it difficult to analyse problems and consider different options, which ultimately, enable them to come up with possible solutions. It is common for people with frontal lobe damage to experience difficulty in planning, monitoring and evaluating their performance and/or behaviour.

AWARENESS & UNDERSTANDING

Another cognitive function associated with the frontal lobes, is awareness of self and others. After brain injury, it is common for individuals to be unaware of the effect that their words and actions have on others. This can result in a cycle of problems when interacting with others; those recovering from a brain injury can be unaware of their behaviour so see no reason to change it.

People recovering from ABI can also lack understanding of the cognitive difficulties they are experiencing. This can vary from person to person during the course of their recovery. For example, some people may have a good awareness of their physical problems but have little understanding of their cognitive issues.

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Many people recovering from brain injury have an intuitive understanding that they are not the same person they used to be. Following a brain injury they may experience difficulties at work or in social situations, but may not fully understand their own contribution to the problems they encounter.

A lack of awareness/understanding can cause problems, as the ABI survivor can keep trying things that they are no longer able to do, which could prove to be potentially dangerous. This usually gets better over time but some people may never fully regain their awareness of self and others. As a result they may continue to misread social and/or professional situations.

LANGUAGE & COMMUNICATION

Following a brain injury, some people may find it difficult to express their thoughts and understand others. It is fairly common for ABI survivors to struggle to find the right words and often use inappropriate words. Some may provide lengthy explanations when they are struggling to find the correct word. They may talk around a specific subject, using lots of different words when only a few required. An ABI survivor can often be unaware of their language or communication errors/problems. Because of this they may become frustrated or angry, and place the blame for these communication difficulties on the person with whom they are speaking.

Other common language/communication problems encountered by those affected by ABI include:

- Difficulty understanding sarcasm or jokes
- Difficulty extracting the meaning of sentences
- Difficulty with reading, writing and spelling
- Difficulty with mathematical calculations

PERCEPTION

Perception involves the processing of information from our senses; this ability can be damaged following a brain injury. Someone with damaged senses may experience a loss of smell or taste, or may not be able to differentiate between hot and cold.

The most common perception problem for ABI survivors relates to problems with visual perception. This can result in the individual being unable to recognise shapes, objects or familiar faces (face blindness). These difficulties with visual perception can be exacerbated by problems with vision; e.g. double vision or a restricted field of view.

Some ABI survivors may find it hard to judge the distance between themselves and other objects. This can have a significant effect on an individual's daily life; something seemingly as simple as putting a mug on the table can be problematic, they may find themselves regularly banging into furniture or they may find it difficult to judge when it is safe to cross the road.

On Occasion, an ABI survivor may suffer from unilateral neglect. This is where because of their injury, an individual is unaware of one side of their body, and so it is ignored and becomes neglected.

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