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Challenging Behaviour following Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Family Members and Carers

Many people experience a change in their behaviour patterns following ABI. This can include a wide range of changes including aggressive or violent behaviour, inappropriate sexual behaviour and behaviour that is considered socially inappropriate.

There are many factors which impact a person's behaviour following an ABI. These factors include the specific damage to the brain, the person's behaviour and personality prior to the ABI, current frustrations experienced by the person, and the capacity of the individual to deal with these feelings in a constructive way.

When working with someone to change their behaviour it is important to ensure that the changes that are being made are in the best interests of the person. Questions that should be asked include:

- Is this behaviour different to their behaviour prior to the ABI?
- Is changing the specific behaviour going to enhance the person's quality of life?
- If the individual was able to view the situation without cognitive impairment, would that person want others to support them in changing the behaviour?

In terms of supporting a person to alter their challenging behaviour, there are two main types of interventions; environmental interventions and interventions that focus on 'personal responsibility taking'. Generally the greater the degree of cognitive impairment, the greater the emphasis needs to be on environmental interventions. Conversely, the greater the cognitive ability the person has, the greater the emphasis needs to be on personal responsibility taking. For most people with ABI a combination of both strategies will be helpful.

Environmental Interventions

Environmental Interventions are designed to provide the person displaying challenging behaviour with a positive experience when they use appropriate or desirable behaviour. These interventions also work to reduce the personal benefit a person derives from displaying challenging behaviour. In addition, the aim of this type of intervention is the reduction of stress created by the challenging behaviour through reducing its occurrence and the creation of positive, meaningful and rewarding experiences for the individual when appropriate behaviour is displayed. Below are some types of environmental interventions. Depending on a person's situation, a combination of these strategies may be helpful.

Rewarding desired behaviours

Rewarding desirable behaviours is generally the most important aspect of an environmental intervention. This involves consistently providing a positive response when the person behaves in the desired manner. Rewards can be in the form of natural consequences; for example promptly providing the person with a requested drink when they have pointed to the appropriate picture on their communication board rather than throwing something in frustration; or more overt such as verbal praise ('I like the way you kept trying even though it was really hard, well done') or even earning points towards a larger reward such as buying take away for dinner. Anything that the person finds rewarding and is appropriate to their age and level of cognitive ability is suitable.

Removing reinforcement of undesired behaviours

When challenging behaviours occur it is important to ensure they are not being inadvertently reinforced. For example, if a person receives a lot of attention when the behaviour occurs, whether it is positive or negative attention, it may be motivating for them to continue to use the undesirable behaviour. Removing reinforcement by using strategies such as ignoring the behaviour or by removing yourself while the behaviour occurs will reduce the chance that the behaviour will continue.

Ignoring 'middle ground' behaviour

Whilst it is helpful to provide positive feedback in response to desired behaviours, it is generally unhelpful to respond to all behaviour a person displays. As such, avoid attempting to change behaviours that might be annoying, but are still acceptable and only attempt to modify behaviours that are clearly inappropriate. This tends to provide clearer feedback for the person.

Meeting the purpose of the unwanted behaviour.

It is important to determine what the person is trying to achieve through their challenging behaviour, and to provide opportunities for this need to be fulfilled in more constructive ways. For example, a person who is frustrated may hit or bite themselves because they don't have an alternative way to express their frustration. Teaching them to say 'I feel angry' or to leave the room and have time out when feeling frustrated, may circumvent the negative behaviour by replacing it with a more desirable behaviour that meets the same need. Similarly, a person who gets bored a lot or is under stimulated may continually turn the TV up very loudly to gain some attention. Engaging that person in a recreation group and looking at other ways to schedule more rewarding activities into their weekly schedule may avoid the unwanted behaviour as the need for attention and social stimulation has been addressed.

Maximise opportunities to express feelings and address difficulties.

For most people it is helpful to be able to express feelings and have a sense that grievances are being taken seriously. For a person with an ABI, particularly if that person experiences communication difficulties, it is important that these opportunities are provided regularly and not just in response to incidences of challenging behaviour.

Defining behaviour that is 'appropriate' and 'not appropriate'

It is important to clearly describe to the person which behaviours are suitable and which behaviours are unsuitable. Take the time to ensure they have understood. It may be useful to use visual cues to assist with understanding and recall of the information, such as a written or pictorial list of behaviours.

Meaningful activities

Having meaningful, rewarding and stimulating activities in which to engage is important for everyone. It is vital to ensure that the person with an ABI has opportunities to partake in such activities. This may involve attending a recreation group, going for a daily walk, or simply being involved in aspects of day to day tasks such as shopping and cooking.

Reducing frustrations

It is important to develop an accurate understanding of the person's frustrations. These frustrations may relate to loss of abilities or increased dependence on others in daily life. Once they are understood, it is helpful to identify strategies for reducing or managing these frustrations. An ABI specialist may assist you both with this process.

Opportunities for privacy

After an ABI (particularly if a person is living in changed or group accommodation) it is often difficult to find opportunities for privacy. In relation to some sexually inappropriate behaviour, such as public masturbation, it is important to respond by providing opportunities for privacy and to give the person feedback about suitable times and places for that behaviour.

Avoid triggers

It is important to understand which situations or events tend to trigger challenging behaviours. If possible, it is generally best to avoid these situations. If they can't be avoided altogether, modifying the situation or reducing its frequency will be helpful.

Avoid battles

It can be very easy to get into battles over who is right or wrong over certain issues. These battles tend to be unproductive and are best avoided through distraction, changing the topic or avoiding discussion or exposure to the topic of the battle.

Safety

It is important that everyone's safety is taken into account in relation to the use of these environmental strategies. If these strategies cannot be carried out without placing an unacceptable level of risk on people's safety, then a review of the behavioural plan is required.

'Personal Responsibility Taking' Interventions

Personal responsibility taking interventions are based upon a person's ability to identify that their behaviour is a problem and then be involved in determining alternative ways of dealing with situations, as opposed to using challenging behaviours. This generally involves developing an understanding of what is going on for them emotionally at the time of their behaviour, how their challenging behaviour is contributing to the situation and identifying and rehearsing more constructive ways of managing these situations. This may involve the person being guided in requesting supportive people to give them feedback about their behaviour in a manner and frequency that is agreed upon, and then being willing to respond to that feedback. For example, in a frustrating situation, deep breathing or counting to ten may be used as a calming strategy therefore avoiding an aggressive or inappropriate behavioural response.

This information sheet has been prepared by Life Supports Counselling Service. Life Supports Counselling Service provides specialist counselling for people affected by Acquired Brain Injury. If you would like to discuss your situation with a counsellor, please feel free to contact our office on **1300 73 50 30**.

For more information sheets on topics related to acquired brain injury please see www.lifesupports.com.au/acquired_brain_injury.htm