



## Compensatory strategies after a traumatic brain injury (TBI)

Your rehabilitation team will talk to you about *compensatory strategies*, and the need to use strategies in order to function independently and effectively following a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

### What are compensatory strategies?

- These are strategies that you may need to use to compensate for the difficulties you are having since your traumatic brain injury. An example of a compensatory strategy would be you can never remember appointments anymore so you now keep a diary with you at all times. The diary is a *memory strategy* and helps you function on a day to day basis.
- Often people find the idea of a strategy difficult to grasp and will not want to use one because they functioned perfectly well without it prior to their injury.
- Many difficulties following a brain injury do not get better or go away. At this point, if you want to be successful at home/socially or at work then you will need to find a way to overcome and compensate for the injury.

### Useful strategies to use after a traumatic brain injury

#### Managing fatigue

- Following a brain injury, symptoms are made worse by fatigue. This needs to be managed effectively before progress can be made in recovery.
- You need to be aware of how fatigue affects you. To do this you may chart your activities during the day and then note down how you feel. Do you get headaches, feel clumsy or irritable? You will become aware of how much you can do in a day before your brain gets overloaded and you start to make mistakes or forget things.
- Once you have figured this out you can put in your planned rests and your fatigue management breaks during the day.
- A good strategy here is to take a *weekly planner* sheet (you can download this from the website) and plan your days. You can pace your activities during the day and balance physical and cognitive (brain) activities. By looking at the whole week you can balance your days to avoid overload.
- Your brain will have a much better chance of functioning well if you keep your mental energy at a consistent level (see information sheet on fatigue and units of energy).

#### Managing attention and concentration

- When your fatigue is under control you have a much better chance of being able to concentrate on what you are doing.
- Most people find that after a brain injury multitasking/doing two things at the same time is not possible any more.
- Again, in the first place, you need to be aware of when your concentration fails you and then a strategy needs to be put in place.



- Noise/internal/external distractions will affect your concentration so you need to *manage distractions*.
- Reduce the chance of noise and visual distraction distracting you by turning off TV/radio, pulling blinds/curtains, repositioning your desk at work etc.
- Manage internal distractions i.e. stress/anxiety/worry by writing things down, talking to someone about it, problem solving with help or simply letting yourself make a specific time to think about what is on your mind.
- Multitasking will be too hard and cause too many difficulties (e.g. making the dinner while talking to children/talking on the phone and taking a message).
- Distractions can cause you to go from one thing to another without firstly completing what you were doing.
- A strategy needs to be used - write a list and do one thing at a time, then tick it off to show it has been completed.
- Talk through the steps aloud as you do them.
- Write yourself sticky notes to stay focused/remind yourself what you were doing for example e.g. what's in the oven.
- If you feel you are losing concentration have a phrase e.g. "stay on track" to keep your attention on the task.

### Managing information processing

- If your fatigue is managed well and you are concentrating, then information is likely to get processed
- Information that you hear, see or read, for example, has to get sorted out and put into storage so you can remember it or relate to it later
- When you've had a brain injury, your processing of information can be slow and if information comes too quickly/is too complicated, or your brain is overloaded, then information gets lost.
- It is very important to realize when this is happening and use a strategy such as:
  - Dictaphone to record lengthy/complex information so you can listen to it a number of times.
  - Answering machine to record phone messages rather than trying to write them down and listen.
  - Taking notes.
  - Asking for repetition/clarifications.
  - Repeating information back to people.
  - Breaking information into chunks.
  - Paraphrasing/summarizing written information.
  - Asking people to slow down.
  - Getting rid of distractions (e.g. going to a quiet place if you are having to process complicated instructions).

### Helpful tips and advice to help you manage your memory after a traumatic brain injury

- To target memory it is important to look at fatigue, attention, concentration and processing first.
- When strategies are in place for these areas and difficulties still remain it is important to look at what memory strategies are going to work for you:
  - What do you forget regularly?
  - What systems did you have in place prior to your injury?



- Are you a visual or an auditory person?
- Strategies will need to be tried out first and then practiced.
- New learning is difficult following a brain injury, so strategy use won't happen overnight
- Habits need to be formed over a period of weeks.
- Having a routine and using a daily planner helps you manage your memory problems.
- If you get into a routine things become habit – the pressure is taken off your brain to remember what you are supposed to be doing.