

Supporting & Communicating with Someone who has had a Brain Injury

Introduction

Brain injury or a disease involving the brain may result in changes in a person's thinking, behaviour and ability to communicate. Family members and friends often comment that visiting a loved one who has had a brain injury is very challenging and difficult. Some commonly asked questions of the Neurosciences Patient Care Team are:

- What do we do or say when our family member/friend speaks without making sense?
- What do we do or say when our family member/friend repeatedly states he/she wants to go home?
- What can we do to help with our family member's/friend's recovery?

The following are some of the most common changes seen and some suggestions as to how they might best be managed. Remember there is no right or wrong way for every person or situation. These suggestions are based on our experience in working with people who have had a brain injury.

1. Environment:

When you are visiting your family member/friend who is confused or disoriented, it is helpful to ensure that the room is as quiet as possible.

Tips:

- Turn off (or turn down volume) the radio or TV.
- Only one person should talk at a time.
- Limit the number of visitors.
- Sit close to your family member/friend and maintain eye contact.
- Speak in a clear voice and keep sentences short.
- Allow your family member/friend to have time to rest.

2. Restlessness/Agitation:

After the brain injury, your family member/friend may become easily frustrated. As your family member/friend becomes more alert he/she may show excessive random movements.

Tips:

- Be calm or soothing in your tone of voice.
- Re-orient your family member/friend if need be - e.g. tell him/her the date, time, place.
- Maintain a simple and consistent routine.
- Do not over react to your family member's/friend's behaviour.
- Avoid arguing.
- Change the topic if it is being repeated.
- Sometimes talking increases restlessness, try being silent at times.

3. Attention/Concentration:

Attention refers to the ability to respond to important information and to screen out less important information. For example, the ability to listen to a conversation while a phone is ringing in the background.

Concentration refers to the ability to focus on a task without reinforcement or cues. It may be difficult to hold your family member's/friend's attention/concentration when there are other distractions in the room.

Tips:

- Clear the space by removing items your family member/friend does not need for the present activity.
- Decrease visual distractions and keep the noise level down.
- Allow regular breaks.
- Set realistic goals for activities. Your family member's/friend's therapists will help you set realistic goals.

4. Ability to Respond:

Your family member/friend may need more time to process, integrate, and respond to information than before. You may notice your family member/friend has difficulty keeping up in conversations or may be slower to perform tasks.

Tips:

- Assume your family member/friend may understand what is said.
- Give your family member/friend extra time to process information and respond.
- Always describe what you are going to do before you do it.

5. Communication Difficulties:

Speaking Difficulties: When talking with your family member/friend, you may notice his or her speech does not make sense. Your family member/friend may choose incorrect words or have difficulty thinking of the word that he/she would like to use. Your family member/friend may change topics quickly or may get stuck on a topic even once the conversation has shifted. He or she may also have slurred speech or difficulty physically forming the words.

Tips:

- Encourage your family member/friend to use a similar word to the word he/she wants or to describe the object/situation that cannot be named.
- Encourage your family member/friend to use gesture to help him/her communicate.
- Give your family member/friend extra time to respond.
- Do not expect your family member/friend to talk all of the time. If it is frustrating for him/her, give reassurance that it is all right to be silent for awhile.
- Acknowledge the difficulty your family member/friend is having. For example, "I can see it is hard for you to get the word you want."

Comprehension Difficulties:

When talking with your family member/friend, you may notice that he or she has trouble understanding what you say. The person may have difficulty making sense of words.

Tips:

- Use gesture (e.g. pointing to what you are talking about, gesturing certain actions).
- Use short, simple sentences, emphasizing the key words.
- Give your family member/friend extra time to process the message.
- Be soothing and speak in your natural tone of voice.
- Speak about concrete topics, in the "here and now". This will be easier than more abstract topics.

Lack of Initiative:

Early in the recovery process, apathy, or lack of initiative will often develop. Your family member/friend may be confused or unable to think about and plan activities. All tasks, however small, are overwhelming so your family member/friend may just sit or refuse to do anything. You may find this very frustrating.

Tips:

- Set up a daily schedule to avoid long periods of inactivity.
- Provide structured step-by-step tasks.
- Do not expect your family member/friend to take the initiative.
- Check off activities, as your family member/friend completes them.
- Learn what things will get a response from your family member/friend.

For more copies, go online at <http://vch.eduhealth.ca> or
email pchem@vch.ca and quote Catalogue No. **FM.335.Su76**

© Vancouver Coastal Health, June 2018

The information in this document is intended solely for the
person to whom it was given by the health care team.

www.vch.ca