

Helping with Executive Functions Problems

Executive functions include a range of processes and abilities. Examples include abstract thinking, sequencing and self-monitoring. In this handout we deal with decision-making, planning and organization skills.

Some of the following could indicate problems with critical thinking:

- responding impulsively
- trouble understanding the consequences of actions
- repeating the same mistakes over and over
- trouble getting things started
- trouble with changes in routine
- difficulty dealing with surprises or unexpected events
- trouble making decisions (even simple ones)
- not planning ahead
- being disorganized
- not finishing things that have been started
- trouble recognizing when actions may be dangerous
- trouble recognizing mistakes

Establish Routines

Routines might entail making up schedules and/or doing things in a similar way over and over again. For example, certain tasks like laundry or shopping could be scheduled for the same day of the week.

Use a Day Timer or other planning tool

Remembering to use a planner can be a challenge. So try to help a person use a planner according to a schedule. For example, the first coffee in the morning might become associated with writing in the day timer or program a phone alarm as a cue for the person to look in the daytimer. Clients who are not used to planning may benefit from the clinician doing it with them and then reviewing the use of the day timer at each session.

Break Tasks Down

A complex task can be overwhelming for a person with executive problems. The daytimer can be used to help a person break down larger tasks into their components and make each component easier to tackle. Spend some session time going through a task step by step with a client. Remind clients to keep the daytimer with them as they do the task so that they can refer to it when they are in the process of undertaking the task.

Setting Priorities

Lists are useful for most of us. One approach to setting priorities is to re-write a list with the most important items at the top. Grouping items in some way may also help a person be more efficient. For example, a person might group all errands that need to be done for the same day or group those that are in the same geographical area. Having a list is a good way to assist memory plus make a person more organized.

Explore New Ways of Doing Things

It is possible that old ways of doing something does not work anymore. For example, a student may find that they simply cannot rely on cramming anymore. What other approaches might they take?

More Lists

Encourage the use of ongoing lists (e.g. of supplies like groceries) and bringing the list along when shopping. This can save frustration and reinforce the use of planning tools.

Decisions

Reduced concentration, working memory and executive functions can make it hard for someone to make decisions. A clinician can be of use by using traditional approaches like listing the advantages and disadvantage, querying the person's preferences and enlisting resources that can provide more information.

Games

Many games help train executive functions. For example card games have rules that must be applied in different circumstances (flexibility). A game demands the use of planning and developing strategies. Sequencing is demanded when a

game must be played according to rules that apply in a sequence. Think about how much planning goes into a chess game.

Many video games are also useful and are entering the market rapidly as the idea of maintaining cognitive abilities has hit the popular media.

Solutions are Diverse

Finally, try to place yourself in the other person's place and imagine what types of approaches might work for different cognitive problems. For example, trouble putting things in sequences could make waitressing very difficult as serving, orders arriving, new customers coming to tables, getting drinks first, asking how things are etc. typically follow sequences that must be followed. How could you help someone to do these things in the correct order? The attempted solutions will only be bounded by creativity and willingness to try out new approaches.

Coach for success by making each step easily attainable – don't rely on the old approach of simply telling someone what to do and then giving corrective feedback on the areas of failure. Many people with psychosis don't learn that way so try not to be guilty of helping them by teaching in ways that rely upon a person's weaknesses. Break it down, keep it manageable and make the compensations work for them.