

Memory Problems Following Traumatic Brain Injury

Carer Information Booklet



Talis Consulting Limited

What is Memory?

Memory consists of several processes that work in different ways. Using memory requires the use of more than just one skill, incoming information must be attended to, the relevant parts of it must be picked out, these parts must then be stored as a memory in a meaningful way. After this we must successfully access this stored memory later and use it correctly.

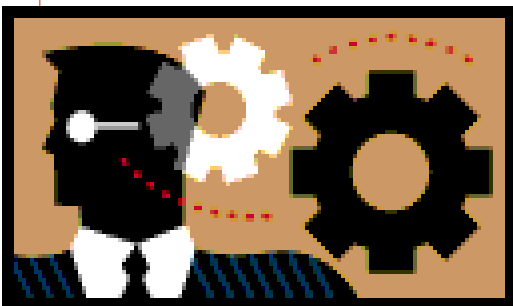
What About Different Types of Memory?

There are many different types of memory we use. We have a short-term memory for things we are currently doing. We also have a separate long-term memory of things that we have learned well; these memories can last a lifetime. But we also have other types of memory, such as procedural memory, which is memory for a task that requires movement (often called “muscle-memory”). These memories often require no thought (like walking). Also we have procedural memory, which is remembering to do things in the future, such as remembering to ring a friend, walk the dog or do the cleaning.



Why Can Memory be Impaired After a Brain Injury?

Because memory involves so many separate processes, many different parts of the brain are used when forming and later recalling a memory. This means that damage to more than one possible location in the brain can affect memory. Because of this, memory impairment is a relatively common complaint following a brain injury.



How does Brain Injury Affect the Different Types of Memory?

The multiple locations of memory processing in the brain means that if one type of memory is impaired, another might remain intact. For example someone might not be able to keep in mind a phone number long enough to dial it, but can remember their own number perfectly well. Or someone might forget how to find their way to an address, even though they can recall the address perfectly.

What is important is to identify the aspects of memory that the person is good at and use these as much as possible to compensate for aspects they are less good at. Usually procedural memory (remembering to do something in the future) is affected more than the other types of memory, so it is important to concentrate on it.

How can I Help a Person who has Memory Loss?

Unfortunately there is no miracle cure for memory loss, an individual with memory impairments may get better over time naturally, they may remain pretty much the same, or in cases of dementia they may in fact get worse. However there are numerous ways that you can work around memory problems and strategies to cope and adapt to changing demands on memory.

The following ideas are just a few tips you may like to try out. The extent to which you rely on them will depend on the severity and the nature of the person's memory impairment. It is important to find a system that will work for you and stick to that.

Things to Change Around the House

Safety Proofing

A person with memory loss may at times be confused or disorientated. Therefore it may be a good idea to safety-proof the house.

This can be done simply by:

- Putting away sharp objects after using them.
- Make sure floor mats are secure and floors are not wet.
- Reducing the amount of furniture that's lying around.
- Turn the thermostat on the boiler down to avoid the person scalding themselves.
- Using a fireguard on an open fire.
- Only putting enough medication out for one day at a time.



Labelling

Labelling things around the house makes it much easier for the person to find them again. What you label depends on what you think is necessary, but it's a good idea to label the cupboards and drawers in the kitchen, or the rooms of the house. It may also be a good idea to paint each door in the house a distinctive colour.



You might also want to consider getting a notice-board to write down important information like phone numbers, the daily schedule, or important events. If you are going out, leave your phone number clearly on the board. If the person keeps on asking for the same information (such as where he or she is) then this can be written on the board too, and you should encourage the person to look at the board every time they wish to know the answer to the question.

Labelling (Continued)



An alternative to having this information on a board is to place it on a wrist band so that the person always has it with them. You may want to include your address and phone number on the wrist-band too in case the person gets lost.

If the person often asks the date or time, consider getting a large, easily read clock, and encourage the person to look their instead of asking.

Keep the House Organised

Keep items the person regularly uses in the same places. That way the person know where to find them if they need them. Also keep furniture in the same regular places so that the person does not become disorientated. You may wish to attach important things together, for example attach the key to the door so that it is always there when the person needs it, or leave medication next to the person's toothbrush so they are reminded to take it when they brush their teeth.

Have a Consistent Routine

Try to have a regular routine, with the same things happening every day or every week. This will relieve strain on the person's memory as they will not have to remember to do different things every day. The timing of events is not as important as keeping the order of events the same throughout the day.

Also people tend to have a time of day when they are at their most alert and responsive. Get to know when this time is and plan appointments and other activities for around this time. Any activities are best kept to a short duration with many breaks, and try not to do too much in one day.



It is also not a good idea to plan activities too far ahead. People with memory problems often have trouble planning too far in advance, and they may get upset if they forget that they were supposed to be doing something.

Ways to Help You Interact With a Person with Memory Problems

Handling Conversations

People with memory problems sometimes have problems understanding what has been said to them, or in remembering what they have been told. They may ask the same questions repeatedly, or tell you the same thing several times. You must be patient with them in this situation.



If the person repeatedly asks the same question, write down the answer and encourage them to look there. For example if they repeatedly ask what the date is, get a large calendar and instruct them to look at that.

If the person makes the same comment repeatedly then consider changing the way in which you speak to them. For example one man with memory problems always gave the same response when he was asked “*Are you ready to go?*”. This quickly became irritating, however a different response would be given if the question was phrased differently, for example saying “*Do you want to leave now?*”.

If the person becomes angry or upset during a conversation, try to distract them rather than confront them.



Giving the Person Tasks to do can be Beneficial

Getting the person to help around the house by doing cleaning or gardening may help give them a sense of purpose. Instructions of what household tasks need to be done and how to do them can be written on a notice-board in the house.

Exercise is also important so try and take the person out for a walk a few times a week.

Dealing with Outbursts of Anger

A person with memory problems may at times become frustrated and angry. Do not take this anger personally, it is likely they are just lashing out at whoever happens to be nearby, even though they are not at fault. If this does happen try and distract the person with another activity, be calm and firm and try not to retaliate. If you are unable to calm the person down, make sure they are safe and then simply walk away.

Try to find out whether there is any pattern to the person’s anger outbursts, if you can find one do your best to avoid those situations which cause the person to get angry.

Prevent the Person from Wandering

Sometimes wandering can occur because the person becomes lost or disorientated in an unfamiliar environment. Wandering can also be because of an impairment in short-term memory, the person may simply forget where they were supposed to be going. Another reason may be because the person is in some form of physical pain and the movement of walking is helping to alleviate it. If this is the case it is important to find out whether any physical problem does exist.



You may wish to place a “stop” sign on the front door so that the person knows they should not leave the house. Also ensure that the person has details of their address with them at all times, and it may be a good idea to give them a mobile phone so you can stay in touch with them. Make sure your friends and neighbours are aware if a person may wander so they can keep an eye out for them.

If a person is determined to leave the house then it may be best not to try and confront them. Accompany them a short way and try and distract them and return them to a familiar environment as soon as possible.

Ways in which New Information can be Taught to Someone with Memory Problems

Teaching new information to people with memory impairments can be difficult as they often do not learn from mistakes, however there are a number of ways you can help make information you present to them easier to sink in.

- Concentrate on the relevant information and try to simplify it
- Divide the information into chunks and give these one at a time
- Encourage the person to take their time and pay attention
- Have the person repeat back the information to make sure it's been understood
- Make associations between the new material and older, previously learnt material.
- Use the “little and often” rule, it's better to work for small amounts of time regularly than doing a lot in one go.
- Choose a good time to practice when the person is alert and ready

It can be frustrating for people to get things wrong, therefore you may wish to practice “errorless learning”. This form of teaching discourages guessing and therefore errors. When you ask a person with memory problems if they know the name of someone, don't just ask “*What is this person's name?*”, instead say “*Do you know this person's name, it begins with a 'J', only answer if you are sure*”. A person with memory problems may find this method less frustrating.

Finally - Don't Forget to Think About Yourself



Anger is a natural response to many of the situations you will encounter. Do not blame yourself if you find that you become angry with the new stresses of dealing with a person with memory difficulties.

It is also normal for some family conflicts to emerge when dealing with a person with memory loss. Each family member will cope with the experience in different ways. Try to make time for each other and talk through your problems.

If there is anything you don't understand about memory loss, or feel you need to talk to someone you can approach your GP or other health professional. There are also support groups and organisations that will listen to you and help provide advice.

Remember that caring for someone with memory loss can be stressful. Don't forget to take time out now and again to look after yourself.

Bear in mind that it is possible to help memory impaired people to develop different and effective remembering strategies, to learn new skills and routines and to reduce the impact that memory problems have on everyday life.

Useful Websites:

www.headway.org.uk

- A useful web site with much information about brain injury and rehabilitation in the UK.

www.birt.co.uk

- Another useful web site concerning brain injury, with downloadable leaflets about brain injury and its implications.

www.tbiguide.com/memory.html

- A website with advice and information specifically related to memory problems and how to cope with them.

www.alzscot.org/pages/memory.htm

- A website devoted to Alzheimer's disease (where memory loss is a symptom). However has links to websites offering gadgets to aid as external memory cues, such as large clocks clearly displaying the date and time.

