



Helping someone with a moderate to severe acquired brain injury (ABI) in the COVID-19 environment

INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES AND CARERS

An acquired brain injury (ABI) refers to any injury suffered after birth resulting in damage to the brain. A person with an ABI typically experiences some degree of change to their thinking, behaviour and emotional functioning. If the injury is significant, this can be long-lasting and have a marked impact on daily life.

Typical difficulties include (but are not limited to):

- impaired attention
- poor ability to adapt to change
- reduced emotional and/or behavioural regulation
- unreliable memory and difficulty learning new information.

Living with someone who has a significant brain injury can be very challenging in normal circumstances, but in the current situation where changes to lifestyle have been rapid and restrictive – some of the issues may be exacerbated further.

You may notice that the individual with an ABI:

- is more agitated than usual
- is stressed or anxious
- has a lower frustration threshold
- is more forgetful or confused.

In particular they might:

- find it hard to keep themselves occupied
- forget why they are constrained, or why friends and family can't visit, if they need to self-isolate
- become agitated about any change to their routine
- express worry or confusion about COVID-19.

Strategies to assist

Start each day with a list of activities and options to fill the day

Keep them varied to manage shifting attention and concentration. These can include (within bounds of capability and preferences) a mix of:

- games
- education activities
- jobs
- hobbies
- exercise.

Replicate usual routine as much as possible

You will also need to be consistent and clear about the adapted version of the person's usual routine:

- write a timetable for the week and have it in an obvious, easy to view location.
- discuss the timetable each day.
- see if there are any usual activities to engage in either online or in-person where permitted and safe to do so
- anticipate reactions to change where possible and provide calm and positive reassurance.

Remind and orient

You may find that the person with an ABI needs reminding of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges it may be presenting or exacerbating. To minimise frequent questions and confusion it might be helpful to:

- write down a simple explanation and put this on a wall or other easy-to-find place
- have pictures of family members and friends around the room
- use a calendar and mark-off the days together, which may be helpful for keeping track of time and date.

Stay connected and communicate

- Keep in touch with friends and family through regular FaceTime or other videoconferencing platforms, phone calls, email (sending messages and photos), social media and safe in-person contact when it is safe and permitted to do so.
- Talk to each other about needs, feelings, understanding of the situation – but keep conversations positive.
- Minimise newspaper or TV coverage that might be distressing.

Provide mental and physical health activities each day

- Download simple relaxation strategies and include them in the daily routine.
- Consider creative ways that you can make the home feel like a relaxing space, or create a room that is the calm room e.g., use music, plants, fragrances, reduced clutter, soothing pictures, warm blankets and cushions.
- Include exercise in the daily routine – both indoor and outdoor. Fresh air is important.
- Continue to access telehealth or face to face psychology, neuropsychology, rehabilitation or physiotherapy as needed.

The APS has a number of resources available to assist Australians in managing their mental health during the coronavirus outbreak. Visit psychology.org.au for more.

Relevant support groups and information

- www.families4families.org.au
- synapse.org.au
- www.tbiguide.com/
- www.braininjuryaustralia.org.au/

Acknowledgments

This resource was prepared by the:



A clinical neuropsychologist is a psychologist who is trained to understand brain-behaviour relationships (across the lifespan):

- To assess thinking/brain abilities and difficulties to clarify diagnosis and identify the client's care needs and priorities.
- To provide targeted intervention or rehabilitation for people with thinking/brain-related difficulties or disorders.
- To adapt or modify treatments to take into account the effects of thinking/brain difficulties.

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