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 in the confines of home
- forget why they are constrained or why friends and family can’t visit
- become upset that people aren’t visiting or that they can no longer attend external activities or groups
- become agitated about the 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.
Bring the outside world in

Many things to do can now be found online to bring these experiences into the home:

• Zoos and nature parks around the world are live-streaming their animal exhibits.
• Archived pre-recorded concerts and performances are being shown online (e.g., Australian Ballet, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra).
• Music and theatre performers are creating live-streamed performances from isolation.
• Galleries around the world are streaming virtual tours.

Replicate usual routine as much as possible

This won’t be fully 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 online versions of usual activities e.g., online classes, online exercise groups, online support groups.
• 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 situation they are in. 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 even letters.
• 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.
• Access telehealth psychology, neuropsychology, rehabilitation or physiotherapy as needed.

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):

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