

Section 2

Executive functioning

Overview

As we learned in the last section, many people with schizophrenia experience cognitive challenges as a part of the illness—difficulties with attention, memory and the range of functions that fall under the term “executive.” In this section, we focus on executive functions, including the abilities to plan and carry out a specific task, be flexible in how we think, and monitor our own progress on tasks and activities. For example, someone experiencing executive functioning challenges might have a difficult time working through the steps of a recipe or might need a prompt to do some basic daily activities (we discuss this below). We are spending this time on executive functioning because it will help us think through what strategies will be the most helpful.

Levels of functioning

Your loved one’s level of executive functioning is one of the most important considerations as you work with them to set up their individualized plan. Someone with greater executive functioning challenges will need environmental supports to be more obvious (e.g., by making signs larger, brighter and more numerous). Supports will also need to be placed closer to where the activity is taking place. So, for example, a reminder about brushing teeth will need to be placed in the bathroom where brushing occurs, rather than in the bedroom. (To download signs, or customize ones for your relative’s home, please refer to www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.)

In general, someone with fewer executive functioning difficulties is able to perform daily activities with less structure and more subtle environmental cues. For example, the person might only need a calendar on their phone to keep organized rather than signs posted on walls all over the apartment. In the table that follows, you will find a few examples of the types of considerations that you will make depending on the person’s level of executive functioning. As you read through the table, think about your loved one and begin to assess the level of support he or she might need.

Intervention guidelines based on types of challenges

QUESTION	MINOR CHALLENGES	MORE SERIOUS CHALLENGES
How specific are the supports?	Environmental supports can address issues more broadly (e.g., a sign saying “How do I look?” placed on the bathroom door).	Environmental supports may need to identify all the steps in a task (e.g., a sign saying, “Is my hair combed? Is my shirt tucked in? Are my hands dry?”). These steps can be posted on a bathroom mirror.
What kind of daily living skills should I target?	Environmental supports can usually begin with more complex activities (e.g., working, cooking for the family, volunteering, doing job interviews), or with basic activities that are interfering with the performance of more complex activities (e.g., disorganized home environment is leading to delays getting to meetings).	Initial supports will focus on basic activities of daily living (e.g., hygiene, dressing), and only move on to more complex ones when basic activities are being done well.

Intervention guidelines (continued)

QUESTION	MINOR CHALLENGES	MORE SERIOUS CHALLENGES
How noticeable do the supports have to be?	Smaller signs (half sheet of paper) with smaller lettering (less than 2 cm) and smaller calendars will likely work. So can watches with smaller faces or more subtle alarms.	Large signs (whole sheet of paper) with large lettering (more than 2 cm) and desk-sized wall calendars may be needed, along with more verbal or voice prompts. Electronic devices (e.g., talking alarms) may help to prompt behaviours.
How many behaviours should I target?	Interventions can be targeted to specific areas that the person is struggling with (e.g., not responding to e-mails or not checking voice mail).	Interventions can address many areas of daily functioning (e.g., laundry, grooming, dressing).
How close do the supports need to be to the area where the behaviour is done?	Signs and equipment should be placed near to where the activity takes place. (A sign on the bathroom door can remind the person to check their appearance.)	Signs and equipment should be placed exactly where activity takes place. (A sign on the mirror can remind the person to check their appearance.)

Types of functioning

Along with the level of functioning described above, the type of functioning is another important part of the picture. Executive functioning problems tend to involve either having:

- trouble getting started or a hard time initiating actions and activities (sometimes referred to as apathy),
- or
- trouble staying organized when doing tasks.

“Trouble getting started” happens when a person does not start necessary activities without being told, or does not complete all the steps in a task because they have trouble starting each step in the process. For many people with schizophrenia, this problem can really lower a person’s quality of life. In milder forms, it can involve a person not reaching out to friends. In more severe forms, people might stay in their pajamas or not shower without prompting. To get a sense of what challenges may arise for someone having trouble getting started, see Video 2: Trouble getting started (Jules) at www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.

“Trouble staying organized” is quite different (though the two can sometimes go together). Someone is disorganized when his or her behaviour doesn’t match the situation or when the person gets easily distracted by irrelevant things in the environment. People having these kinds of challenges tend to be agitated or edgy, have thoughts going off in many directions and have a hard time organizing themselves to get tasks done. For example, they may dress in shorts in very cold weather simply because the shorts were on top of their dresser. Milder organization challenges might involve difficulties such as interrupting conversations or getting off the elevator at the wrong floor.

To get a sense of what types of challenges may arise for someone having trouble staying organized, see also Video 2: Trouble staying organized (Maleck) at **www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com**.

Once we know whether a person has more trouble with getting started or with staying organized, we know generally what we need to do to help.

For trouble getting started, we can help by thinking of ways for the person to find motivation. We can help by using the environment to prompt them to begin a specific behaviour and complete all the steps in a task. For example, we could set a voice alarm with the message, “It’s time to get dressed now,” or put a brightly coloured sign above their alarm clock with the same message. (Many products like this can be purchased online, such as “Your Minder Personal Alarm Clock.”) We could set online calendar alarms to prompt the person to call a friend or relative.

For challenges with keeping organized, we can help by redirecting the person away from less helpful behaviours and removing cues in the environment that might distract them. For example, we could work collaboratively with the person to take clothing out of the closet that does not fit or is inappropriate for the time of year. We could also develop a weekly chore checklist that helps with keeping the environment organized and free from distractions (especially important for things such as studying for tests).