

# FACT SHEET:



# ABIOS

Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

**Category:**  
Behaviour

**Audience:**  
Family and  
Support Workers

For more information  
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## Understanding Changes in Insight and Self-Awareness after ABI



### Introduction

Lack of insight or denial of difficulties or impairments can be a significant problem for some people after an acquired brain injury.

A person may have limited or no awareness about their physical, cognitive, personality or behavioural changes.

### Lack of insight can be caused by:

- Impaired self-monitoring or awareness of functioning or behaviour – the person may not observe mistakes, errors, or impaired performance on tasks, or changes in personality or behaviour.
- Impaired reasoning and thinking skills – even when a person has awareness of a specific error or impairment, impaired reasoning or thinking skills may lead to inability to make the connections between a performance or ability and consequences or outcomes.
- Impaired attention and concentration – a person may have difficulty taking in new information or feedback about their performance or ability. They may not notice difficulties or failures on tasks or in interpersonal relationships.
- Impaired memory or new learning – they may have difficulty retaining and retrieving information about their performance and ability and may forget problems or errors. They may also see themselves as they were before the injury.
- Lack of emotional coping or acceptance – a person may have difficulty emotionally accepting changes in their physical, cognitive or behaviour functioning. They may be unable, unready or unwilling to accept or deal with major changes in their life plans, hopes, or goals as the result of a significant injury.
- A person with impaired insight or self-awareness may not appreciate the implications of their impairments for decision-making or planning about return to work, driving, study and life in the community.
- Generally, awareness of physical impairments or limitations (a problem you can see) is better than awareness of more subtle changes in cognitive functioning such as memory, problem solving, reasoning, or in behaviour.
- As the result of lack of insight or awareness, a person may not understand the purpose of participating in rehabilitation activities or tasks or even participation in community activities. This can lead to poor motivation, lack of cooperation, argumentativeness and irritability.

## Family Adjustment and Understanding

Family members, carers, and friends may also have difficulty understanding the nature and extent of changes in a family member. Lack of awareness may stem from optimism and hope that the person may make a full recovery.

The person with brain injury also may look and seem the 'same' as before and therefore it may be hard initially to notice and understand changes as the result of the brain injury.

## Ideas for Managing Lack of Insight

### Identify the Cause of Lack of Insight

Try to identify the reason the person is having difficulty with lack of insight or self-awareness – this will determine how you intervene or approach the problem.

- If the problem is **self-monitoring**, then strategies that raise awareness of performance may be helpful – videos, checklists, or giving feedback.
- If the main issue is **attention or memory**, then cognitive and memory strategies may be more important.
- If the problem is related to **reasoning or insight**, concrete goal setting, planning, and help with decision-making may be the approach to take
- If the issue is **emotional coping or acceptance** of the disability, counselling and support may be helpful.

For some individuals with severe injuries, they may have problems at all of these levels, and more than one approach to improve awareness is required.

### Provide Feedback and Information

- Provide frequent, non-critical feedback about performance or behaviour on tasks and activities.
- Feedback should be concrete (plain; able to be seen), with specific examples and information. For example, "Because your reaction times are very slow ... this means you are not able to drive now". Try not to dwell on the point if this is distressing for the person or it leads to irritability or anger.
- Direct the person's attention to specific areas or examples of difficulty, as well as areas of strengths, improvements, and changes. When providing feedback it is helpful to have specific examples.

- Provide opportunities for the person to get feedback from other people (family, peers, and friends) so they have more than one source of information.
- Encourage the person to evaluate their own performance in different areas, particularly focusing on areas they would like to change.
- Family members and friends also need information about the person and how the brain injury might affect their ability to live in the community, driving, returning to work or study, or making new friendships.

### Risk Prevention

In some cases where legal issues or safety is involved, decision making may need to be made by others. This might include:

- capacity for management of financial affairs or other for personal matters e.g. accommodation, health, services
- return to driving
- return to work
- care of children is involved.

### Link Activities to the Person's Goals

- Try to link activities and tasks to the person's own goals and plans and priorities, to attempt to increase motivation and participation e.g. "We are working on these memory strategies so you are able to live on your own".
- Help the person to set realistic goals and detailed plans so they are more likely to achieve success.



### Avoid Arguments

- Try to avoid directly confronting or challenging the person’s ideas about their capacity – this can lead to conflict, disagreements and anger.
- Give general information about brain injury and the kind of difficulties that can be experienced. This can shift the focus from a personal problem to something more general e.g. “People with an ABI sometimes have trouble with their anger or temper ... do you think you might have any problems like that?”
- Introduce new ideas or options gradually, and give the person time to think about them.

### Counselling and Development of Self-Awareness

It is important that the person with brain injury and family are given enough time to understand and cope with significant changes in their lives.

Developing insight and self-awareness, and adjustment to changes as the result of a disability can take time – it is important not to rush the process.

Improvements in insight and awareness regarding deficits and impairments can lead to depression and adjustment difficulties, and a person may need individual support and counselling as insight improves.

### Resources

See other Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service (ABIOS) Information sheets at <http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/>



### Notes:

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