

UNDERSTANDING APATHY & MOTIVATION

Lack of motivation or spontaneity, or apathy is a direct result of head injury to frontal lobe structures that concern emotion, motivation and forward planning. The person with the head injury may be motivated to have immediate needs gratified, saying such things as 'I want food', 'I want quiet', 'I want to be comfortable', but sustained, planned motivation is more difficult. Often the person is unable to conceptualise and plan activities, or work towards specific goals, because cognitive abilities involving planning are injured. Often these goals are so overwhelming that it is less threatening and less anxiety-provoking to just sit and ponder. Working towards a goal requires planning, realistic appraisal of the situation and self-appraisal and these are the very skills that are often impaired. As time passes, this lack of motivation can lead to relative social isolation, lack of pleasure and, at times, depression. This lack of initiative and spontaneity is often very frustrating for families and carers. Beware of confusing apathy and poor motivation with tiredness and fatigue.

Coping with Apathy and Poor Motivation (for Family and Carers)

1. At times be firm and say to the person with a head injury, 'we are going to' rather than asking, 'do you want to?', or give him a choice between two desirable activities.
2. Break down the activities into small steps to avoid overwhelming the individual: 'get your clothes on', then, 'have breakfast'; then, 'come with me to the supermarket.
3. Work out a behavioural management system. This simply means changing the payoffs for certain activities. Reward and reinforce certain desired activities and withdraw rewards for undesirable other activities.
4. Encourage involvement in a support group, this leads to stimulation and encouragement from others with similar difficulties.