Communication Skills and the Person with a Right Brain Injury

A person with right brain injury has damage to the right side of the brain. This damage may be from a stroke, traumatic brain injury or brain tumor. A person with a right brain injury has problems with thinking skills, but may not be aware of the problems that he or she is having. Common problems include:

• Problems expressing and understanding information:
  ▶ Says a lot, but lacks a main idea or theme.
  ▶ Brings up subjects out of the blue.
  ▶ Has a hard time following long instructions.
  ▶ Has a hard time understanding indirect requests and humor.

• Changes in interactions with others:
  ▶ Loses eye contact.
  ▶ Changes the topic without warning.
  ▶ Interrupts.
  ▶ Talks too much or does not talk much at all.

• Flat tone of voice or lack of facial expression.

• Not being aware of objects on the left side may make it hard to:
  ▶ Read or write.
  ▶ Look at a person seated to the left.

• Trouble paying attention.
• Trouble keeping track of time.
• Trouble learning new information and remembering recent events.
• Forgetting steps in everyday activities.
• Unable to see "the whole picture".
• Acting without thinking and with poor judgment.

Helpful tips to improve:

Conversation
• Get rid of distractions:
  ▶ Turn off the TV.
  ▶ Close the door.
  ▶ Face the left side of the person, toward the distraction.
• "Signal" to get attention before talking.
• Use gestures or verbal cues to remind the person to look at you.
• Use spoken reminders to get back to the topic.
• Ask questions that need more than a yes or no answer for the person who does not talk much.
• Use gestures or spoken reminders to signal your turn to talk for the person who talks too much.

Visual Skills
• Help the person find boundaries or edges on the left:
  ▶ In the environment
  ▶ During conversation
  ▶ When reading
  ▶ When writing
• Use spoken reminders to help find landmarks.
• Encourage looking left to right.
• Use an index card, paper or finger under a line of print to help focus attention on one line at a time.

**Orientation**
• Use clocks and calendars.
• Keep a daily routine:
  ➤ Plan a schedule.
  ➤ Keep checklists.
• Point out familiar landmarks.
• Remind the person of time, place and situation as needed.

**Thinking Skills**
• Improve the use of memory:
  ➤ Give extra time to learn new information.
  ➤ Use mental images or associations.
  ➤ Group information.
  ➤ Describe ideas when the person is unable to think of a certain word.
  ➤ Use written reminders.
  ➤ Verbally remind the person.
  ➤ Keep to the same daily routine.
• The person can cue him or herself:
  ➤ Talk through the steps of an activity out loud.
  ➤ Recheck work.
  ➤ Pace oneself.
• Caregivers can give spoken reminders to:
  ➤ Talk the person through the steps in the activity.
  ➤ Remind the person to slow down.
  ➤ Help the person remember.
• Stay calm and relaxed.