



Assessing Cognition of the Person with Cognitive Impairment: Questions to Ask

Here are some questions to ask ourselves to better understand a person's cognitive ability. These questions are based on brain functioning and specific changes in cognition. However, we do not need to know anything about the brain to ask them.

The questions address the five phases of cognitive processing that everyone must go through in order to understand and respond to other people and the environment. Asking ourselves these questions can help us assess a person's ability to understand and respond.

A "yes" answer suggests the person has less difficulty performing a particular cognitive function. The answers to these questions can suggest effective intervention strategies.

More information is on the last page of this handout.

1. Can this person receive information from the environment through the five senses (see, hear, feel, taste, smell)?
(Sensory Phase)
 - A. How well does he SEE and HEAR me?
 - If he needs glasses, is he using them?
 - Are the glasses clean?
 - If he needs a hearing aid, is he using it?
 - Does the hearing aid need adjusting?
 - B. How does she FEEL or experience my touch?
 - Does she know I am touching a particular body part?
 - Does the touch feel as soft or as hard as I think?
 - Does the cloth, water, or surface feel comfortable?
 - Does the temperature seem to feel the same to her as it does to me?
 - Does she feel like the temperature is stable and not changing from one minute to the next?

2. Can this person recognize and understand the information received through the senses? (Comprehension/Perception Phase)
- A. How well does he UNDERSTAND what he sees and hears?
- Does he know what an object is when he sees it?
 - Does he recognize various colors?
 - Does he read and understand what he reads?
 - Does he recognize pictures?
 - Does he recognize gestures?
 - Does he recognize what a word means when he hears it?
- B. How well does she recognize WHERE an object, sound, or touch is?
- Does she notice objects in all parts of her visual field?
 - Where in her visual field does she find it most difficult to notice objects?
 - Does she notice touch on all parts of her body?
 - Does she see how far away an object is from her?
 - Does she see where objects are relative to other objects?
3. Can this person categorize, organize, and manipulate the information received? (Executive Phase)
- A. How well does he recognize the IMPORTANCE of the information and use it to make decisions, solve problems, and organize plans?
- Does he pay attention to a task, to an object, or to what I am saying?
 - Does he figure out what I mean, even if he can't hear or understand me very well?
 - Does he remember what he sees, hears, or figures out?
 - Does he compare new information with other information he has learned before?
 - Does he easily shift from one activity to another?
 - Does he easily get started on a task or a response?
 - Does he know how much time has passed?
 - Does he recognize his own abilities, needs, desires, and mistakes?
 - Does he easily control his impulsive responses by censoring or delaying what he says or does?
 - Does he easily control his emotions and his expression of emotion?

4. Can this person's brain tell her body what to do? (Expressive Phase)

A. How well does her brain COORDINATE her own body parts to perform a task or to express a thought?

- Does she easily produce words when speaking?
- Does she easily produce words when writing?
- Does she speak words as easily as she sings?
- Does she talk upon request as easily as she talks spontaneously?
- Does she do tasks as easily upon request as she does spontaneously, or automatically, when she doesn't think about the task or how to do it?
- Does she easily move a body part spontaneously?
- Does she easily move a body part upon request?
- Does she easily build or construct something spontaneously?
- Does she easily build or construct something upon request?
- Does she easily draw spontaneously?
- Does she easily draw upon request?
- Does she easily spontaneously manipulate or move an object when doing a task such as eating and dressing?
- Does she easily upon request manipulate or move an object when doing a task such as eating and dressing?

5. Can this person's body physically respond to the instructions from his brain? (Motor Phase)

A. How HEALTHY and strong is his body?

- Is there full strength in every part of his body, that is, no weakness in any part such as legs, arms, hands, feet, tongue?
- Is any body part weaker on his left side than on his right side?
- Is any body part weaker on his right side than on his left side?
- Does each body part move immediately and easily?
- Does each body part have sufficient range of motion?
- Does he easily coordinate movements of various body parts?
- Does he walk long distances easily?
- Is each body part free of pain when it moves?
- Is each body part free of pain when it is not moving?

More about these Questions

This handout lists questions a caregiver can ask to discover what a person with cognitive impairment can and can't do with respect to cognition (i.e., the ability to think, and to understand and respond to the environment). The questions are based on very specific changes to the brain. They help explore why the person is distressed, is having trouble performing a task, or is engaging in a particular behavior.

The caregiver is expected to ask these questions to her/himself or to other caregivers, but NOT to the person with cognitive impairment. The questions can be asked informally by family and other caregivers or more systematically with formal recording by professionals.

The "Cognitive Impairment Assessment Protocol (CIAP)" presents these questions more formally as an assessment instrument in two formats: a Yes/No and a four-point response format.

The "Cognitive Impairment Intervention Protocol (CIIP)" presents a variety of intervention options for each question on the CIAP.

The CIAP and CIIP consist of four parts, each with a series of questions and intervention options: Cognition, Environment, Caregiver interactions, and Task and Daily Routines. The questions here are part of the Cognition CIAP and CIIP.

These questions are meant to be asked either as a general assessment or while the caregiver is helping a person with cognitive impairment perform a task. The answers to these questions can help a caregiver modify the environment, the task, or communication strategies to accommodate the person's abilities and cognitive difficulties. When they are asked during a task, the caregiver can intervene immediately and respond to subtle changes that occur minute by minute in the person's cognitive abilities.

The questions here are organized under five major queries or steps which reflect the five cognitive phases every person (healthy or not) must go through in order to receive, organize and respond to information from the environment.

Understanding the person's physical and emotional status is also extremely important. The questions presented here focus only on cognition.