

Impulsivity



Impulsivity is a tendency to act very quickly without taking time to plan or think about consequences.

The action may be sudden or occur in response to a strong urge or idea to do or say something. Impulsive behaviors can be seen anywhere. They are common in social situations, at work, school or home.

Impulsivity is a fairly common problem after brain injury. It is caused by an injury to the part of the brain that controls a person's ability to plan, organize and perceive. Injuries to the frontal areas of the brain often cause problems with impulsivity.

The following examples will illustrate different ways in which a person can be impulsive. Please notice the lack of planning and lack of awareness of consequences.

Example 1

Karen is at the grocery store with her mother. They are shopping without any problems until Karen sees some Popsicles that look tasty. Karen decides to open the box and have a Popsicle. She puts the rest of the box back in the freezer section at the store.

Example 2

Mike and his brother are on their way to a baseball game. They have parked the car and are walking to the front gate. Mike suddenly begins to cross the very busy city street without stopping to check the traffic. His brother quickly grabs him and saves him from an approaching vehicle.

Example 3

Mary and her husband Jeff are dining at an upscale restaurant. Jeff suddenly notices that the waitress is attractive. When she leans over to fill his water glass, Jeff says "Oh, Honey, you sure do look good." He makes an attempt to fondle her breast, but Mary quickly redirects his reach.

Ways to Help

- Make a schedule (example: 8 a.m. - take kids to school; 9:00 - grocery shop, 10:00 - go home and unpack groceries).
- Plan ahead and be prepared. Remove dangerous tools, appliances and keys to cars / machinery. Remove weapons and household poisons from reach. Make sure that rooms are well lit.
- Stay alert when out of the home with the person in order to prevent wandering or injury. Walk close together when in large crowds / public areas where it might be possible to get lost.
- Stand close when crossing streets or using public transportation.
- Plan things together.
- Be supportive and non-confrontational.

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- If sexual impulsivity happens, approach it with a "matter of fact" attitude. Using our earlier example, do not appear shocked or angry. Say, "Jeff, we're here for dinner. This is the waitress. I am your wife. Let's talk about what we're going to order for dinner tonight. I hear they serve a great steak here."

Always Remember: Safety first!

Consider safety issues in the kitchen (knives, stove, etc.).

Keep firearms out of reach and out of sight.

Avoid confrontation. Do not argue or try to reason. Instead, offer two safe choices, such as:

- "Would you like to use the urinal in bed or would you like for me to assist you to the bathroom?"
- "I would really appreciate your help in the yard. Would you like to pull the weeds or plant the border grass?" (instead of driving the lawn tractor)

When giving feedback, praise efforts first, then offer suggestions for improvements, such as: "You made a great effort this time. Here is one thing I have found really helpful when getting out of the bed. Maybe we can try it next time."

Never leave a person with decreased awareness/insight alone until cleared by the doctor and/or rehabilitation team. Keep in mind that safety issues may reappear in new environments for an otherwise safe patient.

Alert other caregivers and emergency personnel of the person's limitations, and help them understand how to promote safety.

Observe the person for improvements. The person may be ready to start practicing to be more independent. Speak with the doctor if you think it is time to reevaluate the situation.