

Accessibility in Action

November 1, 2007

Tip #19: Working with Individuals with Cognitive Impairments

Cognitive impairment refers to disturbances in brain functions, such as memory loss, problems with orientation, distractibility, perception problems, and difficulty thinking logically. Cognitive impairment is a syndrome, not a diagnosis. Many conditions can cause cognitive impairment, including multiple sclerosis, depression, alcoholism, Alzheimer disease, Parkinson disease, traumatic brain injury, chronic fatigue syndrome, and stroke.

Communicating with Individuals with Cognitive Impairments:

- If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location.
- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing.
- Offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not “over-assist” or be patronizing.

- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual and make sure the individual understands you.

Accommodations for People with Cognitive Impairments:

- Reduce distractions in the area.
- Increase natural lighting or provide full spectrum lighting.
- Divide large assignments or instructions into smaller tasks and steps.
- Provide written as well as verbal instructions.
- Provide picture diagrams of problem solving techniques, i.e. flow charts.
- Use notebooks, calendars, or sticky notes to record information for easy retrieval.
- Allow the individual to tape record meetings.
- Remind individual of important deadlines in writing and in person.
- Provide additional time when learning new responsibilities.

Remember:

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

ACTION

- Review the suggestions in this tip with staff, volunteers, CSOs and partners (VSPs).
- Apply the suggestions in this tip to the appropriate situations.