**Orchestrating Your Behaviors**

He doesn’t hit a single note or play a violin. But when the curtain goes up, the conductor takes center stage. From there he commands all the players in the orchestra.

Your brain also has a “conductor” that controls the other brain functions. Your “executive functions,” as the conductor is called, help you to control your impulses, pull your thoughts together, make a plan and carry it out, and solve problems.

Executive functions help with tasks such as making a grocery list and then purchasing everything on the list in an orderly fashion. They also play a role in directing your attention, getting started on tasks, and shifting between tasks.

There are several parts to your executive functions:

---

**Inhibition**

This function helps you to 1) ignore distractions and 2) control impulsive behaviors and thoughts. Poor inhibition can affect a person socially and at work. A person with poor inhibition interrupts others when they are speaking. He or she may also start a task without waiting to hear all of the instructions.

**Strategies:**

- Listen to everything a person is saying. Ask questions to make sure that you understand instructions before starting a task.
- When you are tempted to interrupt a speaker, write your question down so you can ask it later.

---

**Shifting/Flexibility**

This function helps you 1) move from one task to another smoothly and quickly and 2) use feedback to adjust plans or steps to complete work tasks. A person who has problems with flexibility does not cope well with changes in plans or events that they did not foresee.

**Strategies:**

- Jot down what you were doing when you have to shift from one task to the other. Then you’ll be able to resume the first task more easily when you return to it.
- Ask questions to clarify instructions.
Emotional Regulation
This function allows you to control and adapt the way you act in response to certain situations. People who lack emotional regulation lose their temper, become upset and unable to calm down, or react negatively at the wrong place and time, for example, when talking to their boss. They are often upset with others and more likely to have fights in personal and work settings.

Strategies:
- Count to 10 before you say or do anything when upset.
- Turn and walk away from a disagreement.

Self-Monitoring
This function comes in handy in social and work settings. It lets you stay aware of your own actions and words so that you respond appropriately. A person with poor self-monitoring may shoot off his mouth without thinking about how others may interpret the things that he says.

Strategies:
- Be aware of your actions and words.
- Think about what part you’ve played in making situations difficult or embarrassing in the past.
- Once you know what part you’ve played, try not to do it again.

Initiation
“Initiation” refers to starting a task. Putting off a task off can result in missed work deadlines and incomplete tasks at home.

Strategies:
- Don’t wait to begin a task. Make a plan to get started.
- Make an outline of the steps needed to finish the task.
- Set a time limit and don’t quit until the time is up.
- Returning to a task after a break is a better approach than putting off the task until you think you have time to do everything all at once.

Working Memory
“Working memory” is your ability to hold things in your mind while completing tasks. Problems with working memory make it hard to learn and recall new information.

Strategies:
- Make lists of things you need to recall.
- Make checklists for tasks to be completed.
Planning and Organization

Say you’d like to bake a cake. To end up with this cake, you have to start with the necessary ingredients (flour, eggs, sugar, cocoa, butter etc.) and the equipment you need. You also need a recipe (a process to follow) and need to know how long the cake should stay in the oven (a timeline for completion). Taken together, all of this is a project plan. You need a plan like this for any type of project you want to complete. In addition to having a plan, you have to be able to find and keep up with the tools needed to complete a task. This skill is called “organization.”

If you try to bake a cake without the right type of pans or without one of the key ingredients (say the eggs) you will end up with results you may not like. Or if leave the cake in the oven for two hours, rather than 45 minutes, your cake will not look like this one. You must plan and stay organized to get the results that you want.

Strategies:
- Make a place to keep all items needed for day-to-day life. Put your keys, wallet, and cell phones in this place so that you can find them when you need them.
- Set a realistic timeline.
- Outline the steps needed to complete a task.
- Estimate how long you think that each step will take.

Task Monitoring

To make sure that your cake is baking properly, you check its progress from time to time by cracking the oven door open and peeking in. In the same way you need to assess how close you are toward any other goal. This process is called “task monitoring.” Problems with task monitoring may occur if you don’t check to be sure that each step of a task is completed or monitor your pace to make sure you can meet the goal on time. Problems can also occur if you fail to check your work for errors.

Strategies:
- Double-check your work
- Evaluate your progress as you move through a task

To Learn More: Go to our website: www.stjude.org/sjlife/handouts