

# **Communication: Strategies for Success After Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (MTBI)**

## **Communication Issues after MTBI**

Mild traumatic brain injury often causes difficulties which are difficult to pin point and easily dismissed by others, especially when it comes to communication. Most of the time, people who have experienced a MTBI look just fine, so if something is not quite the way it should be when it comes to social interactions and communicating with others, people around them may not know what to say or do. Their speech may sound perfectly normal, but the person may talk too much, have difficulty staying on topic, seem to be “stuck” on the topic or may appear as if disinterested in the conversation. These types of problems are really a combination of the lack of ability to process and express information, and the social interactions that are responsible for what, how, and how much we contribute to a conversation. In addition, the person may be having difficulty following or understanding conversations, which could go undetected until they are expected to follow up on the information discussed during a conversation. In many cases, these communication issues appear subtle until return to work, school or other organized community activities. The individual’s own lack of awareness to these issues can further complicate the situation.

## **Helpful Tips for Conversation**

### **Talks too much...**

Help someone re-learn how to allow others time to talk. Use a simple gesture agreed upon ahead of time as a cue. Verbal cues may also be necessary, but should be positive and respectful in nature.

#### **Strategies to help:**

- Practice discussions that include “stop and listen” breaks.
- Identify a cue such as a simple hand gesture and practice discussions using the cue to help someone realize it is time to give someone else time to talk or end the conversation.
- Practice asking questions of others that relate to the topic at hand.

### **Wanders away from conversation or abruptly changes topics...**

Provide direct feedback back to the topic at hand by recapping the main idea and redirecting the conversation back on track.

#### **Strategies to help:**

- Keep conversations as short and direct as possible.
- Reduce environmental distractions if possible.
- Ask the person to practice and make habit of repeating what they have heard, such as, “We were talking about \_\_\_\_\_...tell me more...”.

- Make a list of important points to cover in a conversation (i.e. with a doctor or supervisor, etc.).

### **Short Attention Span...**

Become aware of signs that indicate the person is tired or restless. When the person begins to exhibit these signs of fatigue or restlessness, either stop and rest, or change to another activity.

#### **Strategies to help:**

- Optimize a person's "best time of day".
- Take short breaks.
- Minimize distractions.

### **Difficulty Expressing Thoughts...**

Remain patient with someone who has a difficult time expressing what they are trying to communicate. Reduce background noise and stay engaged in the conversation by using nonverbal gestures such as head nods.

#### **Strategies to help:**

- Use written communication such as day planner, driver's license, etc.
- Describe it.
- Use gestures.
- Write notes ahead of time.
- Practice important conversations ahead of time.

### **Difficulty Understanding Information...**

Sometimes a person with a mild TBI may appear to be following a conversation, when in fact, they have missed crucial information.

#### **Strategies to help:**

- Eliminate extra noise.
- Maintain eye contact.
- Practice asking others to slow down or repeat information.
- Practice asking for information in steps or chunks that can be written down when necessary.
- Only one person should speak at a time.

Reference: Communication Skill Builders, Inc. (1994). Bjorklund, K. *Maximizing Communication with the Person with Traumatic Brain Injury*.