MetLife | Return to Health

Executive Functioning



What is executive functioning?

Executive functioning describes the skills used to manage daily tasks, such as making plans, problem solving, or adapting to diverse challenges and situations. The three main components of executive functioning are **working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibition control**[1]

A person experiencing challenges with executive functioning may have difficulty with integrating information received over time; managing complex tasks or projects; problem solving; or focusing on a conversation or task.

Executive functioning can be affected by conditions such as ADHD, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Alzheimer's Disease or other dementias, traumatic brain injuries, and brain tumors, to name a few.

Examples of Accommodations[2]

Time management

Difficulty managing or keeping track of time, which can affect ability to gauge time needed to complete tasks or prepare for activities

- Divide large assignments into several small tasks or chunks
- Set a timer to sound an alarm after assigning ample time to complete a task
- Provide a checklist of assignments
- Plan and structure times of transition and shifts in activities
- Supply an electronic or handheld organizer and train on how to use it effectively
- Use a wall calendar to emphasize due dates
    - Develop a color-coded system (each color represents a task, or event, or level of importance)
    - Allow co-worker or supervisor to add entries on the calendar or to double-check entries added by the employee

Memory

Difficulty with remembering to complete tasks, job duties, or daily activities

- Provide written instructions and checklists
- Allow use of a recorder
- Allow additional training time for new tasks
- Offer training refreshers
- Provide minutes of meetings and trainings
- Use flow-chart to indicate steps in a task
- Provide verbal or pictorial cues
- Use a color-coding scheme to prioritize tasks
- Use notebooks, planners, or sticky notes to record information
- Use sticky notes as reminders of important dates or tasks
- Provide labels or bulletin board cues to assist in location of items

Concentration

Difficulty maintaining or sustaining focus/concentration, which can be affected by auditory or visual distractions

- To reduce auditory distractions:
  - Provide a noise canceling headset
  - Hang sound absorption panels
  - Provide a white noise machine
  - Relocate employee's office space away from audible distractions
  - Redesign employee's office space to minimize audible distractions
- To reduce visual distractions:
  - Install space enclosures (cubicle walls)
  - Reduce clutter in the employee's work environment
  - Redesign employee's office space to minimize visual distractions
  - Relocate employee's office space away from visual distractions
- Breaks for mental fatigue, including short walks, getting up for a drink of water, and rotating through varied tasks
- Job restructuring so the most difficult tasks are performed at the time of day the employee has the most mental energy or stamina

Multi-tasking

Difficulty performing multiple tasks at once

- Separate tasks so that each can be completed one at a time
- Create a flow-chart of tasks that must be performed at the same time, carefully labeling or color-coding each task in sequential or preferential order
- Provide individualized/specialized training to help the employee learn techniques for multi-tasking (e.g., typing on a computer while talking on the phone)
- Identify tasks that must be performed simultaneously and tasks that can be performed individually
- Provide specific feedback to help the employee target areas of improvement
- Remove or reduce distractions from work area
- Supply ergonomic equipment to facilitate multi-tasking
- Clearly represent performance standards such as completion time or accuracy rates

Organization and prioritization

Difficulty getting or staying organized or prioritizing work tasks

- Develop color-coded system for files, projects, or activities
- Use a color-coding scheme to prioritize tasks
- Use weekly chart to identify daily work activities
- Use a job coach to teach/reinforce organization skills
- Assign a mentor to help employee
- Allow supervisor to assign prioritization of tasks
- Use electronic organizers, mobile devices, and e-mail reminders
- Assign new project only when previous project is complete, when possible
- Provide a “cheat sheet” of high-priority activities, projects, people, etc.
- Organize workspace to reduce clutter
- Provide separate work areas with complete sets of supplies for differing tasks
- Schedule a weekly time to clean/organize workspace
- Take time at the end of each day to organize and set up for the next day

Socialization/ communication

Difficulty exhibiting appropriate social skills, poor listening skills, or difficulty communicating effectively

- Provide a job coach to help understand different social cues
- Identify areas of improvement for employee in a fair and consistent manner
- Encourage employees to minimize personal conversation, or move personal conversation away from work areas
- Provide sensitivity training (disability awareness) to all employees
- Encourage all employees to model appropriate social skills
- Adjust the supervisory method to better fit the employee’s needs
- Adjust method of communication to best suit the employee’s needs
- Allow the employee to work from home

References:

1. Executive Function: What It Is, How To Improve & Types (clevelandclinic.org) – Accessed 5/9/24
2. Executive Functioning Deficits (askjan.org) – accessed 5/2/24)

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