

UNDERSTANDING IMPULSIVITY AND DISINHIBITION

Impulsivity and Disinhibition are the lack of ability to control either actions or speech. The person will act on impulse, will say the first thing that comes into his head and will express feelings, thoughts and opinions without weighing up the consequences. It is as if the normal 'brake' or 'censor' that controls our behaviour is not working. The person responds to anything and everything equally, and does not seem to be able to judge carefully, weigh up options or filter out inappropriate actions. These difficulties are due to neurological damage in the areas of the frontal lobes.

These characteristics are not only frustrating but also very embarrassing for the family. Impulsivity leads to excessive 'demanding behaviour', which can be both tiring and irritating. The problem is made worse because this behaviour usually goes hand in hand with lack of awareness, so the person with head injury blurts out the first thought that enters his head, regardless of who is present. While the family is mortified the person does not appear to comprehend the significance of the breach of etiquette.

COPING WITH IMPULSIVITY AND DISINHIBITION (FOR FAMILY AND CARERS)

1. Recognise that the person's problem is due to the brain injury. Try to understand it.
2. Give the person firm, direct verbal feedback when he behaves inappropriately: "No, Martin. It is inappropriate for you to kiss my hand".
3. Devise a behavioural management system. Ask for help from professionals, such as a psychologist. The system involves making sure that all actions have either a positive or a negative consequence. Periods of appropriate behaviour are followed by rewards, and negative behaviour is followed by withdrawal of rewards. Rewards might be ticks on a chart, tokens, which can be exchanged for presents, money or praise and attention.
4. Redirect the patient's attention to appropriate behaviour. For example, Frank would often question people about intimate aspects of their sex life. This was met with a comment stressing the inappropriate nature of the conversation and then distracting him with another topic of conversation.
5. Be quite strict early on. Don't allow impulsive behaviour to be rewarded or reinforced. This means trying to prevent a pleasant consequence occurring after the impulsive action. Do not make exceptions and say, "Oh that's just Martin. He likes to touch people". Be firm, set boundaries and limitations and spell out the fact that the behaviour is inappropriate. The consequence of not being firm is that the person's lack of control over his behaviour increases. The individual may start off touching and then progress to kissing and may then find he has developed a habit which becomes very difficult to break.