

# Perseveration after an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)

## What is perseveration?

- Signs of perseveration include repeating or continuing an action, word, or movement. Sometimes this can be the continuation of a feeling or idea. For example, you may get “stuck” brushing your teeth, or bring up the same thing over and over.
- **It is important to understand that you are not doing this on purpose.** You may not be aware you are perseverating. You may feel unable to stop or to change the behaviour, even if there may be negative consequences.
- Perseveration can often affect daily activities and relationships. Many people with perseveration problems after ABI may seem:
  - › Stubborn
  - › Repetitive
  - › Inflexible or rigid
  - › Attention-seeking
  - › “Stuck in a loop”
  - › Fixed on an idea or subject
- It is often harder to shift tasks or move past feeling a certain way when you are stressed, worried, or sad.

## What can I do to help with perseveration?

- It can be hard for you to stop the behaviour, thought, or feeling because stopping means switching to something different. This can be harder than it seems because it includes:
  - › Awareness of the action
  - › A sense of time spent on the action
  - › Awareness that the action needs to stop
  - › Stopping the action
  - › Thinking of what to do next
  - › Starting the new action
- Issues with any of these steps can lead to perseveration. You may need outside cues or people around you to “interrupt” the perseveration and help you move on.

## The following strategies can help:

- **Prevention:** Try to avoid topics or activities that may trigger perseveration.
- **Redirection:** This is the most common strategy used in perseveration. For example, a family member could change the subject, start a new activity, or help you move to a different place.

- **Physical cue:** A gentle hands-on cue may work to stop the action.
  - › For example, if you get “stuck” while brushing your teeth, someone could hand you a towel as a cue to move on to the next step.
 Gentle touch combined with redirection may help guide you to the next activity or topic of conversation.
  - › For example, someone putting their hand on your arm when they switch topics.
- **Written checklist:** This can be helpful with daily routines.
  - › For example, a checklist posted on the bathroom mirror to guide you through the steps of brushing your teeth can help if you get “stuck” on one step.
- **Timers and alarms:** These can remind you to stop what you are currently doing in order to move on to the next step. You can set reminders on your smartphone or tablet to help you stay on track.
- **Reassurance as prevention:** If perseveration is based on anxiety about an issue, it may help to anticipate the anxiety, be offered reassurance, and then move on. Be cautious, since focusing on the perseverative thinking may simply increase the anxiety, and the perseveration that goes with it.
- **Setting limits:** It can sometimes help to put a limit on the perseveration and let your family member end the activity or redirect the conversation at an agreed time.
  - › For example, “We can talk about \_\_\_\_\_ for 5 minutes and then we need to move on”.
- **Ignoring: (Use this strategy carefully.)** Simply ignoring the behaviour may make the problem worse. It assumes the behavior is intended to gain attention. It may work in combination with reassurance and redirection.

## Resources

- **Brain Injury Association of Nova Scotia**
  - › [www.braininjuryns.com](http://www.braininjuryns.com)
  - › Phone: 902-473-7301
- **Concussion NS**
  - › [www.concussionns.com](http://www.concussionns.com)
- **211 Nova Scotia:** This free helpline can connect you to community and social services in your area, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, in over 150 languages.
  - › [www.ns211.ca](http://www.ns211.ca)
  - › Phone: 211

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