

Introduction

Executive function is a highly unique ability of humans that gives us the ability to inhibit, have flexible thinking, problem-solve, plan and execute, form concepts, think abstractly, make decisions, have a working memory, and be creative. With these functions, we are able to have insight and the ability to self-identify the effectiveness of our decisions and actions so that we can modify our behaviors for successful functioning in all aspects of our lives.

This workbook was written to provide executive function stimulus materials for those working with clients who have a neurological impairment. Content has been carefully selected to meet the functional needs of individuals who are 16 years of age and older, as executive functions have been thought to develop in late childhood or adolescence through adulthood. Neurologic deficits resulting from head injury and various neurologic etiologies frequently interfere with executive function. The seed for developing these exercises was planted several years ago when so many service men and women returned from deployment with cognitive-linguistic and executive function deficits. In addition, impaired executive functioning has been found to have a profoundly significant effect on functional decline in older adults.

Embedded Processes

The tasks in this workbook include several embedded processes, including the following:

1. There are tasks that involve working memory which tap into a person's general knowledge base, with a strong encouragement for the client to ask others for help or to use whatever is available to gain the information needed to accurately answer a question. All of us ask others for assistance when we don't know something; thus, clients need to be encouraged to utilize this method as much as they need.
2. Most of the tasks provide clients with answers to choose from. This stimulates two specific thinking processes: First, it causes them to evaluate all of the choices to determine whether the provided items fit or do not fit the question. This indirectly gives them practice with self-analyzing and selection based on fact and appropriateness. Secondly, as these exercises were not developed for word finding or memory for general information improvement, clients won't be penalized if they have those deficits along with executive thinking deficits.
3. Many of the items have multiple answers that are appropriate, which causes the client to have practice with thought flexibility.
4. There are multiple exercises that have already been answered, and clients must simply analyze if the selected response is accurate. This provides clients with practice with meta-cognitive skills for identifying, analyzing, and planning.

5. There are exercises that have no “right or wrong” answers, as responses are based on clients’ subjective opinions and preferences.
6. Many of the tasks were designed to assist clients in developing the skill to make decisions based on fact, as opposed to unverified opinions.

Suggestions for Use

1. Initially, the majority of these exercises will feel unfamiliar or difficult. Keep in mind that you’re aiding the client in developing thinking processes as opposed to striving for 100% accuracy. It’s suggested that you familiarize yourself with each exercise so that you can help the client throughout the training period. Be prepared to give your own viewpoint and answers for which the client can then analyze your performance.
2. Reassure your client that it’s not as important to answer each item as it is to be able to utilize strategies for solving the items within a task—or for asking others for their answers.
3. The exercises can be used in individual or group situations. In group situations, clients can work together to solve the problems or take turns providing answers, thus giving each other valuable feedback.
4. The exercises are not for testing purposes. Try to make them as enjoyable as possible. Talking about specific task items will help your client improve his or her ability to identify, create, and modify strategies.