



Understanding Cognitive Abilities: Questions to Ask

Here are some questions to ask yourself to better understand a person's cognitive abilities. These questions are based on brain functioning and specific cognitive skills. However, you do not need to know anything about the brain or cognition to ask them.

The questions address the five phases of cognitive processing that everyone (healthy or not) must go through in order to understand and respond to other people and the environment. Asking yourself these questions can help you recognize and identify specifics about a person's ability to understand and respond.

A "yes" answer suggests this person has mild or no difficulty performing a particular cognitive ability. The answers to these questions can suggest effective support strategies to help this person.

These questions should be asked frequently since this person might change over time or even day by day.

Ask yourself these questions. Do not ask the person you are observing (that is, the person whose cognitive abilities you are trying to understand).

More information is on the last page of this handout.

1. Can this person receive information from the environment through their five senses (see, hear, feel, taste, smell)? (Sensory Phase)

A. How well do they SEE and HEAR me?

- 1) If they need glasses are they using them?
- 2) Are the glasses clean?
- 3) If they need a hearing aid are they using it?
- 4) Does the hearing aid need adjusting?

B. How do they FEEL or experience my touch? Do they:

- 1) Know I am touching a particular body part?
- 2) Feel my touch as soft or as hard as I think most people would feel it?
- 3) Feel the cloth, water, or surface as comfortable?
- 4) Feel the temperature the same as I think it would feel to most people?

- 5) Feel like the temperature is stable and not changing from one minute to the next?

2. Can this person recognize and understand the information received through the senses? (Comprehension/Perception Phase)

A. How well do they UNDERSTAND what they see and hear? Do they:

- 1) Know what an object is when they see it?
- 2) Recognize various colors?
- 3) Read and understand what they read?
- 4) Recognize pictures?
- 5) Recognize gestures?
- 6) Recognize what a word means when they hear it?

B. How well do they recognize WHERE an object, sound, or touch is? Do they:

- 1) Notice objects in all parts of their visual field?
- 2) Have more difficulty noticing objects in some parts of their visual field than others?
- 3) Recognize how far away an object is from them?
- 4) Recognize where objects are relative to other objects?
- 5) Notice where in the room a sound is coming from?
- 6) Notice touch on all parts of their body?

3. Can this person categorize, organize, and use the information received? (Executive Phase)

A. How well do they recognize the IMPORTANCE of the information and use it to make decisions, solve problems, and organize plans? Do they:

- 1) Pay attention to a task, to an object, or to what I am saying?
- 2) Figure out what I mean, even if they can't hear or understand me very well?
- 3) Remember what they see, hear, or figure out?
- 4) Compare new information with other information learned before?
- 5) Easily shift from one activity to another?
- 6) Easily get started on a task or a response?
- 7) Know how much time has passed?
- 8) Recognize their own abilities, needs, desires, and mistakes?
- 9) Easily control their impulsive responses by censoring or delaying what they say or do?
- 10) Easily control their emotions and their expression of emotion?

4. Can this person's brain tell their body what to do? (Expressive Phase)

- A. How well does their brain COORDINATE their body parts to perform a task or to express a thought? Do they:
- 1) Easily produce words when speaking?
 - 2) Easily produce words when writing?
 - 3) Speak words as easily as they sing the words?
 - 4) Talk upon request as easily as they talk spontaneously (on their own)?
 - 5) Do tasks as easily upon request as they do spontaneously or automatically, when they don't think about the task or how to do it?
 - 6) Easily move a body part spontaneously (on their own)?
 - 7) Easily move a body part upon request?
 - 8) Easily build or construct something spontaneously (on their own)?
 - 9) Easily build or construct something upon request?
 - 10) Easily draw spontaneously (on their own)?
 - 11) Easily draw upon request?
 - 12) Easily spontaneously manipulate or move an object on their own when doing a task such as eating and dressing?
 - 13) Easily upon request manipulate or move an object when doing a task such as eating and dressing?

5. Can this person's body physically respond to the instructions from their brain? (Motor Phase)

- A. How HEALTHY and strong is their body?
- 1) Is there full strength in every part of their body, that is, no weakness in any part such as legs, arms, hands, feet, tongue?
 - 2) Is any body part weaker on their left side than on their right side?
 - 3) Is any body part weaker on their right side than on their left side?
 - 4) Does each body part move immediately and easily?
 - 5) Does each body part have enough range of motion?
 - 6) Do they easily coordinate movements of various body parts?
 - 7) Do they walk across the room easily?
 - 8) Is each body part free of pain when it moves?
 - 9) Is each body part free of pain when it is not moving?

More about these Questions

This handout lists questions you can ask yourself to discover what a person does well and not so well with respect to their cognitive abilities (that is, the ability to think, and to understand and respond to the environment).

The questions are based on the cognitive abilities associated with specific parts of the brain. But you don't need to know anything about the brain or cognition to ask the questions and use the responses.

The questions and responses can help you better understand why a person is distressed, is having trouble performing a task, or is engaging in a particular behavior that is distressing.

These are questions to ask yourself, NOT to ask the person you are observing. The questions can be asked at any given moment or more systematically at regular intervals to note changes in a person's abilities. They can also be asked when you notice a change in a person's abilities, behavior, or mood.

The "**Cognitive Abilities and Support Strategies (CASS) Cognitive Abilities Checklist**" presents these questions in more detail and in a more formal structure in two formats: a Yes/No response format and a Four-point response format. It also includes additional questions.

The "**Cognitive Abilities and Support Strategies (CASS) Cognitive Strategies List**" presents a variety of support strategies (intervention options) for each question on the CASS Cognitive Abilities Checklist.

The CASS consists of four parts, each with a list of questions (a checklist) and options of support strategies (a support strategies list). The four parts are: 1) Cognitive Abilities, 2) Environment, 3) Communication, and 4) Task & Daily Routines. The questions in this handout are part of the CASS Cognitive Abilities Checklist and the CASS Cognitive Strategies List.

These questions are meant to be asked through general observation or while you are helping a person perform a task. The answers to these questions can help you modify the environment, the task, or your communication strategies to accommodate the person's cognitive abilities and challenges. When you answer the questions during a task, you can intervene immediately and respond to subtle changes that occur minute by minute in the person's cognitive abilities.

The questions are organized under five major questions or steps which reflect the five cognitive phases every person (healthy or not) must go through in order to receive, organize and respond to information from the environment.

Answers to all of these questions can help determine which support strategies might be most effective in helping a person be happier and function more independently.

Understanding the person's physical and emotional status is also extremely important. The questions presented here focus only on cognition.

Original sources:

- Weaverdyck, S.E. (1990) "Neuropsychological Assessment as a Basis for Intervention in Dementia". Chapter 3 in N. Mace (Ed.) Dementia Care: Patient, Family, and Community. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Weaverdyck, S.E. (1991) "Assessment as a Basis for Intervention" and "Intervention to Address Dementia as a Cognitive Disorder". Chapters 12 & 13 in D. Coons (Ed.) Specialized Dementia Care Units. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press.