

# Making Decisions

## Suggestions for Helping a Person with Cognitive Impairment Make Decisions

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### TO KEEP IN MIND

1. A person with cognitive impairment may have difficulty making decisions or choosing among options.
2. No matter how severely impaired a person is, they will have **desires, preferences, yearnings, and goals**.
3. A person may **not consciously know** or recognize their own desires or be able to articulate them to you.
4. A person with cognitive impairment can and should **make their own decisions**. We are here only to help them make the decision, even if they are severely impaired.
5. A **person centered** approach to assisting, or caring about or for someone with cognitive impairment involves seeing yourself as a **supportive helper** who might alert them to a decision to be made, and inform, encourage, or create conditions that help this person make the decision. But the **person is the primary focus** and is in a real way, **in control** of what decision is made. When they are severely impaired, your role may be more obvious and may require more skill and information to discern what their desires might be if they could recognize and communicate them. The more you **know the person**, including the way they used to live and make decisions, the easier it is to help them. It is important to offer them **only as much help as they need or want**. Keep in mind decisions involve the **whole person**, including their emotions, spirituality, physical desires, needs, and preferences, and their cognition.
6. Helping a person make decisions in their own way involves:
  - a. Seeing a person with cognitive impairment and you as **partners** or a team facing the decision making process together. You are on each other's side meeting the challenges of decision making.
  - b. Recognizing a person's **desires and needs**, and **helping a person discover**, recognize, or comprehend their own desires and needs.
  - c. Recognizing when a person is **receptive** or able to make a decision or to consider options.
  - d. **Presenting options in a way this person can understand**, or helping a person reframe a decision so they can make it in pieces or slowly over time.
7. The Cognitive Impairment Intervention Protocol (CIIP) by S. Weaverdyck has more details and ideas. The intervention suggestions below are adapted from three parts of the CIIP: Cognition III (Executive Functions) D; Caregiver Interactions IV (Approach) D; and Task and Daily Routines VI (Task Goals) A.

### INTERVENTION SUGGESTIONS

8. When helping someone make a decision, focus on the person and discerning their **goals and desires**, rather than relying primarily on your perception of what their goals and desires are, might be, or should be.
9. Try to **be creative** when discerning what a person might want or need, especially if they are very confused or nonverbal.
10. **Orient** a person to the decision. For example say what decision needs to be made, when, and why.
11. Avoid asking a person to make a decision when they are tired or emotionally upset.
12. If a person has difficulty making decisions, **present the various options** to them.
13. **Frequently assess** this person's ability to state a preference or to recognize and choose among options.

14. **Adapt your approach and presentation** of options to this person's ability to choose among options. Avoid making the options too simple or too complex.
15. **Present the options in a way the person can understand.** This may include making the options more concrete, making the differences among the options more obvious, keeping the options familiar when possible, and reducing the number of options considered at one time.
16. **Modify your presentation** of options as this person's ability to choose among options changes.
17. If a person's ability to make decisions becomes increasingly impaired, then gradually **simplify** your presentation of the options. For example, gradually reduce the number of options you present at a time.
18. **List** specific options available, rather than asking an open ended question. For example, say, "Would you like eggs, cereal, or a muffin for breakfast?" rather than "What would you like for breakfast?"
19. **Use words that are familiar** and recognizable to this person. For example, say "mush" rather than "cereal", if that is what they are used to.
20. **List fewer options at a time.** For example, say, "Would you like eggs or cereal for breakfast?" rather than "Would you like eggs, cereal, or a muffin for breakfast?"
21. Present each option as a **"yes/no" choice**, when necessary. For example, say, "Would you like eggs for breakfast?" and then, regardless of their response say, "Would you like oatmeal for breakfast?"
22. **Show** this person the options rather than simply naming them. For example, show them eggs and cereal, to make the options more concrete and visible.
23. Help this person **feel or taste** the options, if they are unable to see or recognize objects. For example, put a small taste of each option in their mouth and watch for their response to each option.
24. Present options **slowly** enough to allow time for them to process the information, but quickly enough so they don't forget the options presented.
25. Ask this person to make **one decision at a time.** Pause between decisions. For example, ask them which food they would like for a meal, then later ask which beverage they would like.
26. Discern this person's **preferences, needs, and goals at this moment in time**, to increase the chances the options will be desirable.
27. If this person appears unable to make a decision or choose an option at this time, present the opportunity or choices again **later.**
28. If this person is nonverbal, encourage them to **point** to what she/he wants.
29. Use cues and options that address **emotions** rather than cognition, for example use a potted plant and table lamp to draw a person emotionally to a quiet spot rather than a sign that says "Quiet room".
30. At all times, **watch and listen** to this person to see how they are reacting to what you are doing and saying. **Immediately change** what you are doing or how you are doing it, when you see or hear reactions that reflect possible distress, confusion, disagreement, tension, or uncertainty.
31. Remind yourself that this person and their **feelings** are more important than the task.
32. Find out what **goals, desires, preferences, needs** this person has had **throughout most of their adult life.** Ask people who knew them well what kind of person they seemed to want to be, or what characteristics were high priority for them when trying to be successful as a person, for example, accomplished, compassionate, admired, busy, elegant, or socially popular.
33. Imagine and write down how each half hour of a **24-hour day** might have been spent and enjoyed if they did not have cognitive or physical impairment. Then write down how they spend each half hour of a typical 24-hour day now. Compare the two lists. Creatively explore how you can help this person live a 24-hour day the way they would if they could. Convert the desired 24-hour day to a set of goals this person might have. Be sure to include in this process people who also know this person well, and have known them for a long time.
34. **Frequently examine** this person's goals, desires, needs, and preferences to recognize when they change.
35. **Show** this person **respect** for them, for the way they make decisions, and for the decisions they make.