

AT for Individuals with Cognitive and Psychiatric Disabilities

The use of assistive technology is most often associated with persons with physical disabilities. People may not be aware of or knowledgeable about the technology that is available to people with cognitive or psychiatric disabilities to assist them in being more independent.

Doctors and counselors of individuals with psychiatric and/or cognitive disabilities rarely, if ever, consider or prescribe assistive technology for such individuals. Yet despite the fact that it is not widely known or recognized, individuals with psychiatric and cognitive disabilities can benefit from assistive technology. Assistive technology can compensate for certain disabling effects of some psychiatric disabilities and/or the side effects of prescribed medications. This bulletin describes some of these assistive technologies.

Causes of Cognitive Impairment

A wide range of factors can contribute to cognitive impairments. Sustaining a traumatic brain injury, having a psychiatric disability, or having mental retardation are a few examples. Other examples may be present in combination with an intellectual disability. Causes of cognitive disabilities may be genetic, congenital or acquired. Side effects from medications may have various effects on cognition and perception.

AT for Cognitive and Psychiatric Impairments

Cognitive and psychiatric disabilities sometimes result in developmental delays or cognitive impairments that may include trouble with abstract thinking, decision-making, short and long term memory, learning skills, coordination and concentration. Examples of assistive technology that have proven helpful in such instances include the following:

- ❑ Tape recorders may be beneficial in compensating for memory impairment by providing repetition and reinforcement. They have also proven beneficial for individuals who have difficulty prioritizing, problem solving and managing multiple tasks. Individuals who have difficulty remembering the sequence of steps in tasks may have the tasks broken into smaller steps and tape-recorded. Then pre-recorded information can be used as a guide for activities or to prompt repetitions as often as is necessary to accomplish the task.
- ❑ The Time Pad Memo and the Sycom Total Recall are advanced clocks and alarms that can be programmed to make specific announcements, some at the same time(s) each day of the week. Pagers or beepers that provide voice and text messages can also be used to remind individuals of appointments and chores.
- ❑ The Teletypewriter, or TTY, can also assist with memory. TTYs are small devices, originally designed for people with hearing impairments, which use keyboards and visual displays to manage the give and take in conversations. TTYs are proven aids to memory and also allow for delayed reaction time by providing a visual display of the telephone conversation.

- ❑ FM systems and earphones may be effective for individuals with attention deficits. They assist with focus and concentration by providing auditory feedback to amplify and focus a speaker's voice making it more distinct than background noises. The earphones may also enable an individual to block out surrounding distractions by introducing a masking noise when he or she needs to focus.
- ❑ The Sound Soother is a small AM/FM radio that features an option to select relaxing sounds from nature or a masking white noise. These soothing sounds may be used to calm a person and to secure undisturbed sleep.
- ❑ A computer is a common device that can assist an individual with maintaining attention, planning, task completion, and time management. Computer software is available to assist with time management. Computer tutorials are capable of presenting needed information in short segments, which can be repeated as often as necessary. Carefully selected computer software, which is multi-sensory, individualized, reinforcing, and motivating, provides the necessary predictability and routine for individuals with cognitive deficits as a result of a psychiatric disability.
- ❑ The Palm Pilot organizer is an example of a microcomputer that can also assist in memory, planning, and time management. This device enables an individual to easily input, save, and retrieve notes, telephone numbers, dates and daily reminders. It also features a built-in calendar.
- ❑ Wearing or carrying some form of identification may assist with wandering and disorientation. Medic alert bracelets, or the Safe Return bracelet or necklace, may include a brief statement of the need for assistance and/or a toll-free number to call for assistance. Portable Talking IDs have also been adapted to quickly communicate special needs in the event of an emergency.

Where can I get Information and Assistance in Obtaining Assistive Technology for Cognitive and Psychiatric Disabilities?

The Assistive Technology Advocacy Center (ATAC), a program of Disability Rights New Jersey provides information and referral, outreach and education, technical assistance and legal and non-legal advocacy in the area of assistive technology. Call 1-800-922-7322 in New Jersey, or access our website at <http://www.drnj.org>.

The Assistive Technology Advocacy Center (ATAC) of DRNJ

210 South Broad Street, Third Floor, Trenton, NJ 08608

For voice assistance and information, please call 1-800-922-7233. TTY users may dial (609) 633-7106, or use the NJ Relay, 711 to reach the 800# above. Visit us on the web at

www.drnj.org

The 56 statewide Assistive Technology (AT) Programs form a national network of statewide assistive technology (AT) programs. Information contained in this brochure represents the accumulation of knowledge of this national network. The AT programs receive funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) to implement the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, as amended. No official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any product, commodity, service or enterprise mentioned in this publication is intended or should be inferred.

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Bulletin