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Strategies for Enhancing Executive Functions

Definition:

Executive functions refer to higher-order cognitive abilities including planning, initiating, sequencing, organization, and fluid problem solving to novel situations. *Executive functions* are also involved in 'orchestrating' or unifying many other cognitive activities so these cognitive processes run smoothly. For instance, we tend to focus and recall information better when we organize and sort information into manageable categories. *Executive functions*, or the *frontal lobes*, are also involved in emotional expression and personality.

General Tips:

- 1) Create a routine for activities.
- 2) Simplify information whenever possible.
- 3) Use external aids to help organize your environment.
- 4) Stay well-rested and balance activities with breaks.
- 5) Keep a positive attitude when problem solving.
- 6) Focus your attention to the task - Slow down if necessary.
- 7) Lean on others for support and help when needed.

Specific Strategies:

- 1) Learn to initiate – Go from the external → to the internal – Use a trigger to help you learn initiation skills (i.e. ring on a timer or alarm). Develop a slow, progressive way for you to adopt the skill.
- 2) Promote your reasoning abilities – Play games that require strategy, such as chess, poker, battleship, bridge, etc.
- 3) Practice problem solving strategies – Prepare, Contemplate, Select, Act, Review, Rehearse, and Master. Plan and do. Once started on a task, don't stop until completed. Review your effectiveness after you complete the task. Ask others to go over your practice task and give feedback. Make corrections as necessary.
- 4) Task Persistence/ Response Inhibition – Both are important. Practice perseverance and maintaining a task. Then, practice inhibition by stopping at various times.
- 5) Categorize & Organize – Practice categorizing objects according to size, shape, color or other classifications shifting from one to another. Progressively increase speed and time limitations with mastery. Flash cards are sometimes helpful.
- 6) Multitasking and switching focus – Try doing two things at once (i.e. reading a name badge while you talk with someone), switch back-and-forth as you are able. Choose safe tasks.
- 7) View errors as learning opportunities, NOT failures – Learn from past mistakes, but don't criticize yourself. This can undermine your progress.
- 8) Generativity – Create an environment of 'green light' thinking. Practice generating ideas and solutions by writing them down or recording them without being critical. Once you have exhausted all the possibilities, then, go over what you have generated and select the best choice, or, rate them on a scale of 1-5 (worst to best), then choose the best.
- 9) Increase awareness – Spend time every day increasing your insight and awareness of what is happening in yourself and in the environment around you. Begin by increasing awareness about your emotions, thoughts, and behaviors by writing these down using a thought record. Identify in detail how these are connected in a particular situation and why.