

Section 7

Putting supports into practice

Environmental supports

Your first discussion—introducing the manual

Key principles and techniques

- Begin with strengths—what your relative is good at.
- Use their own words to describe problems.
- Discuss how cognitive problems affect everyday tasks.
- Answer any questions that arise.

Here's an example of what you could say to the person you are supporting:

I know you have wanted something to help you get better. You have been through a lot and you have a great deal of courage. I'm interested in seeing whether this program involving environmental supports will help you to get even better.

When people have schizophrenia, sometimes they have trouble paying attention, remembering things and making plans. This environmental support program talks about using signs and technology to help you with your everyday tasks so that things become easier, and you can start to move on with your life plans.

The program suggests that you and I put up signs and use alarms that will let you know when it's time to do certain tasks. The program also gives ideas about how we can organize your room so it will be easier for you to get going in the morning and do your everyday activities. You know how I am always nagging you to pick up your dirty clothes? Well, the program actually has a plan that will make tidying up easier for you without my having to keep telling you to pick up after yourself.

For example, you know how you take your clothes off next to your bed and leave a pile there. The program suggests that we put two laundry baskets in your bedroom—one for clean clothes and one for dirty ones. That way you are sorting them as you go along, and it will be easier to do laundry because they will already be in baskets.

We can also work on other things like what to do in your spare time, how to take care of the dog, and maybe ways to get a job.

Talk to your relative about what he or she sees as the most important things to work on. Compare the situation now with how things used to be before the person got ill. For example, you might say, "You used to get out so much with your friend Janelle. Maybe you would feel better if you started doing that again. Every time I see her she asks how you are doing."

You can begin to look at what supports you can introduce once you have:

- explored the person's goals
- figured out the first steps to getting there
- agreed about where the person has the most difficulty (e.g., trouble getting started).

You could begin with one of the supports that applies to most of the strategies (e.g., a calendar) as well as a few specific strategies that apply to a particular task (e.g., organizing hygiene supplies in a small basket).

It is usually best to begin with a simple strategy, like brushing teeth, because your relative needs to master some basic steps before working toward larger goals like getting a job or dating. Here's how you could address brushing teeth.

OK, so brushing your teeth is bit of a problem because, if you don't brush, your teeth hurt. Then you don't brush because your teeth hurt. What I can do is buy some toothpaste that is made especially for sensitive teeth and an extra soft brush. You can start to use that to help your teeth hurt less. We could also attach a cup to the bathroom mirror for your toothbrush and toothpaste. Then you'll see it whenever you go in there. How does that sound?

If your relative doesn't like the plan or it won't work for some reason (e.g., they live in a board-and-care home, where other residents may use the brush if it is in a public place), you can suggest an alternative. The main thing at the beginning is to start with something that you agree about and can get going with, so you both feel you are accomplishing something.

Select supports for two or three problems and set a time, within a few days, for you and your relative to set them up. Depending on your situation, you may want the person to accompany you to the store to buy the supplies you selected. For examples of how this first visit could go, see the first meetings of Videos 3 to 6 at www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.

Second visit—about a week later

Key principles and techniques

- Remind your relative about what you discussed in the first visit.
- Show your relative the things you brought.
- Have your relative help you set up the supports.
- Explain and demonstrate the use of each item.

For each support that you put in place, try to use an approach like this:

Caregiver: Remember last time we talked about how it was hard for you to get going, and that one thing you have trouble with is brushing your teeth? Let's put up the cup on the mirror. Now put in your brush and toothpaste. [Tape instructions to the mirror, along with a checklist]. Also, after you have brushed, you can check it off on this "to do" list for each day. Did you brush your teeth today?

Relative: No.

Caregiver: Why don't you do that now, and then we can check off Tuesday. Use the dental caddy for your supplies and the checklist to remind you to brush every day. This is one of the first steps in your goal to get out more and feel better about how you look.

Toward the end of this second visit, you can select one or two other things to work on. Repeat the process described for the initial discussion.

Caregiver: Now, let's talk about what other supports we can pick up for next week. I remember you told me you were tired of bland, starchy food. What do you think about working on varying your diet?

Relative: Sure, that could be good.

Caregiver: Maybe we could take a look at what you have in the fridge and in your cupboards. Do a bit of an inventory. Then we could look online for a few simple recipes to begin with. Next we could figure out a shopping list and budget how much the groceries might cost. Maybe we could shop together the first time for you to get into the swing of things, and go from there?

Relative: That sounds OK. I used to cook a lot and I miss doing that.

Schedule the next time you will work on this—ideally a few days or a week from now, and then at the same time each week. If you have given your relative a calendar or they already had one, make sure they write down the time and date of each activity (e.g., throwing out spoiled food; looking up a new recipe and writing down the ingredients).

[For examples of how the second visit could go, see "one week later" in Videos 3 to 6 at www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.]

Subsequent visits

In all subsequent visits, you will need to check the strategies put in place in the home on the last visit. Then identify any problems the person has had in implementing specific supports or strategies, and make alterations as needed. Then work with the person to select new targets for attention.

Key principles and techniques

- Review the supports set up on the previous visit.
- Troubleshoot any difficulties.
- Make necessary changes.
- Have your relative help you set up the supports.
- Explain and demonstrate the use of each item.

Address any immediate problems or concerns first before working on environmental supports.

How did last week go?

Your relative may have new concerns, or you may know that things did not go well. If you know, acknowledge the difficulties. For example, you could say:

I know things didn't go too well for you last week. Let's talk about what we can do differently this week.

Next, review the supports set up the previous week. Find out which ones were used, and which did not seem to work. Use the troubleshooting guide (page 95) to identify what went wrong. If an aspect of the plan needs to be changed weekly (e.g., colour of sign to capture attention, updating a social activity list), do so.

If a checklist was not used, discuss with your relative whether they did the task and forgot to write it down, or did not do the task. If they simply forgot to write it down, have them check the appropriate boxes, and try again with next week's checklist.

Caregiver: I notice that you checked off that you brushed your teeth every day. That's great! So this basket and checklist are working.

Or:

I notice that there are no check marks on this. Did you brush your teeth last week?

Relative: Yes.

Caregiver: OK. Then go ahead and make check marks on each day that you brushed. Good. Now, let's put up the new list. See if this week you can make a check when you brush, all right?

If they did not do the task, review with your relative the reasons they thought the task was important and explore other options from the manual that may work.

Caregiver: So this didn't work to help you brush your teeth. How about if we try something else? I can get an alarm that records your voice. You can make it say, "I need to brush my teeth." We could put it in the bathroom and set it for a specific time.

Relative: That might be better, because I'd have to go in the bathroom to shut it off.

Caregiver: Right, and while you're in there, you could brush your teeth. In fact, it might be better to let it keep going off until you're done brushing.

Relative: OK. I can try it.

Add new interventions when the ones already established are working. Repeat the process described for the end of the second visit.

Caregiver: Well, it looks like you did a great job with these things. What would you like to work on next week?

Relative: Well, my wallet is where I keep all these important papers. It's getting too full. Can I get a new wallet?

Caregiver: It looks like you may need a file box for all those papers. That way you wouldn't have to carry them around all the time, and you would know where to find them when you needed them. How about we pick one out for next week and we can work together on filing your important papers?

Repeat this process as you move through the steps toward the person's goal. Remember that this is an experiment that you are doing together. Some things will work and some won't. What we hope you see is that areas that might have required a lot of support early on become more automatic later. Over time, we hope you can move together toward the higher order goals of life—playing, working, having loving relationships—so the person is as fully engaged in the recovery process as they can be and the illness takes up less and less space in all your lives.

For example of how a follow-up visit could go after several weeks of implementing the supports together, see “several weeks later” in Videos 3 to 6 at www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.

Troubleshooting

Here are some questions to ask yourself when an intervention is not working.

Is your relative convinced of the importance of the targeted problem?

If your relative is not convinced of the need to address the problem, you will need to go back over the benefits of doing the task and the consequences of not doing it. Work with your relative to see if they recognize that the target problem is an important one. If this goal is one they do not care about, you may want to shift to another goal they see as more important as a way to keep them engaged. You can attempt to return to the original area later. If your relative is committed to working on a specific problem, you should together be able to come up with a support that will help.

Is the support set up in the wrong location?

If you have set up a support too far from where the targeted activity takes place, you may need to move it closer. For example, if the person undresses by the bed and you put laundry baskets in the closet, you may have empty hampers in the closet and piles of dirty clothes by the bed. Move the baskets to the foot of the bed where your relative gets undressed.

Would another type of support work better?

If your relative prefers voice alarms to signs, or vice versa, try to set up interventions for more difficult problems according to their preference. Initially, both voice and visual reminders may be used together.

Are distractions getting in the way of the task?

If there are too many distractions in the area of the environmental support, you will need to clear the area or move the support to another location. For example, your relative may not notice a pill container if it is on a counter with many other objects, and it won't have the desired effect of helping to remind them about taking medication.

Does your relative have the supplies needed to complete the task?

If, for example, you have signs asking your relative to check his or her shirt for stains, you need to be sure the person has some shirts that are not stained. If they don't, you may need to provide some so that the intervention can work.

Does your relative have the skills required to complete the task?

Make sure your relative has the knowledge needed to successfully complete the task you have set up. You may need to have your relative try the activity while you are there. Teach the skills needed to be successful, providing any information or reminders about the steps, if that proves helpful.

Frequently asked questions

In the strategies listed in Sections 5 and 6, several supports address the same problem. How do I pick one?

Several interventions are presented as options because not all of them will work in every case. For people who have fewer challenges, you can go over the options and they can select which one to try first. For those who need more assistance, you may want to select the option you think would be easiest for them in their environment. Another reason why several options may be presented is to allow for different types of interventions for different problems. For example, using alarms for many different problems could get confusing, so you may want to use an alarm for one problem and a sign on the refrigerator for another.

How do I know whether an intervention is working? And what do I do if it isn't working?

The most obvious answer is that an intervention isn't working if nothing is changing or improving. However, you'll need to continually assess the supports. At each visit, ask which interventions are being used, and find out if any problems have arisen that you'll need to adjust. For example, if a sign is placed on the refrigerator and your relative never opens the refrigerator, they may not see the sign. The sign may have to be moved to the person's bedside or bathroom to be noticed. You may need to troubleshoot (see the previous subsection).

How many problems should we work on at one time?

This depends in part on how similar the problems are and how much support is needed for each. One daily checklist can prompt the person to take medication, as well as to carry out hygiene and household tasks. See what the environment can tolerate. You do not want 10 signs on the refrigerator, or four alarms going off. The idea is to make the environment user friendly—not to bombard the person. We suggest beginning with two to three problems and selecting interventions for those. Once these are being used with ease, you can then try two or three more interventions. Whenever you can, use the same intervention to address several behaviours at once. For example, one daily checklist can help remind someone to carry out hygiene tasks, take medication and try different leisure activities.

Are some environmental supports good for everyone?

Yes, everyone should have a calendar, a watch and an alarm clock or cell phone that they know how to use. If they do not have these items, you need to provide them and explain how to use them.

Can an intervention be taken away after a while?

That depends on the person. Your relative may tell you she does not need a sign any more because she always does a specific task. You can suggest taking the sign down, and then check in with her at the next four visits to make sure the task continues to be done. If the

person does not tell you they want something removed, the easiest thing to do is just keep it up.

How does a person explain to neighbours and friends about the supports being put in place?

You can suggest they tell visitors that they have trouble remembering things, and so they are setting up their house to help them. You can use the example of a bell that rings when you leave your car lights on. It reminds you to turn your lights off. Your relative can say that they decided to use that strategy in a lot of areas of life so that everyday tasks are easier. If your relative is concerned about others seeing the environmental supports, you will need to place them inconspicuously. For example, you could put toothbrush and toothpaste in an obvious place without a sign, and checklists on the back of a door.

Where do I buy supplies?

Most drug stores, grocery stores or local discount stores will have the supplies you need. You can buy voice alarms and recorders online.