

Section 4

Getting started with environmental supports

Devices for recording and tracking progress

Some basic environmental supports help a lot of people. The purpose is to get the person to start doing something and to experience a quick success.

The following are three common strategies we use.

Use a chart or checklist

Depending on the information you gathered in the assessment, you may want to start by having your relative record his or her daily activities for a week. You can use this to start a conversation about what your relative is doing enough of, what would be good to do more of, and what activities he or she might want to start increasing. You can also copy this form or download it from www.schizophreniafamilystrategies.com.

Daily activity tracking log

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
8:00 a.m							
9:00 a.m							
10:00 a.m							
11:00 a.m							
12:00 noon							
1:00 p.m							
2:00 p.m							
3:00 p.m							
4:00 p.m							
5:00 p.m							
6:00 p.m							
7:00 p.m							
8:00 p.m							

	Monday	Tuesday
8:00 a.m	breakfast	
9:00 a.m	call mum, pack snack	
10:00 a.m	library	
11:00 a.m	walk to park, meet Ned	

Next, along with your relative, create a checklist with five to six activities that your relative plans to complete daily (e.g., take shower, brush teeth, put on deodorant, put on clean clothes, take medication, talk to a friend, do a fun activity (e.g., paint, visit Sam, go to the park], cook a healthy meal, exercise, volunteer). You can copy the sample checklist below, and encourage them to insert their activity choices in the left hand column and check them off when completed. Most people find that it feels good to check things off on lists.

Sample checklist

ACTIVITIES	DAYS OF THE WEEK						
	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday

Hang up a large calendar

Hang a large calendar, with a pen or marker attached by a string, to help the person record their appointments and other scheduled activities. You can also use a computerized calendar—although a large paper calendar may be better for people who are likely to forget to check computerized calendars. You might need to teach your relative how to use the calendar to track what day it is and what needs to be done each day. Crossing off each day at the end can be helpful. If your relative uses a smartphone, help him or her track important events by setting alarms as reminders. Help your relative develop a habit of checking the date each morning to see what needs to be done that day or what needs to be prepared for the next.

Track medication use with pill containers

Pill containers, or organizers, can be used to help the person keep better track of their medication. You can work with your relative to have them fill their pill container each week, and then use the container to check on their medication. Sometimes people with mental illness can feel that others are nagging them to take medicine. With this approach, you can check the container daily to see if the medication has been taken, rather than asking repeatedly. (This way, you only need remind your relative when you see that a pill has been missed.) You can also set a voice alarm to remind your relative. They can record the message in their own voice and make up an individual goal (e.g., “It’s 8:00 a.m., time to take my meds. I want to take medication because when I don’t, the voices get really loud and I might lose my job and friends will worry.”)

Explain why using an organizer is helpful. You could tell your relative that if they get distracted and forget whether they’ve taken their medication, they can look in the container and see if the medication is still there. You can also explain that they can use this information to help their doctor make better decisions about their treatment: they wouldn’t want the doctor to increase their dose if they forgot to take their medication. Some pharmacies will supply pills in blister packs that serve the same purpose as organizers.

Supports that address memory and attention difficulties

Many of the supports already described help people bypass problems with attention and memory. For example, placing a toothbrush and toothpaste in direct view, and posting signs as reminders to brush, may help someone to start brushing. Here are some examples of supports that will help.

Memory

If the person you are supporting tells you about memory problems:

- With their permission, label the outsides of drawers and cupboards.
- Use an audio recorder, such as a smartphone app, to help them remember important brief information (e.g., where their car is parked, emergency phone numbers, a specific item to buy at the store).
- Have the person write down important information such as emergency numbers and medications on laminated cards to keep in their wallet.

- Encourage your relative to keep a small notebook on hand to write down what they need to do or get before leaving the house. Place a sign on the door that reads, “Remember to write down what you need to do in your memory notebook.” Each page should be headed with the date. Attach a pen to the book. Label a shelf or area on top of the person’s dresser with a sign that reads, “Keep Memory Notebook Here.”
- If your relative uses a file box for important papers, help him or her make a list of the contents and where they are filed. Tape the list to the front of the box.
- Label areas in the home where important items (e.g., keys, glasses, medication) are kept.

Choose strategies that place the least demand on memory (e.g., voice alarms with specific instructions rather than ringing alarms).

If your relative has an excellent memory, consider having them memorize a list to help in specific activities. Once your relative has memorized to-do lists they have posted on the wall, discuss taking the lists down or replacing them with less detailed lists.

Attention

If your relative has difficulty paying attention to things they hear or see, try some of these strategies:

- Change the colour of signs in the home every week.
- Print signs in fluorescent colours.
- If you are discussing a strategy or doing some work together and you see the person’s attention has drifted, gently touch their shoulder to bring their attention back to the present.
- Get your relative to repeat what they believe you have said, and then clarify what you said if there is any miscommunication.
- Practise with your relative how to tell other relevant people (e.g., employer) about the difficulties he or she has, and how best to teach him or her tasks—perhaps relying less on spoken instructions (e.g., put instructions in writing; give a demonstration first).
- Have your relative write down information to refer to later.

If the person in fact has excellent focus, but perhaps gets lost in tasks and time, explore the use of calendar alarms and mindfulness apps to remind them to take a breath, step back from what they are doing, and decide if they have done enough for now. (Many mindfulness apps can be downloaded from the Internet for free as ways to help people deal with anxiety and stay focused in the moment. They include guided meditations on such topics as anxiety and having self-compassion, and meditations that can take anywhere from a couple of minutes to a half hour.)

Targeting specific activities for support

After you have set up some supports in your relative's home, you are ready to try some of the strategies outlined in Sections 5 and 6, which follow. Remember that environmental supports work a lot better when your approach is focused and systematic. Begin by looking at three or four supports for challenges that relate to the person's specific goals.

People may have challenges in many or even all areas, but by initially focusing on just a few, your relative won't get overwhelmed and will be able to understand the reason for taking on the challenge. You can explain that he or she won't be able to do Y unless they first do something about X.

For each activity in Sections 5 and 6, we suggest more specific strategies. Some strategies are more in line with the needs of people who have trouble getting started and others are more relevant to those who have trouble staying organized. Throughout we make suggestions about how to best match strategies with people's needs. After trying the more general strategies we have described above, move on to the more specific strategies, described in Sections 5 and 6, that are tied to people's goals. We have broken these down into basic strategies for everyday living (like bathing and dressing) in Section 5, and strategies that go "beyond the basics" (like grocery shopping and taking public transportation) in Section 6. The basic strategies are focused on getting the person out of the door in good shape, while "beyond the basics" is about what they do when they are out there.

In every section you will find strategies that are in line with the needs of people with greater challenges, and others that are more suited to those with fewer challenges. Based on your assessment (page 13), you will work to find approaches that seem to be the best fit and are in line with what your relative wants to engage in.

Try to phase in just a few strategies at a time. Seek the right balance between having a good visit and enjoying each other's companionship, versus working on strategies together. We recommend visiting your relative at least weekly to address these interventions (even if only briefly). At the same time, avoid overwhelming your relative by having every conversation be about them! Remember that these strategies depend on a positive and collaborative relationship. This work shouldn't detract from that relationship.

To help you, we have provided a diary for the intervention in Appendix 2 and examples of some signs that we have found helpful in Appendix 3. Good luck!