

YOUR GUIDE TO

# Neuropsychological Assessments

arbias

**BrainLink**



*Your Guide to Neuropsychological Assessment* is part of a series of information products about brain injury produced by a joint committee of brain injury organisations with significant support and assistance from the Department of Human Services Victoria.

**STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS:**

Merrilee Cox	<b>Headway Victoria</b>
Sharon Strugnell	<b>BrainLink</b> (formerly Brain Foundation of Victoria)
Sonia Berton	<i>arbias</i>
Michelle Werner	<b>Department of Human Services</b>
Content:	<i>arbias</i>
	<b>Glen Hardy &amp; Melissa Duncombe</b>
Editor:	<b>Lisa Mitchell</b>
Project manager:	<b>The Journey Place for Living and Learning Inc</b>
Design & production:	<b><a href="http://www.mapcreative.net.au">www.mapcreative.net.au</a></b>

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“Cognitive functions refer to our ability to think, learn, plan, remember, perceive and understand things.”

## Your Guide to Neuropsychological Assessment

If you (or a family member) have experienced a serious accident or neurological illness, such as a stroke or long-term alcohol abuse, you may have incurred brain damage that changes the way your brain works. Perhaps you are more forgetful or short-tempered than usual or perhaps you have trouble concentrating.

You, your family or any member of your health care team, such as a general practitioner or occupational therapist, can refer you to a neuropsychologist for an assessment.

This booklet is a guide to neuropsychological assessment and explains what it is, how it works and what to expect, should you need to have one.


## What is a Neuropsychological Assessment?

A neuropsychological assessment provides very detailed information about how a brain injury changes the way your brain works.

Different areas of the brain manage certain physical abilities and cognitive functions – “cognitive” refers to our ability to think, learn, plan, remember, perceive and understand things.

The assessment is conducted by a neuropsychologist, a psychologist with specialised training who understands how brain injury can affect your cognitive function, your behaviour and personality.

Neuropsychologists are not medical doctors and are not able to prescribe drugs or undertake medical procedures.



The neuropsychologist can structure the assessment specifically to address any of your concerns. The tests identify which areas of your brain are damaged and how that is likely to affect your ability to function in daily life.

Neuropsychologists also suggest strategies to help you manage changes that concern you.

## **Do You Need an Assessment?**

An assessment is useful:

- If your diagnosis is unclear
- To help design your treatment plan
- To determine eligibility for compensation or services
- To assist with planning educational programs and to assess eligibility for assistance in schools
- To gather information about whether your skills are adequate to live alone, drive, manage your own legal or financial affairs

## **What Happens During the Assessment?**

A neuropsychological assessment involves an interview and a number of “paper and pencil” tests designed to identify the areas of your brain that are damaged. It does not involve any physical examinations.

Tests examine things like your memory, intelligence, problem-solving skills, ability to concentrate and personality changes. Programs can then be designed to rebuild the skills and abilities that have

**“The neuropsychologist needs... to speak to... medical professionals involved in your care and people who know you well.”**

deteriorated since your accident or illness. Test results also identify the strengths and skills that are well preserved.

Examples of skills that may be assessed or measured include:

- Attention: length of attention span, ability to divide attention between tasks
- New learning: ability to take in and recall new information, both verbal and visual
- Executive function: ability to solve problems, maintain focus on tasks, follow rules, control behaviour, show initiative, perceive needs

## **Taking Your Personal History**

The neuropsychologist needs to have a thorough understanding of the person being assessed. He or she will ask for your consent to speak to (or collect reports from) medical professionals involved in your care and people who know you well, such as family, friends and case managers.

This allows the neuropsychologist to form a picture of your behaviour, skills and personal qualities and to assess whether these have changed over time due to your condition.

The assessment of change is also important when examining a person for types of deteriorating illnesses such as Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and Huntington’s disease, which can be identified by the progressive deterioration of certain abilities.

Monitoring levels of change can also show how much a person has improved after a brain injury and help to predict their potential for



further recovery.

The type of information that the neuropsychologist might ask for includes:

- How long certain problems, such as poor short-term memory or sudden irritability, have been present
- Specific examples of abilities that you have noticed are deteriorating
- Educational, work and social history, such as level of schooling completed, work experience, hobbies
- How problems affect your ability to manage daily life: your work, finances or relationships
- Medical history: previous psychiatric treatment, head injuries or hospitalisations, drug and alcohol use, current medications
- For children and adolescents: information on early developmental milestones, such as walking, talking and school history

## How Long will the Assessment Take?

Generally, interviews and tests take several hours but some assessments may need to be completed over several sessions.

For example, some people may take longer to do the tests because of their difficulties with concentration, the effects of their medication or the need for breaks due to fatigue. Children may also find it difficult to concentrate for long periods of time.



“Make your appointment for the time of day when you feel most alert.”

## Preparing for the Assessment

You cannot study for the assessment but you can prepare well and make sure it is a good measure of your abilities.

Drugs, alcohol and some medications may affect your ability to do your best on some of the tasks. Ideally, you should abstain from drugs and alcohol for at least five days beforehand. Continue to take any prescription medication; just let the neuropsychologist know the name and dose of any medication you are taking.

Some more tips on preparing for the assessment:

- Write down any questions you wish to ask
- Make your appointment for the time of day when you feel most alert
- If taking public transport, leave early to ensure you arrive stress-free
- Ask for small breaks if you feel tired during the assessment
- If you wear reading glasses or a hearing aid, remember to take them with you
- Take copies of previous assessments, hospital notes or school reports
- Take contact details of people who can give the neuropsychologist useful background information: case managers, teachers, therapists
- Take a support person if you feel the need



## What will the Results Show?

At the end of the session, the neuropsychologist may give you some general feedback about how you performed in the assessment.

They will prepare a detailed, written report that may take a few weeks to deliver. With your consent, the report will be delivered to the health care professional who referred you, but you may also request a copy of the report or a summary of the results.

The report highlights areas of significant change in your abilities and suggests strategies to help you manage your daily life more effectively.

It will also discuss any particular issues of concern raised by you, your family member or the referrer.

If you have any difficulty understanding the report, call the neuropsychologist and ask them to explain it to you or make another appointment so they can go through the results with you.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

### *arbias*

*arbias* conducts neuropsychological assessments and can provide more information about alcohol or substance-related brain injury. (telephone: 8388 1222 or [www.arbias.org.au](http://www.arbias.org.au))

### **BrainLink**

BrainLink can provide more information about stroke-related and tumour-related brain injury, neurological conditions and other forms of brain injury. (telephone: 9845 2950 or toll free: 1800 677 579 or [www.brainlink.org.au](http://www.brainlink.org.au))

### **Statewide ABI Paediatric Coordinators**

Part of Melbourne Citymission, this team provides support and information for people working with children and young people who have sustained a brain injury. They can also offer advice on where to obtain a neuropsychological assessment for people under 18. (telephone: 9385 6333)

FOR INFORMATION CALL

1800 677 579

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