

Tips & Gadgets

for Managing Daily Activities

By Carol Siebert | Occupational Therapist

After a stroke, routine activities can be a challenge. Tasks you've done routinely — getting dressed, fixing a sandwich, making the bed — demand time, attention and sometimes assistance that was not necessary before the stroke. As an occupational therapist, I redesign activities so that the demands — for time, attention and effort — are a better fit for a person's abilities. Redesigning activities means altering the method of the activity, altering the tools used to do the activity, or both.

Redesigning is more than just matching methods or tools to tasks. We are all creatures of habit, and we each handle change differently, so how much redesign of an activity is acceptable is different for each person. Activities have meaning related to memories, roles, culture — so redesign has to respect the meaning of the activity.

Here are some redesign methods (tips) and tools (gadgets) that many people who have had strokes have found useful.

TIPS

Save Energy

Don't let activities consume more energy than they deserve. The easiest way to do this is to sit rather than stand for any task that can be done sitting down: brushing your teeth, putting on a shirt, making a sandwich, even vacuuming the rug (try it!). Standing when it isn't necessary is *not* "exercise." Sitting when you can is a way to save energy for tasks that have to be done standing, or tasks that demand more physical energy.



Plan and Pace

Energy isn't all physical. Learning new ways of doing things or having to pay close attention takes *mental* energy. Brains get tired, too. Pushing yourself when your body or your brain is tired leads to fatigue-related mistakes, difficulty controlling muscles and, sometimes, falls and injuries.

Before you start your day, think ahead. Plan to take breaks or rest. Break up more difficult or energy-consuming tasks into shorter, simpler tasks. Pacing yourself is essential to allow your brain and body to do their best.



Simplify

Simplifying activities is a great way to save energy and pace yourself. Simplifying reduces effort or gets more results out of a single effort. Some examples:

- Dressing and undressing is easier when clothing has fewer fasteners or has hook-and-loop fasteners instead of buttons or zippers.
- Making the bed takes much less time and effort if blankets and top sheets are replaced with a single comforter and duvet (comforter cover).
- Using a medication organizer that's filled once a week means not having to deal with multiple pill vials every day — or multiple times each day.



Delegate

Delegation means assigning the right tasks to the right worker. As you save energy, pace and simplify, you may decide that some tasks or parts of tasks should be delegated — they take too much energy or effort in comparison to how important or meaningful they are to you.

Rather than giving up the activity, you may want to delegate the part you can't do to a family member or helper, at least temporarily. Delegation is a management strategy to keep you in charge of your activities.



- Putting a jar gripper under a medicine bottle and using the heel of your hand to press down and twist makes it possible to open child-proof containers with one hand.
- Wrapping a stabilizer around the handle of a toothbrush, hairbrush, fork or even a pen makes the tool easier to hold while brushing, eating or writing.

Go high-tech

Delegate tasks to your smartphone, tablet or computer. There are apps available for phones and tablets that can help you schedule activities, remind you of appointments, extend your abilities or keep track of your health. Many of these apps are free (visit strokeassociation.org/strokeconnection for more details about helpful apps).



Monitor your home. If you have a home wireless network, you can install cameras inside or outside to monitor areas of your home from your computer, tablet or smartphone. If you have delegated tasks to others, this can allow you to supervise or monitor a helper who is in another room or see who is at the door without getting up from your chair.

Home automation systems allow you to control lights, start the coffeepot, adjust the thermostat or call for help. Simple systems are available for under \$100 and allow you to control lights or appliances with remote control. More complex systems integrate wireless networks with your home's electrical circuits or alarm systems. These can be programmed or can be controlled from smartphones or tablets even when you are away from home.

Whether a tip or gadget is right for you depends on your habits, your preferences and your needs. There is no one-size-fits-all cookbook for activity redesign. Give yourself time to try a new method or tool to decide if it works for you. It takes time to get used to, but it also takes time for it to become habit — to be automatic. If you need more advice or assistance identifying methods or tools specific to your needs, consult an occupational therapist in your area. **SC**

GADGETS

Reachers

Reachers have a trigger at one end and a claw or pinch mechanism at the other. When you squeeze the trigger, the claw or pincher closes. There are many different kinds of reachers. Some have a rubberized pinch and a magnet on the end to pick up small or metallic items. Others have a claw wide enough to grab your pants out of a bottom drawer or your cereal off the cupboard shelf. They may be called reachers, grabbers or pick-up tools. Some models fold so they can be carried in a tote, a walker basket or a wheelchair pack. Reachers are available in home improvement stores, medical supply stores and Internet vendors. You may find it convenient to have one in each room of your home — especially your bedroom, bathroom and kitchen.



Stabilizers

Stabilizers can make it possible to do tasks with one hand. My favorite stabilizers are rubber jar grippers and rubberized shelf liner. They can come in handy for a number of things:



- Putting a jar gripper or shelf liner under a jar helps hold the jar in place so one hand can twist it open.
- Putting a piece of shelf liner on the floor stops the shoes from sliding away while slipping feet into shoes. (Pick it up before walking.)
- Cutting shelf liner to the size of a placemat and putting it under the plate or bowl stops the plate from moving when you are cutting or scooping.

About the author...

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