



An Introduction to Supported Decision Making

A practical guide for advocates working with
clients with cognitive disability

What is Supported Decision Making?

People with cognitive disability are often assumed to lack the capacity to make their own decisions without any attempt being made to involve them in the decision making process. When people with cognitive disability are given the opportunity and receive the right support, they can often make decisions for themselves.

Supported decision making is when an advocate or other supporter helps their client to make their own decisions. To do this, you may need to adjust how you usually do things, for example, how you work, how you communicate, how you present information, how much time you spend or how you listen. These adjustments will then maximise the opportunity for a person with disability to understand, weigh up options, and make informed choices and decisions.

People can receive support in several different ways. For example, a person may require changes to their environment or how information is provided to make it easier for them to understand. This might include:

- having information in Easy Read or Plain English
- having information presented in different ways, e.g. in pictures or diagrams
- having extra time to think about a decision.



How do you know if someone has the capacity to make their own decisions?

There is no single definition or test for a person's capacity to make decisions. Decision making ability or 'capacity' is a fluid concept. It is decision specific, and it may vary over time. It is an assessment of a person's ability to make a decision, not a judgement of the decision they make.

Generally, when a person turns 18, they are legally presumed to have the capacity to make decisions about their own lives, even if they have a disability. People with disability are autonomous and independent human beings with wishes, hopes, likes, and dislikes.

To have the capacity to make a decision, a person must be able to:

1. Understand the facts involved and the available choices
2. Understand and weigh up the consequences of each option, and understand how the consequences will affect them
3. Communicate their decision.

Decision making ability is often best assessed by those who know the person well, such as family, friends or advocates. Formal assessments of cognitive disability and decision making capacity, typically conducted by a psychologist, may also play a part.



What adjustments could I make to help a person with cognitive disability make their own decisions?

An advocate may be paid or unpaid, someone that the person already knows, such as a friend or carer, or a professional worker, such as a disability advocate or support worker.

An advocate can enhance a person's decision making capacity by helping the person to:

- Understand all the information relevant to the decision
- Weigh up the information as part of the decision-making process, e.g., the pros and cons
- Communicate their decision, e.g., speaking, nodding, shaking their head, making a noise, writing a mark, or using an assistive device
- Act on their decision.

As an advocate, it's important to reflect on your own unconscious biases, life experiences, and values to best support a person in making their own decisions, particularly if their choices differ from your own. Researching and understanding concepts such as **Dignity of Risk** versus **Duty of Care** would also be beneficial. For example, the dignity of having and choosing a relationship versus being protective of the person out of a duty of care and discouraging them from having a relationship.

Suppose the person comes from a different cultural background. It might then be helpful to explore various cultural perspectives, particularly regarding how disability is viewed and the structure of families or kinship. This understanding can significantly impact your work and may differ from your own ideas or cultural upbringing.

Advocates can help with practical support, like remembering or getting to appointments, helping a person remember information, or reading important information to the person in a way that they can understand. An advocate can help by explaining information using simple words, using Easy Read or Plain English, images, or diagrams. You may also check for understanding by asking the person to explain the decision in their own words.

Some people with cognitive disability will say 'yes' to closed questions, even if it does not reflect how they feel

A closed question can only be answered with 'YES' or 'NO'. For example, 'Do you understand?' can be answered 'Yes' or 'No'.

People with cognitive disability are more likely to answer 'YES' even if the answer is 'NO'.

For effective communication, it is valuable to use open-ended questions. For example, 'What do you understand about that?' An open-ended question requires a more detailed answer and will give you more insight into a person's understanding or genuine wishes.

Open-ended questions tend to start with these words:

- How
- What
- Where
- When
- Who
- Why
- Which





Supporting someone to make a decision can take time. Building rapport and trust with the person you are assisting can improve their ability to understand the information you share. People with cognitive disability may need extra time to process the information and to consider their decision.

Additionally, a person may only be able to understand one concept at a time. It can be helpful to schedule multiple meetings to avoid overwhelming them with too much information at once. Although advocates often face high demands with limited time and resources, this approach can ultimately save time in the long run by improving the person's understanding.

If possible, meet in an environment where the person feels comfortable and where there are minimal distractions.

Disability affects individuals differently. It's essential to ask each person how they can be best supported

Before the meeting

- **Create the right environment:** Choose a comfortable place that is free from distractions.
- **Schedule enough time:** Don't rush the process. Plan for extra time for conversations and allow for periods of silence so the person can think. It might be helpful to have a few short meetings instead of one long one.
- **Research and prepare:** Find out what options the person has and consider how to present the information in a way that is accessible and easy to understand.



During the meeting

- **Build rapport first:** Spend time getting to know the person. Begin with a simple and comfortable topic to establish trust before moving on to the main decision.
- **Use simple language:** Avoid jargon and acronyms and use plain English. If you have to use a complex word, make sure you explain it. Use visual aids like pictures or diagrams to help explain ideas.
- **Check for understanding:** Regularly ask the person to explain what you've just talked about in their own words. This helps you know if they've understood the information. Encourage them to ask questions or to let you know if they haven't understood something.
- **Ask the right questions:** Avoid questions that can only be answered with "yes" or "no", like "Do you understand?" Instead, use open-ended questions that require a more detailed answer, such as "What do you understand about that?" This helps you truly understand what the person wants.
- **Be patient and listen:** Don't finish the person's sentences. Allow them to take their time and process their thoughts. Don't feel the need to fill silences—they may be thinking.
- **Focus on one thing at a time:** Discuss one idea or topic at a time and clearly signal when you are moving on to the next one.
- **Think about your body language:** Stay mindful of your body language and expressions, and try not to show frustration.



Tips for advocates

After the meeting

- **Understand your own biases:** Before offering an opinion, reflect on your own values and experiences to ensure you're not projecting them onto the person. Carefully consider the concept of Dignity of Risk versus Duty of Care.
- **Support. Don't decide:** Remember that your role is to support the person's decision making process, not to make the decision for them.
- **Aid memory retention:** Talk to your client about how they can be supported to remember appointments and information, e.g. provide hard copies of information, send text or email reminders, provide information to the client's support, with the client's consent.



*This resource was developed on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.
We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Owners and Custodians on
whose land we walk, work, and live.
Always was, always will be Aboriginal Land.*

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