DOWN'S SYNDROME ASSOCIATION

Time: the Challenges and What Might Help

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McGuire and Chicoine write that the biggest problem for people who have Down's syndrome occurs when others assume they understand time and time references in a 'typical' or 'usual' fashion. This leads to misinterpretation of what they say and sometimes to disagreements or misunderstandings.

What do we mean by time?

An ongoing and continuous sequence of events that occur in succession, from past through the present, and to the future.

Awareness of time

Past, present, and future are concepts that most of us take for granted in everyday life. However they are abstract and can be a challenge for many people who have Down's syndrome to differentiate. Often, we find a less clear line of distinction between past and present.



Sequencing of events

Placing events in order of time can be challenging for people. Some past events may seem as real as present events where there is a vivid visual memory and limited comprehension of time.

Duration

Teaching tools and strategies may be needed to help a person understand how long a second, minute, hour or day is. Some people will learn to tell the time by using clocks and watches but still not understand the concept of time passing. This presents challenges when a person needs to leave the house to be somewhere at a certain time.



Expressive language challenges

Some people who have Down's syndrome don't use verb endings correctly, partly because of hearing issues. The mixing of tenses is not uncommon and means that people may be unable to tell you when something has happened.

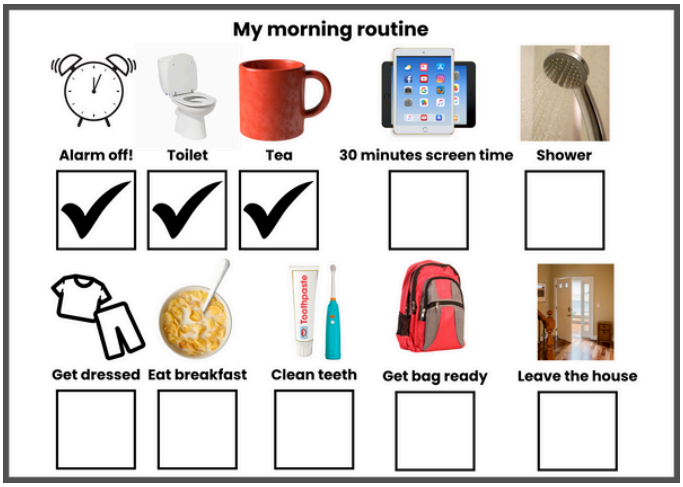
What might help?

Strategies and tools

- Show clocks, watches and time displays from a young age.
- Talk about meaningful time points such as bedtime or lunchtime and use the words morning, afternoon, night and daytime.
- Use supports that help with understanding the passing of time such as egg/sand timers, electronic countdowns.
- Use now and next and visual timetables to explain present and future. This may support understanding of when something is going to happen.







Communication

A way to support someone with timescales is to use a measure that may be meaningful to them such as ‘dinner will happen after one episode of EastEnders.’

McGuire and Chicoine in their book Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome make some recommendations for optimising communication

- Appreciate that someone with Down’s syndrome may have a different understanding of time. If you know that a person may be speaking in the present tense about a past event, ask further questions to prevent confusion.

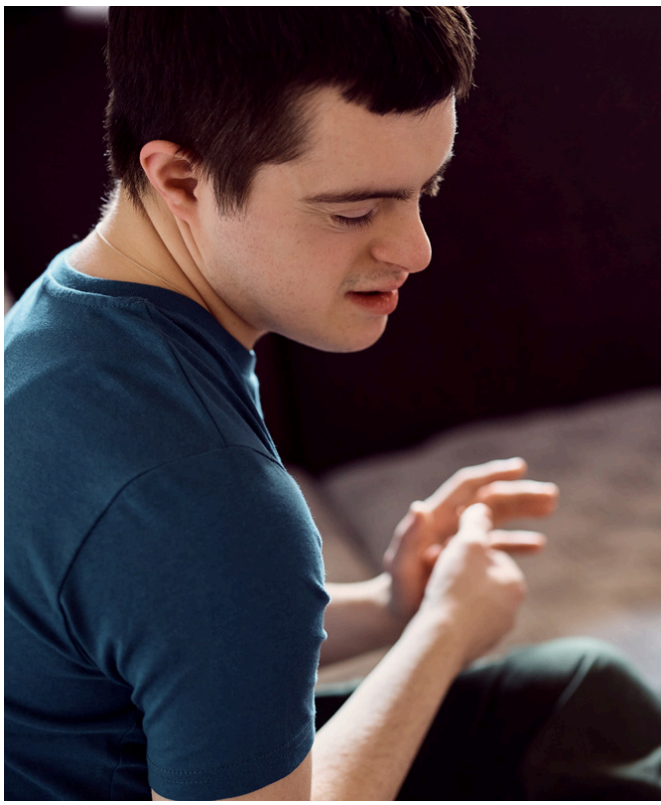
- What are the overall language skills of the person? Have you previously heard them use past tense or words like ‘yesterday’? If not, when they are speaking in present tense, they may be speaking about the past.

- If possible, help the person put the event in the time context of another event. For example, ask, ‘Did it happen when you were in school? Did it happen when you were working at the shop?’ Particularly if the person says they don’t know, look for other clues about when the event occurred.

Lack of flexibility

McGuire and Chicoine also talk about the paradox of people who have Down’s syndrome knowing the time even when they cannot tell the time because of having an internal clock that is often extremely accurate.

This can result in people being very inflexible about times in their routines, insisting that meals, breaks at work, TV programmes etc. occur at set times. People may be less tolerant of questions and interruptions during these times, and this can be challenging for those around them.



Examples
(taken from the Mental Wellness book)

Example 1

Robert, a thirty-six-year-old man with Down syndrome, came into the office for the first time. When discussing his family history, he suddenly started crying after mentioning that his father had died. After further discussion, we learned that his father had died fifteen years prior. Robert had an excellent memory; however, his sense of time was limited, as it is for many people with Down syndrome. To him, there was little if any difference between several weeks ago and several years ago. Since the staff understood these concepts, Robert was comforted and reassured, and the interview continued. There was no need to consider the diagnosis of prolonged grieving or even depression.

Example 2

Carol, age twenty-five, usually speaks in one- or two-word phrases. She was complaining of ear pain. A thorough evaluation revealed no underlying problem. After further discussion, it seemed that this was more of a complaint of her past medical history of frequent ear infections. Sometimes the misunderstanding may be due more to difficulties using past and present verb tenses than to a true lack of understanding of time.

References

Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome (McGuire & Chicoine, 2021)

A Practical Guide to Educating Learners with Down Syndrome: Supporting Lifelong Learning (Faragher, 2023)



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