

Taking Care of the Family After Brain Injury

Any brain injury can cause some changes to the affected person and their family. Talk and plan with the rest of your family. Your roles may change, but don't give up all the things you hold dear. Get help. Remember that there is often some improvement over time. Find ways to keep your family moving ahead.

Don't forget the rest of your family. Talk and spend time together. Make plans. The future still exists.

Expect conflicting feelings

As the extent of your loved one's injury becomes clear, it is normal to feel angry or guilty. Allow yourself and other family members to be honest. Personality changes can occur in people after a TBI. Counseling may help you and your family adjust to these sudden changes in your lives.

Plan ahead

Will your loved one live at home or be able to stay alone? What's to become of the family? Ask the social worker about government support services. A financial advisor can help plan for the future.

You should know that there is a lot of research on brain injury. Hopefully, in time, new treatments may become available. However, it is also important to have realistic expectations.

Rethink household habits

Now is a good time to rethink chores and old habits. List the tasks you do each day. Then ask yourself:

- Must this task be done?
- Does it need to be done this often?
- Is there a better way to do it?
- Who else can do it?
- Can we take turns?

Keep hobbies and friends

Life goes on, despite your loved one's injury. Take time to relax and do things you enjoy. Try to stay in touch with friends. Make new contacts. Talk about things other than your affected loved one.

Stay healthy

Take good care of yourself. Family caregivers are at higher risk of emotional and physical problems than the general population. Follow these tips:

- Exercise a little each day. Stretch. Go for a walk. Work out with friends or take a class each week.
- Eat fresh foods, such as fruit and vegetables.
- Reduce stress.
- Set attainable goals.
- Sleep when you're tired. A nap can help lighten your mood and give you energy.
- Visit your doctor on a regular basis to take care of your own health.

Ask for what you need

You can't do it all by yourself. No one can. Only when you take care of yourself can you take care of others. Ask for help, and accept help when it's offered. Don't worry about repaying favors. Ask a friend to listen. Allow a neighbor to run an errand or pull weeds.

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Problems with Thinking Skills After Brain Injury

One of the brain's main roles is to allow a person to think, remember, reason, and judge. After a brain injury, a person may be less able to coordinate sequential activities (apraxia), process thought (agnosia), or use language (aphasia). At first, therapy may be provided by medical professionals, physical therapists, and occupational therapists, but it often requires longer-term support by family and friends.



Coordinating function

Coordinating functions can be hard for a person with a brain injury. Even a simple task, such as combing hair, may be hard. It may need to be broken into steps. The team can teach you how to help the person.

You can help:

- Find out what your loved one is working on. Ask them to do the task. Allow plenty of time.
- Break all tasks into simple steps.
- Change topics or tasks if your loved one gets confused.
- Use pillboxes to help organize medicines.

Improving memory

One goal is to help people know where they are. Put up signs to label the bathroom, closet, and doorway. Put up maps of the person's room or the gym. Names of family and therapists may be on a daily schedule or in a journal.

You can help:

- Keep visits short. But try to visit often.
- Say who you are when you greet your loved one. Ask the same questions often.
- Look at family photo albums with the person.

Relearning language skills

A person may have trouble understanding or using words. They may need to use gestures or eye blinks to communicate. To help a person relearn words, a therapist may point to an object and ask its name. If a person has physical trouble speaking, exercises may help. A speech therapist may show how to form the lips and mouth to make certain sounds.

Altered speech functions can be frustrating. It is important for family and friends to be supportive.

You can help:

- Use picture flash cards with the person.
- Speak slowly. Use common words.
- Speak in simple sentences. Stick to 1 idea or action.
- Ask yes-or-no questions.

- Give the person time to understand you and respond.
- Bring the person back to the main topic.
- Don't "talk down" to the person. And don't ignore them.
- Keep calm if your loved one gets upset or agitated.

Bring some things to rehab that hold meaning for the person:

- Photos of family or friends
- Plants and knickknacks
- Favorite clothes
- Posters
- Music

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Problems with the Senses After Brain Injury

Sometimes an injury damages the part of the brain that controls balance, sight, or hearing. Or memory loss may keep a person from remembering certain sights, sounds, smells, or tastes. Some people have trouble handling abstract ideas, such as time. Or they may simply forget what they are doing from one moment to the next.

Problems with sight or sound

If a person is sensitive to light or has double vision, an eye doctor may suggest sunglasses, prescription lenses, or an eye patch. Some people lose vision or hearing on only one side. They may be taught to turn the unaffected side of the body toward the action. If a person has trouble hearing or is confused by background noise, limiting distractions can help.

You can help by doing the following:

- Adjust lighting and window shades for comfort.
- Close the door if the person is bothered by noise.
- Turn off the TV.

Regaining balance

Keeping balance and judging distance are common problems after brain injury. A physical therapist may help a person sit up, stand, or walk. Some people may need to use a wheelchair, walker, or cane.

If the person lives in a multistory home, other changes may be needed. Consider having them stay in a bedroom on the ground floor. Adding bars in the bathroom can help the person stand up safely.

You can help by doing the following:

- Ask the team about your loved one's abilities. Learn to help the person work at a safe skill level.
- Walk with the person. Go slowly.



Dealing with time

Some people can't remember from one moment to the next. Others may have trouble planning ahead. Because of this, the rehab team may teach them to check a calendar and clocks throughout each day. People who can read and write are taught to use diaries or daily planners. Each team member may ask the person, "What day is it? What time is it? Where do you need to be next?"

You can help by doing the following:

- Try to visit at the same time each day.
- Ask the person which day of the week it is when you arrive.

- Keep a calendar on the wall. Have the person cross off each passing day.
- Use the person's daily planner to note your visits. Write down what you talked about and any decisions reached.
- Bring in a clock that's easy to read. A digital display may be best.
- If the team agrees, get your loved one a watch with an alarm. The alarm can be used to remind the person of meals or rehab sessions.
- Try to go with the person to important events, such as medical appointments. If this isn't possible, call to remind the person to go to appointments.
- Use daily pillboxes to organize medicines for the person.

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Physical Problems After Brain Injury

A brain injury can affect other parts of the body. As a result, people who have a brain injury may have little or no control over their bodies. Muscles may weaken, tighten, or twitch. People may develop sensory problems, problems speaking, trouble with hand-eye coordination, and other problems. Some people may also have physical injuries that occurred along with the brain injury.

Improve posture and motion

Physical therapists help people regain movement and strength. Improving posture and range-of-motion exercises improve movement. In addition, they help prepare people to do tasks. For instance, a person may work on lifting an arm above the head. This may help him or her dress more easily.



You can help your loved one by:

- Showing interest. Ask the therapist how you can help.
- Reminding them to use good posture.
- Making sure an affected arm or leg is supported in the correct position.

Reduce swallowing problems

If a person has trouble swallowing, a speech therapist may help him or her increase muscle control in the face, mouth, and throat. The person may also learn to turn or hold the head in a position that makes swallowing easier and safer.

You can help by:

- Checking with a team member before bringing in food or drink. If your loved one has a swallowing problem, they may be on a special diet.
- Limiting distractions during meals.
- Taking smaller bites or sips.
- Changing the texture of food such as softening, chopping, or pureeing solid foods for easier swallowing.
- Eating while sitting up only.

Reduce muscle and joint problems

Damage to the brain may tighten muscles or tendons (contracture). Sometimes an injury causes spasms that jerk or twist affected muscles (spasticity). Range-of-motion or stretching exercises may help control these problems. Sometimes casts or splints are used to hold a joint in the correct position. Over time, this may relax the muscle. Sometimes surgery is needed to release tight tissue. Medicines to help relax the muscles may be helpful for spasticity. Some people may find that a shot (injection) of Botulinum toxin into spastic muscles helps improve motion.

You can help by making sure:

- Your loved one does any prescribed exercises or stretches daily.
- The splint is on when it needs to be.

Seizure risk and safety

If your loved one is likely to have seizures, don't leave them alone in places where a seizure could cause severe harm. For instance, never leave them alone in a swimming pool or bath tub. Assess other places and situations for risk as well.

Control seizures

If too many signals flood the brain, a seizure may occur. Medicines may control these episodes. A brain injury increases the risk of seizures.

You can help by doing the following during a seizure:

- Help the person into a safe position. Make sure your loved one will not fall or hit his or her head.
- If they are lying down, turn them to the side with mouth pointed down.
- Don't restrain the person or put anything in their mouth.
- Tell a team or staff member.

Call 911

Call **911** if a seizure lasts more than 5 minutes.

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Behavior Changes After Brain Injury

After a brain injury, a person may behave in new or different ways and may have personality changes. They may become agitated or aggressive, and these mood changes may be disturbing. Some may curse, laugh, or cry out of context. Others may show increased or decreased sexual interest. Judgment may be altered. This can have financial and legal implications.

Behavior changes may be caused by damage to the brain. Or they may result from the person's increasing awareness of what has happened. Such changes may be linked to frustration, anger, or grief.

Not all changes in behavior are caused by a brain injury. For instance, if a person is addicted to drugs or alcohol, going through withdrawal will be linked with a change in behavior. Other health issues such as reactions to medicines are linked to agitation and behavioral changes.

Handling feelings

Many people with brain injuries have extreme mood swings. Others show no change in emotions. As a person becomes more aware, depression may set in. Signs of depression should be brought to the attention of healthcare professionals. A number of treatments are available that may be helpful for improving quality of life.

Team members address the person's feelings and behavior. A team member may ask an angry person to "calm down." If the person does, they are praised for using self-control. Then the person may be asked how they were able to handle the emotion. If they know, the technique can be used again.

Controlling agitation

A person with a brain injury may pass through stages of agitation and aggression. A healthcare professional needs to ensure that there is no physical, medical, or psychiatric cause for the agitation. If the person's safety is a concern, restraints may be used. If this happens, be sure to contact the healthcare team. Or team members may take turns staying with the person. The healthcare professional may recommend medicine. As a person becomes calmer, the team may do the following:

- Point out when a behavior is not proper. Then explain what the person could do instead.
- Redirect agitated actions such as pacing.
- Divert the person from tasks that are upsetting.
- Reduce stimuli such as TV, phones, and frequent visitors.
- Try to stay away from situations that may trigger agitated or aggressive behavior.

Regaining social skills

After a brain injury, some people see only how matters relate to themselves. They may not be aware of how their actions and words affect others. Group rehab helps people with brain injuries learn to deal with others. It also improves speech. Playing games helps people link ideas and increase hand-eye skills.

You can help

Try to act in ways that teach good behavior. Also, let the person know they are still needed and loved. Try the tips below.

- Stay calm.
- Don't hold a grudge.
- Don't always give in to demands.
- Ignore outbursts of anger. Direct the person toward a task they can do.
- Don't cringe, frown, roll your eyes, shake your head, or clear your throat.
- Make contact. Hug, hold hands, offer a gentle touch of reassurance.

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