

## Brain Injury and Family Life

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It was a day that started out the same as any other, but with no warning, the unthinkable happened. No time to prepare for the upcoming challenges, the heartache and the drastic changes to daily life. Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) can be a devastating experience, not only for the individual who sustains it, but also for their families and friends. Bones mend and scars heal but a brain injury stays for life, and can impact on everything we think, do and feel.

Siblings very often share a lifelong relationship. Greatly influenced by one another's behaviour, mannerisms, identity and personality. The emotional bond between brothers and sisters is a complex one, characterised by various dynamics such as: jealousy; love; hate; rivalry; solidarity; loyalty; companionship; affection and compassion. With a bond so strong, and with siblings being such a large part of one another's everyday lives, it is not surprising that when one suffers an ABI, the other(s) can be greatly affected. This can present in many different ways and will be different for everyone.

When someone close to you has suffered an ABI it can be an extremely confusing and overwhelming time. A particularly stressful time is during the emergency, intensive care and hospital stage. For a sibling, this time can be fuelled by a whole range of thoughts and emotions. Siblings who were present when the injury was sustained can often experience invasive thoughts and memories from the time of the accident which make the whole experience of coming to terms with their brother/sisters ABI even more difficult. Those who have shared stories of their siblings ABI journey often reported that they felt a certain amount of guilt and self-blame, despite having no control over what happened. Talking to someone, particularly their parents, or other close friends or relatives helped in making them feel better, and to reduce this unwarranted guilt.

For parents: coming to terms with the fact that their child has suffered a brain injury brings a whirlwind of emotions including:

- Shock/denial - at the immediacy and severity of the injury along with the effect of having an ABI will have on their child.
- Anger/frustration - at the circumstances, of how it has impacted on family life and how their child's life will be different.
- Loss - cancelling/changing plans, financial losses, grieving the loss of the future they had previously anticipated for themselves and for their child.
- Resentment/guilt - resenting the changes, feeling as though they could have "done something different", feeling guilty for feelings of anger, resentment and frustration.
- Loneliness/Isolation - many parents report the gradual withdrawal of their friends as their lives have now taken different directions with different priorities. Not being able to work is also a big factor in these feelings of being alone and withdrawn from the outside world.
- Mourning - Grieving processes rarely end completely as a loved one remains in your life, but often as an altered person. It is common to mourn the personality and characteristics that have been lost while learning to relate to a different person. Mourning is never completed but can begin again with reminders of what has been lost which can be extremely difficult.

It is ok to not be ok all the time; these thoughts and feelings are completely normal.

As well as feeling intense worry, some may also experience emotional turmoil; such as feeling shock, numbness, isolation, and sadness. Being on an 'emotional rollercoaster' is never fun under any circumstances, let alone when trying to come to terms with an ABI in someone so close to you. When you find yourself on this 'rollercoaster', you may find that you don't know which way is up and which is down. Feeling as though you are moving at 100mph, your vision is clouded and you're not in control.

We all end up on this roller-coaster from time-to-time, but that is okay- its all part of being human.

Do not worry! This is the contrast of life. Nature is forever seeking balance. There are peaks and valleys, ebbs and flows, and everything that comes in-between. Having emotions is all part of the 'human experience' and know that there is nothing wrong with having negative emotions (other than the fact that they don't feel very good). We are emotional beings and we were given the gift of feeling, so don't ignore it or try to push it away. The only time that problems might arise, is when we allow ourselves to be pushed and pulled back and forth by these emotions. This 'yo-yo' effect has the ability to take a detrimental toll on both our physical and mental wellbeing (not to mention that during stressful times this can be exacerbated even further).

As humans, we tend to fall off track when identifying with emotions instead of labelling them as something you are experiencing in the moment. It might be a case of you're feeling alone- recognise that although you're feeling this way- this does not define you; it does not mean you really are alone. The goal is to recognize when you have lost control and then take it back. We do this by recognising and identifying our emotions as they arise. Being mindful of your emotions will help in accepting them and help you stay in control. It's only from this place that you will re-find the ability to refocus, rebalance, and recalibrate.

Life after brain injury can present various different changes, challenges and learning experiences for everyone who has been affected.

No family is every prepared to deal with a brain injury; the average family already has a full schedule and agenda of problems to deal with before clearing their desks to make way for the challenges ABI's can bring. The individuals who seem to cope best in situations such as these are those who possess two special qualities..

The first of these qualities is having the ability to be flexible. Not being rigidly tied to the idea of how things 'ought to be', but being able to embrace the changes and viewing them as a challenge. A challenge that can be faced and overcome. The second quality is having the ability to effectively communicate. Communicating openly and honestly, expressing emotions that are both positive and negative. A family who have the ability to be flexible and openly communicate are more likely to grow in strength through crisis, finding ways to deal with it as a unit, supporting one another where needed.

Being exposed to the fragility of life has the ability to give a whole new perspective and intensity to the love and relationships that existed prior to brain injury. Having a person with an ABI in the family often brings a new found awareness and sensitivity to other members of the family, bringing them closer together. The strongest families will only get stronger, leaning on one another, talking to one another, adapting, changing and growing together.

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