



Self-centeredness

The ability to view the world from someone else's point of view is a very complex cognitive skill that occurs in the frontal lobes of the brain. This is a very common area to be affected in a brain injury and other brain disorders which can cause self-centered behaviour.

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What is self-centered behaviour?

In some cases, survivors of a brain injury can appear to become very self-centered and display egocentricity that is more normally associated with a young child.

They lose the ability to see the world from another person's perspective and have little or no self-awareness about how their behaviour is impacting on others.

'Gavin used to be a thoughtful and considerate husband and father. We've made so many sacrifices since his hospital discharge but he says we have not been supportive. No matter what I'm doing he expects me to drop everything to do the smallest tasks and responds with outbursts the moment he doesn't get his way.'

'Before her stroke, Belinda was a great listener. But now she never takes an interest in my life any more, and gets frustrated when the kids want her attention.'

'I gave up my job to look after Andrew full time. This has been so exhausting that I've arranged respite one night a fortnight to have coffee with friends for an afternoon. Every time he sulks and complains that I don't really care about him.'

This inability to see another's point of view can be very destructive, as the family often cannot understand how a previously caring person now lives completely for themselves and has no insight into how they are affecting the family.

Why does it happen?

Although we take it for granted, the ability to view the world from someone else's point of view is a very complex cognitive skill. This is just one of many sophisticated mental skills that occur in the frontal lobes of the brain.

Unfortunately, this is a very common area to be affected in a TBI and other brain disorders. This is why self-centeredness frequently goes hand-in-hand with lack of self-awareness, anger, depression, fatigue and reduced social skills. Understanding the effects of brain injury and using strategies to reduce these effects will benefit everyone involved.

Impact on the family

Families are usually overjoyed when a loved one survives the initial trauma of acquiring a brain injury. After discharge, a relieved family will go to great lengths to help with the continuing rehabilitation process, usually making many sacrifices in time, money and effort on the road to recovery.

Family members can grow resentful over time if a person with a brain injury has trouble feeling or expressing gratitude for the sacrifices they have made. Friends can be even less likely to tolerate self-centeredness, leaving family as the only social network available.

In some cases, the person may be able to portray a cheerful caring unchanged personality around their old friends, but immediately revert to their self-centered behaviour when only the family is around. This is particularly difficult, as these friends may not believe the family when they talk about the difficulties of the new personality they are facing.



What the family can do

Often the hardest part for a family is accepting that self-centeredness is unlikely to go away. Some say that understanding that the TBI has caused the self-centeredness brings them to a point where they can accept the changes and enact strategies to manage the situations that arise.

Sometimes the family unwittingly contributes to the problem. In the early days after the injury, families may do everything for the patient. If the family member is self-centered they will lap up the attention, become dependent and expect to be the centre of everyone's world even more. Families need to be very firm in setting boundaries, and realise that they must look after their own needs as well as their loved one's needs.

It is important to understand that a person with brain injury is often not capable of being concerned about the rights and needs of their family.

In some cases, a person will not only be self-centered but very skilled at manipulating their family emotionally. If their demands aren't met, they try various strategies to get what they want. This can include threats, pleading, criticising the lack of compassion or sullen silences. Family members are often surprised that their loved one's skills in manipulation are so effective when their overall social skills have dropped significantly. In this case, it is vital for the family to have agreed-on boundaries for acceptable behaviour, refuse to be drawn into arguments and always be assertive.

Brain injury support groups can bring about some level of self-awareness as a result of seeing similar behaviours in others.

Another way to increase a person's awareness of their own self-centeredness can be through therapeutic sessions with a neuropsychologist. If an assessment indicates the person could benefit from therapy, the neuropsychologist will gradually gain the person's trust and begin exploring and challenging their beliefs and behaviours. With time this can gradually increase a person's awareness and insight into how their behaviour impacts on others.