

Relationship Changes After Brain Injury

Everyone wants to be loved, it's a fundamental human need. We all need people to talk to and laugh with, spend time with, share ideas, worries and joys. But after brain injury our relationships with partners, family and friends can often change quite significantly.

Some common statements people share with us after they or a loved one have experienced a brain injury are:

“ | *I am lonely all the time*

“ | *Our friends don't call or come by anymore*

“ | *I can't relate to other people*

“ | *Other people don't want to be around me or my loved one*

“ | *Who am I now? How do we fit together now as a family?*

“ | *No one understands me or what I'm going through*

“ | *I feel abandoned, rejected, unworthy and different.*

Why do relationships change after a brain injury?

After an injury, family roles can change; sometimes jobs are lost, finances can become a significant worry. Brain injury may have impacted or limited physical and cognitive function resulting in changes to a person's emotional, behavioural and mental state. With all these changes can come stresses on relationships.

We know that relationship dynamics frequently do shift after brain injury, and, adapting can be difficult, but the good news is that it can be done and relationships remain a significant positive factor in people's lives post brain injury.

PARTNERS

Partners of people with brain injuries will often take on extra responsibilities: sometimes becoming the sole wage earner, running the house, making most of the decisions and providing support to the person with the injury. A couple's financial situation can change due to medical bills and loss of income, and changes in their sexual relationship can often occur. Maintaining a relationship through changes across a number of levels can be challenging for both parties.

CHILDREN

A child may have to come to terms with why their parent has changed so dramatically after coming home from hospital – why their parent needs care, walks or talks differently, doesn't remember things, and may get easily upset. They might find it hard to understand what is happening to Mum or Dad and why things are different, particularly if they look the same as before. Many families report relationships can become strained between children and their parent post brain injury.

FRIENDS

A very common statement made by people with a brain injury is: 'you find out who your real friends are'. It can be hurtful when friends disappear at a time when you need them most. It's common for people who have spent a long time in hospital to feel that they have missed out on a lot of experiences with their friends and that they now have trouble relating to them and sharing their interests.

Simple strategies to improve your relationships

- With brain injury-related cognitive changes come changes to communication abilities, problem solving skills and the ability to empathise and see another person's point of view. It's easy to see how this can make things trickier in relationships for both the person with brain injury and the other party.
- Addressing some of these challenges during rehabilitation and long-term recovery can play a huge part in rebuilding and maintaining relationships. Understanding common problem areas of relationships – all relationships, not just those where brain injury is involved – can be key to knowing where you can benefit from support and guidance.

Effective communication

Poor communication is an area identified in many relationship problems. The way people talk (or don't talk) to one another can cause a lot of distress and tension within a relationship.

TIPS FOR ENHANCING COMMUNICATION

- Try not to speak while the other person is speaking – wait for them to finish talking before responding. You can set a limit of 5 or 10 minutes and then it's time for the other person to speak.
- Try to avoid blaming and labelling – blame doesn't achieve positive outcomes. Whereas clearly outlining difficulties provides opportunity for change.
- Encourage each other – look for positive ways to discuss things and phrase things in ways that build up the other person.

Better supporting each other

In order for a relationship to survive and thrive, each person needs to feel supported by their partner. There should be clear understanding and reasonable expectations around each other's needs for support.

TIPS FOR PROMOTING SUPPORT

- Take time to figure out what your needs for support are – think about what would make you feel more supported in the relationship. Is it that you need your partner to listen to you more? Or to back you up with the kids/in-laws? Or do you need more help around the home? Be really clear and consider writing it down.
- Talk! Communicate your expectations clearly to the other person – ensure that they understand what you're asking for and how they can assist.
- Be forgiving and patient – nobody is perfect, try to maintain a gentle and forgiving attitude and keep your expectations realistic.



Joint problem solving

Focusing on the solutions to our problems, rather than getting stuck in the problem itself, can help us deal with many of the things we face in our day to day lives. Problem solving together in a relationship can really help each other feel supported and part of a team.

TIPS FOR BETTER PROBLEM SOLVING

- Break down big problems into smaller ones and solve them one at a time – this will make overwhelming problems easier to manage.
- Think of all possible solutions before choosing one – sometimes the unusual solutions can be helpful or at least useful later on.
- Involve the other person and work as a team – both parties need a sense of shared ownership in the problem-solving process.

Quality time and positive experiences

In couple and family relationships people often get so busy they don't plan quality time to enjoy meaningful shared experiences together

TIPS FOR INCREASING QUALITY TIME AND ENJOYABLE SHARED EXPERIENCES

- Plan regular quality times together, making sure they are free from distraction, where you can really be present for each other and do the things you love.
- Make enjoyable shared experiences an ongoing growth area – find activities you both enjoy and continue to do them together, expanding and deepening your individual interests in the activities.