

NEW DIRECTIONS

A NEWSLETTER FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED BRAIN INJURY

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Coping With a Traumatic Brain Injury in the Family

If you are reading this, you probably already know that brain injury affects more than just the person with injury—it affects the entire family. While most families have faced difficulties before, usually they have never experienced anything similar to brain injury. Since our RRTC began in 1993, we have talked to many family members and have spent a lot of time researching the ways in which TBI affects the family and how family members cope with TBI. Here are some of the things that we have learned.

COMMON CHANGES IN FAMILIES AFTER INJURY

While everyone's situation is a bit different, there are some common changes that many family members experience.

- **Less time for themselves:** Many family members say that they have little time to do things they enjoy or just to relax. Much of their energy goes into taking care of their family member with injury or making sure that the household is running.
- **Financial Difficulties:** Many persons with injury are not able to return to work, so the family may be living on less money than before the injury. Families also report that they have many more medical bills than before the injury, and they may have difficulty getting government

aid, such as SSDI.

- **Role Changes:** After injury, family members usually don't have the same responsibilities that they did before. The family member who was injured may no longer be able to carry out the same activities as before. Other family members may try to take over those responsibilities and may become overloaded and stressed. Everyone may seem to have too much to do, or some family members may try to do everything.
- **Problems Communicating:** Things are often so hectic after injury that family members have very little time to just be together as a family. It may seem like everything is about the injury now, and family members may not know what is going on in each others' lives. Everybody in the family probably has feelings about the injury and the changes it has caused in their lives, but they may not know how to talk to each other about it.
- **Lack of Support or Help:** Before the injury family members may have known where to go to get help with different kinds of problems. But they usually find that few people have answers for them about the injury. People that they have trusted in the past, like doctors and teachers, may not be able to help them much with the injury. Their friends and coworkers

may also not understand what they are going through or be able to offer much help.

HOW DO THESE CHANGES AFFECT FAMILY MEMBERS?

Here are some common feelings that family members report:

- **Feeling sad or down:** Family members may feel blue and not know why. They may have less energy and may not enjoy things the way they used to. Some people start spending more time by themselves and they may cry more easily.
- **Feeling anxious or nervous:** Some family members report being nervous all the time. They may worry all the time about such things as finances, the future, and the health and well-being of their family member who was injured.
- **Feeling angry:** Many family members feel anger. Some may be angry at doctors or other professionals who they don't think are providing enough care. Others feel angry at other family members or at friends who give advice but don't seem to understand what they're going through. Still others are angry at their injured family member for not trying hard enough or for not appreciating what is being done to help them. Some people are angry at no one in particular, but are just

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angry that such a thing has happened to them.

- **Feeling guilty:** Guilt is a common feeling after injury. Some family members blame themselves for the injury, thinking they somehow could have prevented it. Others feel guilty that they cannot keep up with the things that need to be done from day to day. Some family members feel guilty about being angry, thinking that they have no right to feel that way.
- **Feeling frustrated:** Family members often have a lot of things to be frustrated about after the injury. Some of the things that frustrate people the most are: not being able to get the services they need; not having enough time to get things done; feeling that others don't understand what they're going through; and dealing with the things that their loved one can no longer do.

WHAT CAN FAMILY MEMBERS DO TO COPE?

Here are some suggestions that may help to reduce your stress. Everyone is different and what works for some people may not work for everyone. Try different things and find the ones that work best for you.

- **Realize that you are not alone.** There are thousands of other family members who are going through the same thing. You may not know any of them, but you can meet them through support groups and internet sites. *See the Resources box in this newsletter for support groups and web sites that you might be interested in.*
- **Try not to beat yourself up about the way you feel.** The emotions

you are experiencing are normal given your circumstances. Trying to ignore your feelings or telling yourself that you shouldn't have them can lead to problems like depression and can also have a negative effect on your physical health. Instead of ignoring the way you feel, talk to someone you trust. Just saying things out loud can make a difference.

- **Learn as much as you can about brain injury and its effects.** There is a lot of information out there that you may not have known about. *See the resources section in this newsletter for some sources of information that we think would be helpful.*
- **Learn to relax.** Taking a few moments to relax can help you to be more ready for the things you need to do. Even when you are trying to rest you may not be in a relaxed state because you are thinking about what you need to do tomorrow or how to solve a crisis. You need to train your body and mind to get into a relaxed state. *Try some of the relaxation activities in this newsletter.*
- **Learn how to reward yourself.** Even if you have very limited time, you can find some small way to reward yourself. Promise yourself a bubble bath at the end of the day. Take a walk around the block. Or have a cup of your favorite coffee or hot chocolate. If your schedule is very hectic, you may need to write this time into it. Try to ignore the voice in your head that makes you feel guilty for taking this time for yourself. You will be able to help your loved one more if you are healthy.
- **Ask for help when you need it.** If you're like most people, you probably place a lot of value on being able to handle things on your own. But the injury is a very

unusual circumstance and you need help to deal with it. You may need professional assistance, such as medical information or counseling. You may need practical help such as help getting the kids around or cleaning the house. Whatever you need, don't be afraid to ask for it. Others may want to help but not know how, and they may be glad when you tell them what you need. **ND**



COME VISIT OUR WEBSITE at

www.braininjuryresearch.org

Web sites operated by researchers with information for consumers:

www.braincenter.org/familycr.htm

www.neuro.pmr.vcu.edu

www.ohiovalley.org

www.vh.org

www.tbimo.org

www.bisociety.org

www.tbims.org

WEB SITES OPERATED BY CONSUMER ORGANIZATIONS:

www.biausa.org

Tbichat.org

Waiting.com/waitingbridge.html

www.caregiver.org

Relaxation Exercises That Can Help You Reduce Stress

Here are some things that can help people relax. All of them will not work for everyone. It's important to find the one you're comfortable with and to PRACTICE. You've spent a lot of time building up stress and it will take some time to learn to relax.



- **Focused breathing:** When you are stressed or upset, your breathing becomes quick and shallow. You begin taking short breaths from your chest rather than breathing deeply from your diaphragm (the muscle between the chest and abdomen that helps with breathing). Taking full breaths from your diaphragm puts your body in a relaxed state. Try the following exercise
 1. Lie down on your back in a comfortable place.
 2. Put your hands just below your belly button.
 3. Close your eyes and imagine a balloon inside your abdomen.
 4. Inhale fully (but not too deep), and imagine the balloon filling with air.
 5. Exhale slowly, and imagine the balloon collapsing (you can also imagine all the stress leaving your body).

Try this exercise several times during the day. Once you get the hang of it, you can do it sitting down or standing up as well as lying down.

- **Use a focus word or phrase:** This exercise can help you to rid your mind of negative thoughts and stress. Choose a focus word or phrase. Some people choose a word that has positive meaning for them (e.g., "peace"). Others choose something that's just easy to remember, like a number ("one"). Take full deep breaths from your diaphragm. Say

the focus word to yourself each time you breathe out.

- **Visual Imagery:** Lie down in a comfortable, quiet place and imagine yourself in a place where you feel calm and relaxed. It can be a place that you've been before or a place you've always imagined would make you feel relaxed. For example, you can imagine yourself on a beach, lying in the cool sand, feeling the sun on your face, and hearing the water lap against the shore. Try to sense all that is there—the feel of the sand, the sound of the water, the smells of salt water. If a beach does not seem relaxing to you, pick another place.

In order to train your body and mind to relax, you need to practice often. Don't give up if it doesn't work right away. If you keep practicing these techniques, you will feel more relaxed in the long run, and you will find that you're able to function better in all areas of your life. **ND**

RESOURCES

ADVOCACY, INFORMATION, & GENERAL HELP

- Brain Injury Association of Texas 713-326-1212 or 7-800-880-0821
- Houston Center for Independent Living – 713-974-4621
- Texas Brain Injury Network
Contact Person: Cheryl Amoruso 713-627-9239

MEDICAL CARE

- Harris County Hospital District Gold Card – 713-526-4243

DRIVING

- Driver Rehabilitation Services, p.c. 713-722-0667

EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, & SUBSTANCE ABUSE

- Harris County Psychiatric Center 713-741-5000

EDUCATION & EMPLOYMENT

- Texas Rehabilitation Commission 713-862-5294

FINANCIAL

- Social Security Administration (SSI & SSDI) – 1-800-772-1213

TRANSPORTATION

- Public Transit (Metro)—Half Fare for the Disabled – 713-635-4000
- Paratransit System (Metrolift & Freedom Pass) 713-225-0119

SUPPORTED LIVING

- Pine Tree Lodge – 281-487-3113

SUPPORT GROUPS

- Challenge Brain Injury Support Group – Contact: Lyn Cone 713-729-5162
- Brain Injury Association of Texas 512-326-1212 or 1-800-392-0040


Family Education Manual in Development

As part of our RRTC Center, Dr. Angelle Sander is developing an educational manual for family members. We know that there are a lot of educational resources that have been developed for family members. Most of them focus on educating family members about brain injury, including the course of recovery, cognitive and behavioral problems that can be expected, and strategies that can help to get around these problems. The manual that we are developing addresses all of these issues. However, it also focuses on helping family members to pay attention to their own needs by describing techniques that may reduce stress and help family members to feel closer to each other. The sections included

in the manual are:

- I. What is a traumatic brain injury?
- II. What problems may your loved one have after TBI and what can you do to help?
- III. How long will these problems last?
- IV. How does brain injury affect family members?
- V. Ways to reduce stress
- VI. Will my family ever get back to normal?
- VII. Where can you turn to for help?

The manual should be ready for distribution in late Fall 2001. Please contact Nancy Smith (713-666-9550; e-mail: smithn@tirr.tmc.edu) if you are interested in receiving a copy. Dr. Sander will also be sponsoring family group seminars addressing

the topics shown above. If you are interested in participating in one of these seminars, please contact us at the number shown above. 

THE NATIONAL DATABASE OF EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES ON TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

Looking for videotapes or written information on brain injury but finding it hard to know where to go? The National Database of Educational Resources on Traumatic Brain Injury is available to help you. The database can be found on the world wide web at www.braininjuryresource.org or if you do not have access to the internet you may call and request a FREE database search on two subject areas of your choice. The phone number is 713-797-5947.

Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on
Rehabilitation Interventions in Traumatic Brain Injury
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