

Coping with Brain Injury for Family and Friends

How you can help in the recovery of a person who has sustained a brain injury and how to look after yourself at the same time.



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Family and friends of an individual who has sustained a brain injury can often become overwhelmed by the changes they see in the person they love.

Impacts on relationships

Physical, cognitive and emotional limitations from the accident may place added pressure on family and friends due to increased stress and demands upon your time.

It can be easier to understand and deal with a visible physical injury which serves as a constant reminder that the person has been injured. By contrast, changes in the way a person behaves, feels and thinks may be harder to understand, accept and cope with as they are 'invisible', but frequently have a greater impact on relationships with family and friends.



Cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects

The cognitive, behavioural and emotional effects of a brain injury can be more limiting and harder to accept and overcome than the physical injuries, both for the person who has sustained the injury and their family and friends.

Family members of those who have sustained a brain injury often find themselves in a state of denial, finding it difficult to accept that their loved one has changed in any way. This is particularly common when there are no serious physical injuries.

You may feel as though the person you knew has been 'replaced' by somebody else and you may find it difficult to deal with the 'loss' of the person you knew.

You can help a loved one who has sustained a brain injury, by having a clear picture of how a brain injury can affect a person's mood, behaviour and personality.

For detailed information regarding this, please refer to factsheet no.6

Symptoms of brain injury such as increased fatigue or decreased attention are often seen as laziness, lack of motivation, or a sign that the injured person just isn't trying hard enough. For example, a lack of progress may be blamed on the person not working hard enough or may be believed to be because the individual lacks motivation.

Consequently, friends and family members might offer encouragement to 'try harder'. This may be well meaning or intended to motivate but it may actually be counterproductive leading to conflict, fatigue and increased stress.

Understanding changes in mood and behaviour

Anxiety, depression and behavioural changes are common after a brain injury.

The impact of the changes can also affect friends and other family members who may also feel upset. It can take everyone time to adjust to the changes so be patient and support each other through the process.

Brain injury can affect behaviour

Damage to some parts of the brain can affect a person's ability to control their moods and behaviour.

It is important to realise this is caused by the brain injury, so you must be fair and firm in setting limits around their behaviour and how they can treat you. Brain injury is not an excuse for bad behaviour.

What you can do to help

Encourage independence and discourage over-dependence

The family should encourage the person to do as much as is reasonably possible, within the limits imposed by the brain injury. This will foster self confidence and self esteem while reducing the risk of resentment when unreasonable demands are not met.

Set limits

Be clear around what you will not accept in terms of the way you will be treated. While brain injury is not an excuse, you need to be aware of the changes in behaviour that can result.

Make contact with local brain injury support groups

Your local Brain Injury Association will have a variety of support group options. Group meetings can be very helpful in facilitating individuals to understand their behaviour and their limitations, by networking with others in similar situations.



Looking after yourself

Understand your family member's current limitations.

Accept the fact they may not be able to do some of the things they were able to do previously. Take time to understand their injury so you can accommodate their needs and support their rehabilitation.

Don't 'Bottle Up' your feelings

Allow yourself to experience sadness. Sometimes counselling from a professional can be helpful with adjusting to the changes in your family member and in the family roles. Support groups may also be of benefit.

Make time for 'Me'

Try to take some regular time out for yourself so that you can remain strong to support your injured family member. You can't care for others if you don't take care of yourself!

Who can help?

Health Professionals and your local Brain Injury Association may be able to give you support and advice.

How can they help?

Clinical Psychologist

Can work with the family as well as the individual who has suffered a brain injury, to help you understand changes in thinking and feelings. They can help you find ways to cope with changes and learn how to best support your family member.

Social Worker

Can provide support to family members and help you find community resources which are available to you.

General Practitioner

Will help the family with their medical needs. Your GP can refer you to Health Professionals and recommend support services which may be helpful to you.

Brain Injury Association

Can provide you with education about brain injury, help you to understand the rehabilitation process and provide advocacy services. Local associations run support groups for family members as well as for individuals who are living with a brain injury.

Talking to others, whether they are Health Professionals or your family or friends, is a good way to share your feelings and gain some support.

For further information

Some of the other leaflets in this series may help or you can contact your local Brain Injury Association, ACC, Ministry of Health or Disability Resource Information Centres.

For more information go to:
www.brain-injury.org.nz

My important contacts:

Brain Injury Association:

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Case Manager:

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Doctor:

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Other contacts:

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