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## Brain Injuries

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### What is a Brain Injury?

A brain injury (sometimes called a head injury) is damage to brain tissue and is characterised by a loss of consciousness even for only a few moments. Traumatic brain injury is commonly caused by impacts to the brain in car accidents, falls, assaults and sports. Brain injury may also occur due to strokes, tumour and drug and alcohol abuse.

Anyone who has suffered such an injury may be left with these disabilities - memory loss, sensory loss, behavioural changes, lack of concentration or an inability to plan and be self-motivated. Some of these people are severely disabled and are unable to live independently.

### Symptoms

Many people who have acquired brain damage show no outward signs of disability. However, they may have significant hidden disabilities. No two injuries are alike. The extent and consequence of the damage varies widely from person to person.

*Ongoing problems may include:*

- Difficulty with thinking clearly, memory, maintaining concentration, tiredness, solving problems, planning and completing projects, making judgement, expressing oneself or understanding others, speaking, reading and writing.
- Problems with balance, special perception (judging distance), reduced mental and physical stamina, slower reflexes, headaches, sleep disturbances, seizures.
- Changes in sensory perception - sensitivity to noise, light and temperature, as well as changes to sense of smell and taste.
- Change in personality - irritability, intolerance, depression, anxiety, socially inappropriate behaviour, mood swings, uncertainty and lack of self confidence.
- Fatigue - tire more easily than most others, resulting in any disabilities becoming more pronounced.
- Many people with head injury endure interruptions to work, school or training, social and recreational activities and experience stress on friendships and relationships.

### How it affects

#### Behavioural Changes

Many people with brain injuries go through behavioural or personality changes. Not all of these changes are immediately obvious. They may get worse as time goes on and unfortunately, are unlikely to get better.

*It is possible that the worst aspects of the person's personality before the injury will become exaggerated afterwards.*

The person you care for may become more excitable, more irritable, more aggressive, less inhibited or much less emotional and caring. Every case is different. Behavioural changes caused by the injury may be made worse by the depression and grief caused by a physical disability (if any). People with head injuries are likely to sleep poorly, which contributes to irritability and depression. Sleep patterns may also be erratic.

*The brain injured person may:*

- Change the way they think about, or engage in, sexual activity
- Abuse you verbally, or talk too loudly, too much, or use language unacceptable in a situation (get abusive in social encounters)
- Become physically violent
- Become self-centred or egocentric
- Become rigid and inflexible in thinking (e.g. believing they are always right)
- Become impulsive and uninhibited
- Have difficulty managing money
- Find learning new things, new procedures, difficult
- Be forgetful

## Frustration

People with acquired brain damage are not necessarily intellectually disabled. However, they may have more trouble actually using their intelligence. This is extremely frustrating, particularly if they are talked down to.

## Treatment

Comprehensive rehabilitation is crucial if patients with brain injuries are to return to a normal life. Most patients are admitted for intensive care or neurological treatment and assessment before being transferred for rehabilitation. The transfer is made as soon as they are stable - the earlier rehabilitation begins, the better the outcome is likely to be.

Brain injuries are never simple. Patients will have a range of disabilities - physical, intellectual, psychological, behavioural or cognitive. Some lose the ability to speak or have other communication problems.

*Traumatic brain injury is the greatest cause of disability for people under the age of 40.*

Patients receive full individual assessment and specialist nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech language therapists, a clinical psychologist, a social worker and medical staff, help them work towards short and long term goals.

Rehabilitation is one small step at a time. They start with basic self-care and daily living skills, and gradually broaden out from there. The rate of progress is a very individual thing as it depends on the type, extent and complexity of the injury.

## How to Best Care for a Person with a Brain Injury

- If the person you are caring for is an adult, it is important that they do not feel they are being treated like a child. You may need to take responsibility for most of the planning but don't exclude them just because it takes longer with them involved.
- Avoid putting the person you are caring for under stress if you can. Prevent situations which require learning quickly or making swift decisions.
- Always try to speak calmly and quietly.
- Give simple, concrete directions.
- Your caree should take it easy when exercising.
- Plan rest breaks on your outings or during activities - don't let your caree get overtired.
- Identify situations in which aggression is most

likely to occur and try to work out how they might be avoided or changed, e.g. crowded and noisy situations can be confusing.

- Discourage use of video PC type games that have vivid colours and flashing lights as these can cause headaches and seizures.

## Practical Suggestions for Coping with Brain Injury

**Support:** Investigate access to and join support groups with others affected by brain injury and their families. Families are often left in a state of continual grieving, a problem not well understood by the wider community. It is important to seek counselling.

**Behaviour:** Changed behaviours can be distressing simply because they seem to make the person you care for a stranger. Worse, they may not realise that they have changed. Where violence is an issue, take steps to ensure that you are as safe as possible. Remind yourself that your caree is behaving this way because of their Brain injury.

## Where to go for Support

### Brain Injury Society (Canterbury) Inc.

The Brain Injury Society assists people with brain injuries and their families. They provide support, information, assistance and advocacy. They offer Social Workers; a monthly newsletter, covering issues of interest, personal stories and relevant information; and a library of resources related to brain injury including articles, books and videos. Most importantly the Brain Injury Society provides support groups, which meet monthly for people with brain injuries and their family members and carers.

For more information phone 03 351 9786

### Caring for Carers

Joining a carer support group can relieve some of the stress you are under as a carer. The constant tasks, the concerns, grief, drama, moments of joy, frustration and exhaustion are all part of the day to day existence of a carer.

*Caring for Carers* has a Newsletter and several support meetings each month and ongoing telephone support. These services are provided to help make your job easier.

*Caring for Carers* is situated:

4<sup>th</sup> floor, Securities House  
221 Gloucester Street, Christchurch.  
Postal address: P O Box 13 167, Christchurch  
Phone: 377 8426  
Fax: 377 8420  
Email: [caringforcarers@xtra.co.nz](mailto:caringforcarers@xtra.co.nz)