

Adjusting to Life with an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for people with ABI, family members and carers

Everyone has a different experience adjusting to life with ABI. For some people, usually those with more severe cognitive deficits, there may be little emotional response to the changes in their lives, or perhaps even little awareness of the changes. These people may go on to live happy yet simple lives, despite their significant impairments. However, for a much larger group of people, there is an acute awareness of the massive changes and losses in their lives as a result of ABI. This group are left with the difficult task of navigating their way through life with new and unfamiliar limitations. For all people with ABI, life has increased challenges and difficulties.

Despite the increased life challenges that exist following an ABI, there are people who seem able to adapt relatively well to their new lives, and some even report that life has improved since their ABI. There are some factors related to life circumstances that are known to assist with adjustment to trauma such as financial security, a lack of personal and emotional problems prior to the injury, and life stage at the time of injury. In addition to these life circumstances, there are also positive coping strategies that assist people to adjust to massive life changes and go on to live positive and rewarding lives.

If you have an ABI, and you are finding it difficult to adjust to life after your injury, the following may be helpful:

- Confronting and grieving the losses in your life is an important part of the adjustment process. Feeling sad about changes in your life and expressing this sadness is a healthy part of your recovery. You will always need ways to proactively deal with feelings that you find difficult. One of the best ways is to talk, talk, talk. This might be to a trusted friend, family member or counsellor.
- When you have found ways to accept and nurture your emotions around the changes and losses in your life, it is important to re-evaluate your life and determine what it is going to be about. This may mean letting go of roles you once had and finding new things on which to focus. Your injury may mean that you are no longer able to fulfil previous life roles. Perhaps sport or work was a focus and a passion prior to the injury but you no longer have the skills to perform at previous levels. It is important to find alternative ways of participating in these activities, or to find new things on which to focus if fulfilling previous roles is no longer realistic.

- If you have determined what you are interested in and capable of doing, it is helpful to invest yourself in these interests and activities to find meaning and pleasure in them. For example a person who was primarily a financial provider for their family prior to their injury, may have missed most of the pleasures of raising children. After the injury this person may invest time and energy into their children and have a relationship with them that otherwise would not have been experienced. It is important to be future focused and invest as much as you are able to into new roles, relationships, interests and jobs.
- It is also important that your life style post ABI fits in as well as possible with your current life stage. This means that teenagers should engage in teenage activities; young adults should engage in activities of interest to young adults etc.
- Many people may have come close to death as a result of their ABI. People who adjust well to life with ABI tend to see themselves as lucky to have survived and focus on gaining pleasure from their day to day lives and making the most of their second chance at life.
- It is also important that people around you are able to adjust to the impact that your ABI has on them in a positive way. One person in the family may have the ABI, but the whole family has to live with its impact. Your family will need to have time and opportunity to express their concerns, grievances and fears if they are able to participate in life in a new way. If the people around you are doing well, this makes adjustment easier for you.
- It is important that you focus on your achievements and the strengths and abilities that you **do** have, despite the ABI. Try to focus on roles and activities that utilise your strengths.
- Keep connected with as many people as possible. Do what you can do to maintain friendships. The love and support of good friends is an important part of life and can facilitate your adjustment immensely.
- When you are faced with difficulties, try to be proactive about addressing and dealing with them. This may involve seeking help from a rehabilitation worker, counsellor, or talking to a close friend or family member.

This information sheet has been prepared by Melbourne ABI Counselling. Melbourne ABI Counselling provides specialist counselling for people affected by Acquired Brain Injury. If you would like to discuss your situation with a counsellor, please feel free to contact our office on 1300 29 76 09.

For more information sheets on topics related to acquired brain injury please see <http://melbourneabiccounselling.com.au/abi-information-sheets.htm>