

Families and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for People with ABI and their Families

Whilst it may be one family member who sustains an ABI, it is the whole family that feels and lives with its effects. When a family member sustains an ABI, the family itself faces huge change and this change can be the most challenging, stressful and difficult that the family has ever experienced. Initially, family members are faced with the potential loss of a family member, then the hope of their recovery and then finally the adjustment to the way that the ABI will impact their capacity to function within the family unit. In the context of these huge changes, it is common for family members to feel lonely, confused, guilty, isolated and angry and to experience a decline in their mental health. Children within the family may display behavioural changes. Despite the massive stress caused by an ABI, some families seem to have greater resilience to manage this situation than others.

Below are some factors which may help you to manage your family life following ABI:

- There is inevitable stress within the family when one member of the family sustains an ABI. As such, it is helpful to be proactive about planning for the individual care and support that each family member will require at this time. This may involve adults taking time to consider their own needs, their partner's needs and those of children. The ABI will impact each person differently and therefore accessing support tailored to individual needs is important.
- It is important that families learn to talk openly about the ABI, the way it has affected the family and the concerns or questions it may generate with respect to family functioning. As a general rule, children tend to benefit from hearing clear, age appropriate information about what is going on around them. In the absence of this, children will decide for themselves what is going on which often results in self-blaming and thoughts that exaggerate or worsen the reality of the situation. Children may also require assistance to put into words what they are seeing and experiencing. They may need to be told, for example, that it is okay to feel angry

- or sad. The best way that children can be encouraged to communicate openly is through the modelling provided by the adults within the family. It is important that adults learn to talk about what is happening in the family and how they feel about the situation, in a non-blaming, clear and accepting way.
- Any stressful event in a family tends to bring out underlying family difficulties. This means that unaddressed grievances, differences in parenting styles or addictive behaviours that existed prior to the injury tend to get worse. It is important to be proactive about addressing these issues.
 - An ABI often requires family members to take on roles that are different to those they had within the family prior to the injury. It is important that these changes are well considered and that all family members are given a chance to have input into these changes and to express their feelings about new family roles.
 - Be mindful of the stage your family is up to in your family lifecycle. 'Family lifecycle' refers to the normal stages families go through (e.g. having children, raising children, children leaving home, parents adjusting to life without children at home). Do what can be done to promote your family's ability to continue to move through these cycles as opposed to stopping everything to care for the person with the ABI.
 - It is important that all members of the family receive regular updates regarding the family member's injury, as the impact of an ABI tends to change over time, particularly in the early months and years. This should include information regarding changed management strategies, the opportunity to ask questions and discussion around the future and what it holds for the person with ABI and the family.

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>