

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

Grief is an important part of the response to traumatic change for those whose lives have been impacted by ABI. The experience of grief is a normal and healthy way to respond to loss. It involves adapting to loss emotionally, cognitively, behaviorally and philosophically. Most people find accepting and expressing grief in response to loss extremely difficult, and the losses associated with ABI can be extremely complex.

Most losses associated with ABI are referred to as 'ambiguous losses'. An ambiguous loss is the loss of something that is ambiguous or abstract in nature, such as the loss of the ability to parent children independently, the ability to return to work, or the ability to speak clearly. Unlike more commonly recognised losses, such as the death of a loved one, ambiguous losses lack a formalised ritual, such as a funeral, during which grief can be acknowledged and expressed. Furthermore, ambiguous losses are poorly understood and often not recognised by others. In relation to the losses associated with ABI, it can be difficult to pin point what has gone forever, what is just different and what is different in a negative sense. As such, losses resulting from ABI are most likely going to be difficult for a person with ABI, their family and friends, to fully understand.

Trying to ignore grief is the most dangerous response one can have when it is felt. If grief is not accepted and expressed, then the pain of grief is likely to be prolonged and this can lead to ongoing emotional and psychological problems into the future.

How can people with ABI, their family and friends grieve in a healthy way?

- It is important to clearly identify the nature of the loss or painful change. For family members this may mean identifying exactly what the person with ABI is no longer able to do, or what has changed about their relationships with those around them. It may or may not be helpful to do this along side the person with the ABI, depending on their ability to deal with this feedback.
- Accepting and expressing feelings is the best way to respond to grief. This may involve talking with a trusted person or counsellor about how you feel, writing down how you feel in a journal, painting

colours, patterns or images that reflect how you feel or engaging in any other activity through which you can express your thoughts and feelings.

- Grief feels unpleasant but expressions of grief are helpful. They should not be a one-off occurrence, but rather a process that you build into your life and experience as often as you find helpful.
- Allow yourself to feel your pain. Allow yourself to cry.
- Do not insist on always being positive. Whilst people around you might expect you to be positive, this is not always helpful. If you are sad, you must allow yourself to feel it.
- Spend time with people who can empathise with you and allow you not to 'move on' before you are ready.
- If you are doing things to grieve in a healthy way and do not seem to be making any progress, it is important to consult a counsellor who has experience in ABI.
- Plan to be doing as many rewarding things in your days as possible. It is helpful to develop a weekly timetable of activities so that you are more likely to follow through and make these activities happen.
- Establish a plan for your life after ABI, including your goals for the future. Focus on your strengths and utilise the supports around you to work towards a future that is interesting, rewarding and realistic. Try not to live wishing that things were different.

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>