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Model Systems
Knowledge Translation
Center

Couples' Relationships After Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

A resource for individuals with TBI and their supporters



This presentation is based on TBI Model Systems research and was developed with support from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR).

Visit www.MSKTC.org for additional TBI resources.



Purpose of this Resource

- This presentation summarizes research on changes that may occur in relationships after a TBI.
- The information can help people with TBI and their partners understand common changes in their relationship after incurring an injury.

Couples' Relationships and TBI



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Traumatic brain injury can significantly change a couple's relationship.

The following life changes typically affect intimate relationships after a TBI:

- Changes in responsibilities
- Changes in relationship roles
- Changes and challenges in communication

How are relationships typically affected after a TBI?

How do responsibilities typically change?

- As TBI survivors focus on getting better, they often give up work and household responsibilities.
- Partners often assume responsibilities formerly managed by the survivor, such as:
 - Yard work and household maintenance
 - Managing household finances
 - Planning and organizing activities for the family
- There are new tasks for both survivors and their partners, such as managing the health care of the survivor.

What happens when responsibilities change?



- The injured person experiences more stress when responsibilities change.
- The stress of changes in responsibility can increase tension between partners.
- Partners with more responsibility have less time for other things, which affects how much time partners have to spend together.

Tips to Improve Relationship Issues Related to Responsibility Changes

- Be understanding about each other's new responsibilities.
- Take time and effort to note all the responsibilities your partner is managing.
- Notice and talk about these challenges to reduce tension in your relationship.
- Say “thank you.”
- Make a commitment to thank your partner for attempting to manage new responsibilities.
- Schedule opportunities to take breaks from responsibilities.

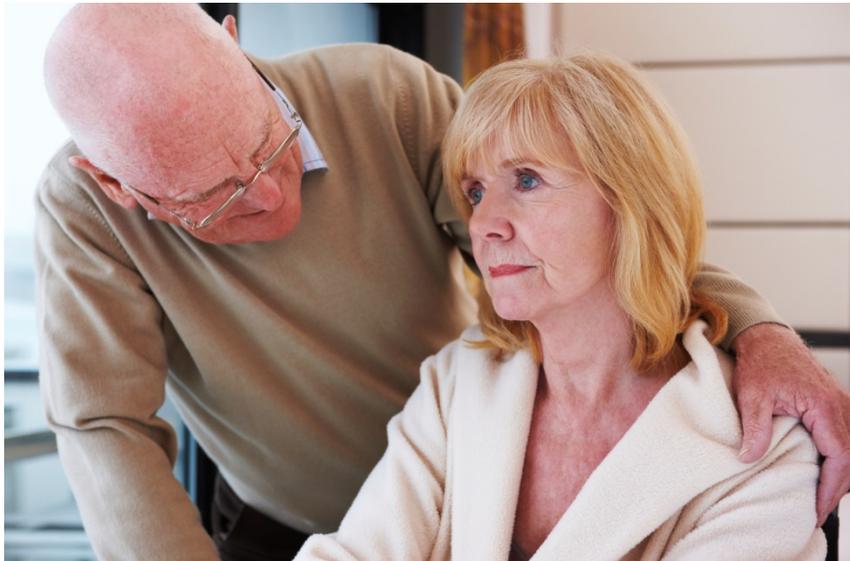
Relationship Roles



- In all families, people take on roles that often define how they behave.
- After TBI, the challenge of recovery nearly always results in some changes to the roles within a family.
- The uninjured partner may need to make decisions that are usually made by the person with TBI who is in the hospital.

How do relationship roles change after a TBI?

Changes in Relationship Roles



- TBI results in dramatic role changes that occur instantly and without preparation.
- Changes in roles may appear temporary; however, changes may last for years or even be permanent.
- The uninjured partner often takes on more leadership roles in the relationship.

What happens when relationship roles change?

- It may be harder for a couple to adjust to the change.
- Couples who keep tasks separate instead of alternating find it more challenging to adjust to new roles.
- Couples who have recently begun a new phase of their relationship, such as marriage, having children, or being a new “empty nest” couple, may have a more difficult time with changes in roles.
- Uncertainty and frustration can result in increased criticism between partners.
- People close to the couple may not understand the need for role changes.

Tips to Improve a Relationship When Roles Have Changed

- Identify where role changes occur and talk about these changes openly.
- Serve as mentors and consultants for one another.
- Be conscious to not criticize the partner who is taking on a new role.
- Support one another in the new roles.
- Educate family and friends about brain injury and the changes it brings.
- Have open communication with family and friends so they can understand and better support role changes.

Communication



- Communication is the foundation of a relationship.
- Communication takes place through gestures, facial expressions, and emotional reactions, as well as physical interactions.
- In studies on relationships after brain injury, people often report the biggest changes in the area of communication.

Changes in Communication

For the partner of an individual with a TBI, common changes can include:

- Talking less
- Talking more
- Communicating more intensely or urgently.

For both people in a relationship, common changes can include:

- Increased stress levels, which affect communication
- Fear that sharing negative thoughts or feelings will burden their partner.

What happens when communication styles and patterns change?



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- Both partners can feel alone and isolated.
- One partner may not understand what the other is thinking or feeling.
- Difficulty communicating can cause partners to pull away from their relationship.
- Communication struggles can affect all parts of a relationship and make it difficult to adjust to changes together.

Tips for Improving Couples Communication

- Make a commitment to improve communication with your partner.
- Listen patiently to what your partner is saying.
- Listen for points where you can agree rather than focusing on disagreement.
- When you disagree, think about what you might say before you say it.
- Be patient—survivors may need more time to think about what their partner is saying and how they want to communicate.

Tips for Improving Couples Communication

- Take notes on your thoughts during conversations rather than immediately saying what comes to mind. Revisit points after you have had time to reflect.
- Exchange bulleted lists of important points for big discussions.
- When a topic is likely to cause a disagreement, practice what you would like to say in a mirror before you start the conversation:
 - Look at facial expressions, gestures, and body language
 - Choose your words carefully.
- When you talk, try to stick to what you practiced.

Physical Intimacy/Sexual Relationships



Most couples notice significant changes in their sexual relationship after TBI due to:

- Hormone levels as a result of injury
- Roles in the sexual relationship
- Appearance, self-confidence, and/or attraction
- Areas of sexual interest.

Tips for Improving Intimate Relationships

- Find a therapist that can help with your specific situation.
- Try a support group that helps couples establish new friendships.
- Find local information and resources.
- Spend time apart for reflection.
- Consider Web-based support groups and communities.
- Commit to establishing a positive environment and look for opportunities to have fun as a couple.

Considerations in New Relationships

- If you are in a new relationship, the process of recovery can be more complicated.
- Uncertainty over roles can result in confusion and uncertainty, and make one wonder:
 - “Who am I in this relationship?”
 - “Who are we together?”
- Couples in a new relationship can take a positive approach to recovery.
- Couples in new relationships are not tied to old ways of doing things and thus have more freedom in their relationship.

Considerations in Nontraditional Relationships



- Individuals who identify as gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, or heterosexual and unmarried may experience more complicated issues.
- The lack of understanding of nontraditional relationships may impact a couple's ability to obtain care and impact the success or failure of a relationship.
- A caregiving partner may try to build relationships with the survivor's family members who are supportive.
- Consider counseling for added support and guidance.

Concerns About Divorce or Separation



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- Some studies suggest that divorce and separation rates may actually be lower after brain injury than for the rest of the population.
- Rather than focusing on the possibility of divorce or separation, couples should focus on improving the quality of their relationship with one another.

For additional resources on living with a traumatic brain injury, please visit the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center website at www.msktc.org

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