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Model Systems
Knowledge Translation
Center

Emotional Problems 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 emotional problems that may occur after a TBI.
- The information can help people with TBI understand why they may experience changes in the way they feel or express emotions.

Emotional Lability



- Some people with brain injury may experience emotions very quickly and intensely but with very little lasting effect.
- The person may get angry easily but get over it quickly.
- They may describe it as being “on an emotional roller coaster” in which they are happy one moment, sad the next, and then angry.

What causes emotional lability?

Causes of Emotional Lability

- Mood swings and emotional lability are often caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control emotions and behavior.
- Often there is no specific event that triggers a sudden emotional response.
- In some cases, the TBI can cause sudden episodes of crying or laughing. These emotional expressions or outbursts may not have any relationship to the way the persons feels.
- In some cases, the emotional expression may not match the situation.
- Usually the person cannot control these expressions of emotion.

What can be done about emotional lability?



- Emotional lability often improves in the first few months after injury, and the person may return to a more normal emotional balance and expression
- In the meantime, you can:
 - Talk to a physician or psychologist to find out the cause and get help with treatment
 - Seek counseling for the family to help members cope better.
 - Talk to our health care provider about medications to help improve or stabilize mood. 6

What can family members and others can do?

- Remain calm if an emotional outburst occurs, and avoid reacting emotionally yourself.
- Take the person to a quiet area to help him or her calm down and regain control.
- Acknowledge feelings and give the person a chance to talk about feelings.
- Provide feedback gently and supportively after the person gains control.
- Gently redirect attention to a different topic or activity.

Anxiety

- Anxiety is a feeling of fear or nervousness that is out of proportion to the situation.
- People may experience anxiety or feel anxious about making too many mistakes or failing a task.
- Situations such as being in crowds, being rushed, or adjusting to a sudden change in plans can be harder to handle after a TBI.
- Some people may experience overwhelming anxiety, called a panic attack.
- Anxiety may be related to a very stressful situation—sometimes the situation that caused the injury gets replayed in the person’s mind over and over and interferes with sleep (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

What causes anxiety after TBI?

Causes of Anxiety



- Difficulty reasoning and concentrating
- Too many demands and/or time pressures on the injured person
- Being in situations that require a lot of attention and information processing

What can be done to control anxiety?

- Reduce the environmental demands and unnecessary stresses that may be causing anxiety.
- Provide reassurance to help calm the person and allow them to reduce their feelings of anxiety when they occur.
- Add structured activities into the daily routine, such as exercising, volunteering, church activities, or self-help groups.
- Take medications to help with anxiety, seek counseling, or do both.

Depression

- Feelings of sadness, frustration, and loss are common after a TBI. These feelings often appear during the later stages of recovery after the individual has become aware of the long-term situation. If these feelings become overwhelming or interfere with recovery, the person may be suffering from depression.
- Some symptoms of depression may include feeling sad or worthless, changes in sleep or appetite, difficulty concentrating, withdrawing from others, loss of interest or pleasure in life, feeling tired and sluggish, or thoughts of death or suicide.

What causes depression after a TBI?

Causes of Depression After TBI



- Struggling to adjust to temporary or lasting disability and loss or changes in one's roles in family and society
- Injury to areas of the brain that control emotions
- Biochemical and physical changes in the brain

What can be done about depression?



- Antidepressant medications and/or counseling from a mental health professional familiar with TBI should be considered.
- Aerobic exercise and structured activities during each day can reduce depression.
- It is best to get treatment early to prevent needless suffering.

Temper Outburst and Irritability

- Family members of individuals with TBI often describe the injured person as having a “short fuse,” “flying off the handle” easily, being irritable, or having a quick temper.
- The injured person may yell, use bad language, throw objects, slam fists into things, slam doors, or threaten or hurt family members or others.

What causes temper outburst after a TBI?

Causes of Temper Outburst After TBI

- Receiving an injury to the parts of the brain that control emotional expression
- Experiencing frustration and dissatisfaction with the changes in life brought on by the injury, such as loss of one's job and independence
- Feeling isolated, depressed, or misunderstood
- Having difficulty concentrating, remembering, expressing oneself, or following conversations
- Tiring easily
- Experiencing pain

What can be done about temper problems?



- Reduce stress by decreasing irritating situations.
- Learn anger management skills such as self-calming strategies, relaxation, and better communication methods.
- Take certain medications prescribed to help control temper outburst.

Ways That Family Members Can Help

- Try not to take temper outburst personally because the anger and irritable feelings are due to the brain injury.
- Do not argue with the injured person during an outburst.
- Do not try to calm the injured person down by giving in to his or her demands.
- Set some rules for communication.

- Let the injured person know that it is unacceptable to yell, threaten, or hurt others.
- Refuse to talk to the injured person when he or she is yelling or throwing a temper tantrum.
- After the outburst, encourage the injured person to discuss the problem in a calm manner and suggest other outlets for prevention of the same situation.

Question To Ask Your Doctor To Gain Understanding

- Would psychological counseling be helpful?
- Would an evaluation by a psychiatrist be helpful?
- Are there medications that can help?

More About Medications

If you or your family member is taking medication for these problems, make sure to work closely with your health care provider and remember:

- There can be a delay until the beneficial effects of medications are felt.
- Your doctor may need to adjust the dose for maximum benefit.
- You may need to try one or more different medications to find the one that works best for you.
- Except in an emergency, you should not stop taking a prescribed medication without consulting your doctor.

Peer and Other Support Groups

You may benefit from:

- Joining a brain injury support group—some specialize in supporting people with TBI
- Receiving peer monitoring, in which a person who has coped with a TBI gives support and suggestions to someone struggling with similar problems
- Checking with your local Brain Injury Association chapter for more resources
- Talking to someone you consider to be a good listener

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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