

Living with a Traumatic Brain Injury

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“I don’t know what to do! I want so much to help her”, Julie said. “Of course I’m glad that she’s home, but it’s hard to predict her mood. I don’t know who she is anymore. She’s sure not the girl who left home three years ago.” Julie’s daughter, Angela, had returned after 3 years at college to live at home for a while. A couple of sports-related concussions and a head-on car wreck within the same year had left her with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). Julie described her daughter as smart, outgoing, and a talented athlete who had been awarded an athletic scholarship out of state. Angela thrived in college her first 2 years. She had suffered a pre-season concussion followed by another in her first conference game early in her 3rd year, but had recovered reasonably well. Several months after her athletic season, a drunk driver hit her car head on while she was driving near campus.

The initial symptoms of her brain injury were much more pronounced after the wreck than those from her sports injuries. Angela became extremely sensitive to light and sound, and she had a migraine-like headache for weeks. She had difficulty focusing and following a conversation. She fatigued quickly. Her balance was so compromised that she had to use a walker at first.

Her emotional state could change in an instant. Julie had been in regular contact with Angela and her doctors, so she intellectually understood what Angela had been facing. Once Angela was released from the hospital, Julie brought her daughter home to recover.

In short order, Julie felt as if she had sent one person to college and brought a different person home. Angela was uncharacteristically cranky, and had little patience for suggestions, noise, or offers of help. She managed to work a part-time job, but came home exhausted every day, with very little interest in interacting with her mom. She regularly forgot her doctor’s appointments. She often reacted to everyday situations dramatically. Julie found herself confused, exhausted, heartbroken, and stressed out trying to make sense of the situation and still help Angela recover.

Julie needed a plan to do 3 things - take care of herself, learn more about TBIs, and connect with a community of caregivers. First, I encouraged Julie to prioritize taking care of herself. She needed space to grieve the daughter she’d lost so she could begin building a relationship with the daughter she had. Also, she needed to make sure she was getting enough sleep, exercise, etc. We’re not able to help anyone if we’re not squared away ourselves!

Next, I encouraged her to learn more about TBIs and the neuro-fatigue that many people with TBIs face. Angela was displaying symptoms of an injury, not intentionally trying to fight with Julie. The more Julie could understand common TBI symptoms, the easier it would be for her to avoid taking them personally. Then she could think more clearly about how to respond. Finally, I suggested that Julie connect with others caring for loved ones with TBIs through online communities such as brainline.org or caregiver.org. Talking with those who had already been through her situation would help her make a plan for navigating Angela’s recovery. Over time, Julie was able to remember that her daughter was injured and trying to heal. She was able to set up her home to minimize Angela’s discomfort and upset, and became more skillful at managing the upsets when they came. Julie became more strategic about finding time to connect when Angela still had energy, and found it easier to notice when Angela’s symptoms improved a bit.

Whenever a loved one goes through a traumatic experience, life is not the same. It requires that we adjust to new realities. Taking time and counsel for making a plan to do this is an essential step in healing. So, where are you having to adjust to new realities with loved ones?
