7 Pathways For Reconnecting After Traumatic Brain Injury

Solutions for Couples

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Introduction

With a health care career that spans 40 years, I bring a unique blend of skills to help individuals and couples navigate through this life-changing experience.

Early in my career, I worked as a speech pathologist, learning about the intricate workings of the brain. After working at a world-renowned brain injury rehabilitation center, I went on to serve as a clinical director of brain injury clinics in California and Utah, ultimately opening my own psychotherapy practice to serve thousands of individuals and couples who were struggling to recover together. Over the years, I have acquired and developed proven strategies that I want to share with you. When you’ve sustained a traumatic brain injury, nothing feels the same as it did before. The injured partner’s physical, cognitive, and emotional pain can be devastating — but the uninjured partner faces tremendous grief and confusion too.

You Didn’t Plan for This

Immediately following a TBI, all of the focus is on the injured person. Medical teams identify the physical injuries, then you become overloaded with medical appointments and a sudden shift in roles and responsibilities. Because the injured person looks normal, you expect everything to be "normal" after a few months or after rehab is complete. Months — and sometimes years — later you both realize things just aren’t the same. The injured person may look like himself, but he doesn’t act like himself. You feel as though you’re living with a stranger, and your partner feels like they’re living with someone else’s brain.
7 Pathways For Reconnecting after Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

- What the doctors didn’t tell you
- Grief and loss
- New roles and responsibilities
- Communication
- Sex
- Self-Care
- Hidden Blessings
7 Pathways to Reconnecting after TBI
Solutions for Couples

1 What the Doctors Didn’t Tell You

- The brain can take weeks, months, or years to heal.
- There will be a sudden change in roles and responsibilities.
- There may be changes in personality, behavior, and thinking.
- There may be challenges in communication because the injured partner will become fatigued, can’t think of words, and can’t track conversations.
- The brain is working 10 times harder than before the injury, so fatigue sets in quickly. Because you can’t predict fatigue and the level of function can vary from day to day, you may not be able to depend on your injured partner to be consistent.
- The injured partner may be sensitive to noise and light.
- You, the caretaker, may become fatigued, resentful, and burned out. You may have thoughts such as, “How do I go back to be a wife/husband again?”
- Many of your friends and family won’t get it. They won’t understand what you’re going through because it seems as though enough time has passed, and the injured partner looks normal.
- You will need a team of specialists to support you along the way, and members of this team can change over time.

SOLUTIONS

- Gaining accurate information will allow you to get a strong start and a supportive team in place to help you move through this process. You can end up stronger than you were before.
- You can learn new skills to compensate for what you’ve lost, and the brain can develop new neural pathways.
- Reach out to a speech pathologist, psychotherapist, and neuropsychologist for guidance and support.
Grief and Loss

You’ve lost a lot, but you don’t need to lose each other.

Because healing takes place over years and the injured partner may have residual problems as time goes on, you may be constantly reminded of your old life every time you can’t do something you used to do. Dreams fade as what is becomes more real.

The grief you’re feeling is very different from the grief you might feel when someone dies. The type of grief you’re feeling is referred to as “ambiguous loss.” Although your partner is still here and still looks the same, they aren’t the same. There are changes in their personality, behavior, and communication patterns. Friends and family may begin dropping off because they just don’t understand why you can’t move on and be happy. You start feeling scared, angry, and hopeless. But then you may see glimmers of your old life together and begin to feel hope.

SOLUTIONS

- Accepting your new reality doesn’t mean you’re admitting defeat.
- Develop the emotional flexibility to move back and forth between feeling what you lost and being present with what is.
- Identify what you’re feeling and express it. What you’re both feeling makes total sense and you are having all the right feelings based on what you are going through. Knowing this will encourage you to take the first step in having a conversation.
- Be angry at what happened to you both, but don’t be angry with each other.
- Give yourself time to adjust.
- Get support to learn to live with ambiguity and unpredictability. Remind yourself that you aren’t alone and get support from a therapist and from TBI support groups in your community.
Roles and Responsibilities

Your life changed in an instant. Some of the most significant ways that it changed include how you depend on each other. The uninjured partner takes on additional responsibilities, which may include managing finances, paying bills, and taking care of the household. In addition, it may be necessary to be sure the injured partner takes medications, eats healthy foods, and gets to all necessary medical appointments. But you can learn how to redistribute responsibilities.

SOLUTIONS

1. Create a list of all of the responsibilities that you need to attend to.
2. Identify the injured partner’s current strengths.
3. Make a new list that clarifies to both of you who is doing what based on the injured partners strengths.
4. Give yourself time for both of you to learn to trust and feel comfortable with each other with your new roles and responsibilities.
4 Communication

Knowing how to have difficult conversations with each other is the most important skill you can learn. You both may be having many conflicting feelings. The injured person may be feeling shame and embarrassment about their changes in thinking and personality. They may not want their partner to know that they aren’t tracking conversation because their brain is overloaded. They may withdraw and isolate. The uninjured partner may be feeling guilty for being angry, resentful, and impatient with their partner. To protect their partner, they may not share their true thoughts and feelings. They may also withdraw and isolate.

Not talking will only make things worse and will create more resentment and emotional distance. It’s normal to feel scared of talking honestly with each other. You may be afraid of starting a fight or hurting the other person. Worse yet, you may feel as though they might leave you.

**SOLUTIONS**

- Identify a quiet space where you won’t be interrupted.
- Limit your conversation to 20 minutes. Setting a timer can help you stick to this limit.
- Identify how you both want to behave during the conversation. For example, “I want to be calm, open, loving, and curious.”
- Begin by identifying one concern to discuss.
- Don’t take what your partner says personally. Don’t defend yourself, criticize, or blame. These are your partner’s feelings, and they’re about them. They are a separate person from you.
- Express appreciation when your partner is honest with you. This will encourage more openness and communication as you move forward.
Sex

The caretaker often feels like they’ve lost “the feeling.” You may feel as though you’re more of a parent now rather than a lover or a partner. The injured partner may say, “I don’t have confidence in the bedroom. I’m scared and anxious that I won’t be able to perform.” You both may feel a loss of desire for each other.

There are many factors that contribute to these challenges. Following a brain injury, hormones may change. This may cause a diminished or a completely absent libido. These hormonal changes may also affect physiological feedback so that the body doesn’t generate feelings of arousal.

Medications impact one’s sexual responses and desire. It’s important to review those with your physician to be aware of the side-effects of your partner’s medications. The injured partner may also be limited physically by pain, sensitivity to touch, or headaches. The injured partner could also be depressed and feel a loss of self-esteem. On top of that, difficulty with attention, concentration, initiation, and memory can have an impact on desire. Your partner may also have forgotten past sexual experiences that you have shared.

SOLUTIONS

- Take the pressure off to have intercourse.
- Go slow and experiment with ways of touch and with other erotic pathways.
- Talk about what feels good to you.
Self-Care

Taking care of an injured partner can be profoundly stressful. You’ve taken on additional responsibilities, and you’re tirelessly tracking your partner to be sure they’re taking their medications, making it to all of their appointments, and eating properly. You’ve adjusted to so many changes, and, after a while, you may just get plain tired, feel resentful, or feel overcome with stress.

SOLUTIONS

- Ask for help from trusted friends and family
- Seek counseling
- Get enough sleep
- Journal
- Take time away to do something just for you
- Be still / Meditate / Do yoga
- Maintain good nutrition
- Engage in a hobby
Hidden Blessings

This is an opportunity for you both to create an even stronger relationship than you had before the injury. Although injured, your partner’s heart and soul remain intact, even if their personality and behaviors may be different.

Prior to the injury, the injured partner may have been a perfectionist or may have overworked. These are personality traits that can get in the way of experiencing emotional intimacy and living a balanced life. The brain injury provides an opportunity to make changes—ones that probably wouldn’t have happened if the injury hadn’t occurred.

Relationship patterns that existed prior to the injury (e.g., avoiding conflict, repeating arguments, blaming, and criticizing) can finally be addressed with proven strategies that have helped thousands of people build amazing, healthy, and satisfying relationships.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Opportunity to grow individually and as a couple
- Become clear on what matters most to you individually and together
- Opportunity to create an even stronger relationship than before
I want you to know that you don’t have to struggle alone. There is support out there for the both of you, so you don’t need to figure this out by yourselves.

1. Begin by reaching out to the Brain Injury Alliance in your state. They have a wealth of information, and they’re a great resource. They can direct you to providers who can help you.

2. Visit my blog here.

3. I recently did a series of complimentary “Ask Lori” live sessions. You can listen here.

4. If you want to receive more personalized guidance join me for my new private Facebook Community — “Ask Lori” Going Deeper with the 7 Pathways. Learn more about it here.
7 Pathways For Reconnecting TBI
Detailed View • Solutions for Couples

What the doctors didn’t tell you
- Gain accurate information to get a strong start in this process
- Learn new skills compensating for what was lost
- Reach out to specialists for support

Grief and loss
- Acceptance of your reality
- Identify and express your feelings
- Give yourself time to adjust
- Develop emotional flexibility
- Be angry at what happened, but not at each other
- Get support as you learn to adjust

New roles and responsibilities
- Create a list of your responsibilities
- Identify the injured partner’s current strengths
- Make a new list of responsibilities for both based on the injured partner’s strengths
- Give yourself time for these new roles and responsibilities.

Communication
- Find quiet space where you won’t be interrupted
- Limit conversation to 20 minutes — set a timer
- Convey how you both want to behave during the conversation
- Identify one concern to discuss
- Don’t take what your partner says personally
- Don’t defend yourself, criticize, or blame
- Express appreciation when your partner is honest — this will encourage more openness and communication

Sex
- Remove the pressure to have intercourse
- Go slow and experiment
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Self-Care
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