Emotional Changes After a Traumatic Brain Injury

Some people with Traumatic Brain Injury or “TBI” often have a hard time controlling their emotions.

“EMOTIONAL LABILITY”

Some people with TBI may have intense mood swings. They may go from feeling happy, to angry, to sad very quickly. Usually they can't control this.

“EMOTIONAL LABILITY” can be caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control emotion.

Dr. Cushing told me that my emotions will probably become “more normal” after the first few months.

For now my family and I are talking to counselors to help us cope.

If you or your loved one are experiencing this, the first step is to talk to your doctor.

Great question! Here's a list of a few things you can do to help...

1. Remain calm, avoid reacting emotionally.
2. Gently change the subject or suggest doing something else.
3. Get them to a quiet area. This will help them regain control.
4. Give the person a chance to talk calmly.
5. Acknowledge their feelings.
6. Provide feedback gently and supportively after they regain control.

That's great! Counseling can help you manage your emotions better. There are also medications that can stabilize mood.

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Anxiety is a feeling of fear or nervousness that’s too strong for the situation. People with TBI may feel anxious without knowing why...

People with TBI may get anxious about how well they’re able to do things.

Being rushed, being in crowds, or sudden changes in plans can cause anxiety.

Sometimes the memory of how a person got injured gets played over in their head and interferes with sleep.

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a form of anxiety that can occur after an accident and can be triggered by reminders of the injury.

Anxiety often happens when there are too many demands on a person...

Why Does Anxiety Happen?

After a TBI, anxiety is very common, especially when there are a lot of demands, like taking a test, or being in a noisy environment.

I get anxious when I’m driving, especially when I’m trying to find someplace new.

I’m getting anxious just thinking about that stuff...

SO WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT ANXIETY?

Try to reduce environmental stresses that cause anxiety.

Counseling is good for managing anxiety, there are also medications that can help. Discuss these options with your doctor.

Add structure or routine to daily activities.

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**What Causes Depression After a TBI?**

Depression can arise as someone struggles to adjust to a temporary or lasting disability. People may become depressed when adjusting to their new role in their family or community. Depression can also be caused by chemical changes or damage to parts of the brain that control emotions.

**What Can Be Done About Depression?**

Depression is not a sign of weakness. You can’t just “get over it”. Depression is an illness. Aerobic exercise and daily routines helped me reduce my depression. Either counseling, medication, or a combination of both can help some people with depression.

It’s best to take action as soon as possible. If you or someone you love has these symptoms, talk to your doctor. Don’t wait!
FAMILY MEMBERS OR INDIVIDUALS WITH TBI OFTEN DESCRIBE HAVING A “SHORT Fuse” OR A QUICK TEMPER.

STUDIES SHOW THAT 71% OF PEOPLE WITH TBI ARE FREQUENTLY IRRITABLE.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

...I'M FRUSTRATED AND UNHAPPY WITH HOW MY LIFE HAS CHANGED.

...I FORGET THINGS AND CAN'T CONCENTRATE WELL.

...I FEEL ALONE, DEPRESSED AND MISUNDERSTOOD.

...I HAVE DAMAGE TO THE PART OF MY BRAIN THAT CONTROLS EMOTIONS.

...I LOST MY JOB AND A LOT OF MY INDEPENDENCE.

...I GET TIRED EASILY.

...I'M IN A LOT OF PAIN.

PEOPLE WITH TBI GET ANGRY FOR MANY REASONS...

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY TEMPER AND IRRITABILITY?

REDUCE STRESS AND DECREASE IRRITATING SITUATIONS.

PEOPLE WITH TBI CAN LEARN SOME BASIC ANGER MANAGEMENT SKILLS LIKE SELF-CALMING, RELAXATION TECHNIQUES AND BETTER COMMUNICATION.

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Don’t argue with them while they are having an outburst; let them calm down first. When the person is calm, set rules for communication. Don’t give in just to calm them down after the outburst is over; have a conversation.

Some other ways to calm down are meditation, leaving the room, or going for a short walk (but make sure to tell people when you will be back).

Counseling, medication, or a combination of both can be helpful when working with a doctor. Don’t take it personally; remember their anger is due to their injury.

Make sure they know that it is not ok to threaten to hurt people or yell at them.

If you or someone in your family is dealing with depression, anxiety or emotional lability...

...talk to your doctor and ask them if medication, a psychological evaluation, or counseling could help.

Family Members Can Help Too!

What’s the Next Step?

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A brain injury support group can be a fantastic source of peer support; some groups are open to people with TBI or their family members; other groups are open to everyone.

More about Medications

If you or your family member are taking medications for any of these problems, it's important to work closely with your doctor and be sure to keep your follow up appointments.

It may take some time to see results. Be patient.

There can be a delay before the medication starts working.

Your dose may need to be adjusted by your doctor or you may need to try different medications before you find the one that works best. Except in an emergency, do not stop taking the medication your doctor has prescribed without talking to them first.

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Peer Support and Other Resources

Contact your local brain injury organization to find out what resources they may be able to offer!

Remember not all help comes from health care professionals!

Peer mentoring is when somebody who is in the same situation helps you cope with problems they may have dealt with themselves.

We can help!

I had that too. It got better after a few months.

I laugh at strange times.
SOURCE

The health information presented in this Graphic Fact Sheet is based on evidence from research and/or professional consensus and has been reviewed and approved by an editorial team of experts from the TBI Model Systems.

AUTHORSHIP AND ILLUSTRATION

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