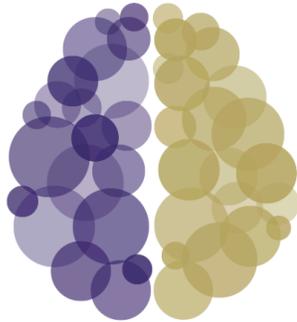


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We hope you enjoy the Winter Edition of our newsletter.

Sent on behalf of the Traumatic Brain Injury Model System (TBIMS) Research Study.



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY  
MODEL SYSTEM

PATIENT CARE • RESEARCH • EDUCATION & TRAINING

# TBI Model System Updates

Winter 2026  
Volume 24  
Issue 1



Welcome to our Winter Newsletter!

Spring is almost here. The days will start to get longer. The sun will start to break through the clouds. The animals will wake from hibernation and humans will want to cure their cabin fever.

However, going out into the world and being with other people is not always easy. People who have experienced a traumatic brain injury may know this better than most. Lately everyone seems to be feeling less connected. A study from Harvard University in 2024 found that many Americans feel very lonely. More than one-third of adults said they feel lonely, and over half of young adults feel this way as well.

Loneliness can make us feel disconnected from others, which can cause us to want to spend more time alone. This can lead us to then feel even more alone. It's a vicious circle a lot of us are trapped in and it's driving us further apart. Luckily, there's a bright side...we are not alone!

Most people want to connect with other people.

Building connections can help reduce loneliness. In this newsletter, we will look at places to meet other people and ways to build connections. One step at a time, each of us can try to reverse this common trend.

### **In this issue:**

1. **The Benefits of Being Connected:** Why loneliness is a problem and how to overcome it.
2. **Ways to Connect with Others After Brain Injury:** Simple ideas to help you connect at your own pace
3. **How to Start a New Connection:** Tips from a clinical psychologist and a speech pathologist on how to start the conversation.

Thank you for staying with us and being part of this journey!

INSIDE  
THIS  
ISSUE

W

**The Benefits of Being Connected**

**Ways to Connect with Others After Brain Injury**

**How to Start a New Connection**



**The Benefits of Being Connected**

After a brain injury, going back into the world and being around other people can feel scary and overwhelming. This is one reason many people with a TBI feel lonely or spend more time alone. But this problem is not just for people with brain injuries. Many people today feel uncomfortable in social situations.

### **So how did loneliness become such a big problem?**

There is not just one reason. One major change over the past 20 years is technology. At grocery stores, banks, and restaurants, machines now do jobs that people used to do. In waiting rooms and lines, many people look at their phones instead of talking to others. We can order food, watch movies, and shop without leaving our homes. Technology has made life easier, but it has also taken away many small, everyday conversations with other people.

Dr. Jamil Zaki is a professor at Stanford University who studies kindness and social connection. His research shows that loneliness can grow over time. In one study, students said they were friendly and helpful, but they believed other students were not. When people feel lonely, they expect others to reject them. Because of this, they pull away. Over time, they may stop believing connection is possible. Dr. Zaki also found that social confidence grows with practice. Small acts of kindness and helping others can reduce loneliness and help people feel like they matter.

Relationship expert and author Esther Perel also believes small social moments are important. She says people have fewer chances to talk with strangers in daily life, which increases loneliness. Simple conversations—like talking to someone in line or saying a few words to a cashier—help people feel more connected. These moments can build curiosity, confidence, and joy. Perel encourages people to focus on engaging others, not on trying to be liked. Asking questions and listening helps create connection.

NYU psychologist Jonathan Haidt believes the loss of connection is part of today's mental health and loneliness problem. He says smartphones and social media can make people feel like they must do everything on their own. This can cause people to feel separated from others. Haidt believes people need to feel part of something bigger than themselves. Loneliness often decreases when people join groups or help others. He encourages people, especially young people, to get involved in their communities through volunteering, clubs, or faith groups.

The idea may sound simple, but the way to feel less alone is to connect with other people. After a brain injury or a difficult life event, this can feel very hard. The fear of rejection is real for everyone. It can feel like being at a party where everyone wants to talk but thinks no one wants to talk to them. In the next section, we will share places and activities where people can meet others. Taking the first step takes courage, but every big change starts with one small step.



**Ways to Connect with Others After Brain Injury**

Making social connections can feel hard. It does not matter if you are just starting recovery or have been healing for a long time. This guide shares ideas to help you meet others when you feel ready.

**Take your time. Go at your own pace. Small steps count.**

## **Brain Injury Organizations**

*These groups support people with brain injuries and their families. They offer classes, events, and safe spaces to connect with others.*

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### **Brain Northwest**

- Free online classes and workshops
  - Virtual food bank every few months
  - Resource line for questions or support
  - Lists of local support groups
- 

### **Brain Injury Association of America**

- Largest brain injury group in the U.S.
  - Shares information and education
  - Supports research and treatment
- 

### **Love Your Brain**

- Yoga and meditation programs
- Online classes and trainings
- Focus on mind, body, and heart

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## Headstrong

- Supports young people with brain injuries
- Hosts biking, kayaking, music, and art events

[Click here for BrainNW's Website >>](#)

[Click here for Brain Injury Association of America's Website >>](#)

[Click here for Love Your Brain's Website >>](#)

[Click here for Headstrong's Website >>](#)

## Social Activities

**Tip:** Check bulletin boards at coffee shops, grocery stores, and libraries for local events and classes.

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## Meetup

- Free to join
- Find local groups and activities
- Meet people with similar interests

[Click here for Meetup's Website >>](#)

## Take a Class

Trying something new is a great way to meet people.

### You could:

- Learn a new hobby
- Practice a skill you already enjoy
- Join a class at a community center

**Tip:** Ask if they offer scholarships, discounts, or sliding-scale fees.

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## Some Creative Options

- Pratt Fine Arts Center (tuition help available)
- Seattle Artist League (scholarships available)
- Seattle ReCreative (creative reuse store and community center)
- Local community centers (often low-cost or free)

[Click here for Pratt Fine Arts Center's Website >>](#)

[Click here for Seattle Artist League's Website >>](#)

[Click here for Seattle ReCreative's Website >>](#)

## Get Active

Moving your body can help you feel good and can be a way to meet others.

### Look for:

- Yoga or Tai Chi
  - Soccer or coaching a team
  - Fitness classes at the YMCA
  - Pickleball, art, or cooking classes
  - Community gardens
- 

### **You can also check:**

- Outdoors for All
- The Mountaineers
- King County Parks

[Click here for Outdoors for All Volunteer Opportunities >>](#)

[Click here for The Mountaineers Volunteer Opportunities >>](#)

[Click here for King County Parks Volunteer Opportunities >>](#)

### **Volunteer to Connect**

#### *What is volunteering?*

Volunteering means giving your time to help a person, group, or organization without being paid.

Volunteering has many benefits

- Meet people who share your interests
  - Have a set schedule
  - Feel proud and helpful
  - Be part of something bigger
-

## Ways to help:

- Habitat for Humanity
- Salvation Army
- Volunteer at a church, temple, or mosque
- Help at an animal shelter
- Volunteer at a senior center or food bank

[Click here for Habitat for Humanity Volunteer Opportunities >>](#)

[Click here for Salvation Army Volunteer Opportunities >>](#)

## Final Thoughts

You do not have to do everything at once.  
Try one small step.  
Give yourself credit for trying.

Connection takes time — and you are not alone. ❤️



## How to Start a New Connection

So you found a group, class, or volunteer activity that you're excited about. Now you're ready to meet people who like the same things you do. But when you walk into a room full of new people, you may not know how to start a conversation.

Silas James, one of our TBI Model System study research coordinators, interviewed Fleur Godfried and Chuck Bombardier to get advice on how to handle social situations after a brain injury. Chuck is a board certified clinical psychologist in the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine. Fleur is a speech pathologist in the Comprehensive Outpatient Rehabilitation Program at Harborview.

Here is part of their conversation:

**Silas:**

"Thanks for meeting with me, I'd like to go through some of the basic things someone might worry about as they meet new people. Walking into a room full of strangers can feel awkward.

**First question, when someone enters a class or volunteer group, what should they think about before starting a conversation?"**

**Fleur:**

"The first thing is to look around and notice who is nearby. It's usually easier to talk to someone who is physically close rather than across the room. In some situations when there is a planned activity, like in a class, it might make sense to approach the group leader first."

**Chuck:**

"I'd also look at body language. Are they looking up and around?"

Are they smiling or standing in an open way? Those are signs someone might be open to talking."

**Silas:**

"So body language matters.

**Q: What are some clear signs that someone *is* interested in talking? Or not talking?"**

**Chuck:**

"Eye contact is a big one. If someone looks at you more than once, faces toward you, or smiles, that's often an invitation to talk. If people are looking down, away or trying to avoid eye contact they likely don't want to talk with you."

**Fleur:**

"Yes, and if they ask you a question, that's a strong sign they *do* want to have a conversation."



**Silas:**

"Ok that's great!

**Q: So, once a conversation has started, how can you tell if it's going well?"**

**Chuck:**

"If the person gives more than one-word answers and stays on

the topic, that usually means they're interested."

**Fleur:**

"And if they keep eye contact and ask follow-up questions, that's a good sign too. If they change the subject quickly or look away, they may be ready to end the conversation."

**Q: "How do you keep a conversation interesting for both people?"**

**Fleur:**

"Listening is key. Nodding, making eye contact, and asking follow-up questions shows you care about what they're saying."

**Chuck:**

"Agreed, be curious! Your goal should be to help the other person feel heard. You can even point out something positive they said, like, "You were really patient in that situation.""

**Fleur:**

"Also, don't talk for too long. Pause after a sentence or two and ask what they think. Conversations should feel like taking turns—more like tennis than giving a long speech."

**Silas:**

"I like that, "good back and forth!"

**Q: If a conversation goes well, how should someone suggest staying in touch?"**

**Fleur:**

"You can say something complementary like "I've really enjoyed talking with you." And then ask if they'd be open to talking again some time?"

**Chuck:**

"If they say "yes" or "sure" you can ask if they'd like to exchange contact information."

**Silas:**

"These are great tips!"



**Q: "What are some common mistakes people make when meeting new people?"**

**Fleur:**

"Talking too much or dominating the conversation is a big one. A lot of people struggle with that, not just people with TBI."

**Chuck:**

"Other missteps could be making too much or too little eye contact, sharing very personal information too soon, or expecting too much from someone you just met."

**Q: "How can someone respectfully join a group conversation?"**

**Fleur:**

"Start by listening. Try to add short comments that support what's already being discussed instead of changing the topic."

**Chuck:**

"Making eye contact and smiling helps too. You can also ask directly, "May I join the conversation?" and then pay attention to how the group responds."

**Q: "What if someone disagrees with something that's said?"**

**Chuck:**

"If you can, it's often best to avoid disagreeing right away."

**Fleur:**

"Instead, be curious. You can ask questions like, "Can you tell me more about that?" If you do disagree, soften it by saying "I'm not sure that I agree with [blank], but I can see your point."."

**Chuck:**

"Being kind and respectful is more important than winning an argument."

**Q: "If someone asks about a traumatic brain injury, what are some ways to handle that?"**

**Chuck:**

"It can help to prepare ahead of time. Some people decide what they'll say to a stranger, an acquaintance, or a close friend."

**Fleur:**

"Keeping it short is often best. You can explain how it affects you now and what support you might need. You also get to decide how you want to describe yourself."

**Chuck:**

"And if you don't want to talk about it, you can give a brief answer and change the subject by asking a question."

**Silas:**

"That's a great note to end on, it's always ok to say "I'd rather not talk about it right now." Thank you both for your time talking with me. I think our readers will really appreciate the insight you've shared!"



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## UW TBIMS Anti-Racism Statement

***The Traumatic Brain Injury Model System team does research to improve the health of people who have had traumatic brain injuries. Structural racism, which is any policy or procedure that contributes to inequality, can make people sicker, especially people who are Black, Indigenous, and other people of color, as well as LGBTQ+ communities, people with low income, and those with disabilities. We are committed to improve the lives and well being of people who have experienced traumatic brain injuries, and that includes using our research to increase awareness of the effects of racism.***

## Shared Stories

Do you have a story you would like to share?

We would love to hear from you! Please email us at [uwtbi@uw.edu](mailto:uwtbi@uw.edu)

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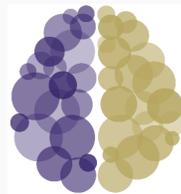
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