

# CHAPTER THREE: ADJUSTING TO SPINAL CORD INJURY.

## A. PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES

**Adjustment to a traumatic life event such as a spinal cord injury is a very individual experience. We are all individuals with different backgrounds, life experiences and personal histories. We have different coping styles and handle situations in very different ways.**

Experiencing a spinal cord injury challenges a person to tap into their strengths and to often find new ways of doing things, not only in a physical sense but also an emotional one. There is no right or wrong way to adjust, just as there is no right way to grieve for a loss. Sometimes however it helps to talk about these issues with health professionals and loved ones.

Understanding what is happening to you is the first step of coping with your situation and regaining a sense of control over your future. Experiencing a spinal cord injury may well be the worst thing that has happened to you. You cannot change what has happened, leave it behind, or even choose to ignore it. One way or another you have to deal with it and only you can do that.

### **Soon after your injury**

During the early days of your hospitalisation, experiences can be frightening and overwhelming, both for yourself and your loved ones. There are heightened emotions both positive and negative. People describe many different experiences immediately following their injury. If you were injured as a result of an accident or other traumatic event you may experience certain symptoms. You may feel stunned or removed

from the event, or you may feel you are re-experiencing the incident and feel distressed. These and other symptoms are not uncommon. It is important to talk about these things. Your social worker is available to you to discuss these issues.

## The adjustment process

As the crisis situation settles, you will start to become familiar with the routine of the unit and know more about the rehabilitation process. Adjustment does not stop when you finish your rehabilitation. It is a process which starts now and will continue for quite some time.

**There is a definition which describes adjustment as a “life in which disability is no longer the major focus”.**

Adjustment involves coming to terms with the changes that have occurred and restoring order and balance to many areas of your life such as : -

*Bio-organic* – bladder, bowel and skin.

*Environmental* – where you live, how you get around, access issues and equipment.

*Psychosocial* – emotions and feelings, relationships, financial, life goals and roles.

People will experience many different emotions. You may feel frustration, anger, fear, helplessness, sadness, loss of control and anxiety about your future. You may also feel positive emotions and be able to share those feelings with your family. You may feel them all at various times. This is normal and it is important to acknowledge these feelings even though they may be painful. You can't begin to deal with something until you acknowledge it is there.

However you should not be too surprised if you find yourself reacting in ways that seem out of character for you. This is a crisis stage and as you regain a sense of control over your life you will start to feel like you again. You will find your sense of humour, sense of pride and accomplishment and hope for the future.

Sometimes a person can become stuck in feelings of sadness and hopelessness which can mean you are experiencing a depression. If this happens it is important to talk to someone about your feelings.

However, it is normal to experience many different emotions. If we learn to talk about our worries and seek solutions the fog does begin to clear.

Your GP, social worker or a psychologist can help you deal with these issues.

Studies have been done that indicate people with spinal cord injury who take charge of their health and become responsible for their future and wellbeing experience less depression. One of the first steps towards taking charge is to educate yourself about your spinal injury – ask questions, read information, attend all available education sessions and talk to other people who have been there before you.

Having an acquired disability produces a lot of questions such as *am I the same person? Why did this happen to me? How will others react to me? Will I still be useful? Can I still work? Can I still form relationships? How do I feel about myself?* As a person comes to terms with the disability he or she will gradually find his or her own answers to these questions and begin to live a meaningful and satisfying life.

### **Examining your feelings towards disability**

It is often said that one of the hardest things about coping with an acquired disability is that you are suddenly thrust into it with all your able bodied beliefs attitudes and misconceptions.

Have you ever known anyone with a disability?

First impressions or initial attitudes are not always accurate and may change over time. Our own misconceptions often shape our fears and how we think things will be.

It is important to examine your own attitudes and talk to those close to you about theirs. You might be surprised and may find attitudes change over time with information and understanding. You will still be you to those who know you. You may also find you may have a strong influence over misguided beliefs others may have about disability.

The process of your adjustment is greatly influenced by your philosophical attitude towards life. Some people have a very flexible attitude and take one day at a time. Others prefer to plan tomorrow. Whichever is your style it is important not only to take charge when and where you can but also to have realistic expectations of yourself and remember to remind yourself of the progress you have made in a difficult situation. Remember no one chooses to have a spinal injury, but those who have lived with spinal cord injury for many years report that there is a positive side.

**Adjustment does occur and you can once again be actively engaged in life, relationships and all that is important to you.**